

Ireland and the First World War - The Sinking of the R.M.S. Leinster

■ Learning Outcomes

- Develop a further understanding of the events of the First World War and its impact on Ireland.
- Discuss the impact of the sinking of the R.M.S. Leinster on individual people.
- Examine primary source documents.
- Link to classroom studies and prior knowledge.

■ Some Ideas to Begin:

1. Examine the Interactive Timeline and Map.
 - a). To review information about Ireland and the First World War, see the section on Edward Heffernan.
 - b). As a class or in groups, write down ways in which the First World War impacted the lives of people discussed on the Timeline.
2. Ask students to think of any ships that are connected to Irish history and to write down information that is relevant. Share these points with the class.
3. Students could prepare for this lesson by creating an overview grid to explain the First World War. Students should aim to include the 5 W's: Who, What, When, Where and Why? Discuss and assess this work in class. Students can collaborate in order to develop their work further.

■ The R.M.S. Leinster

The R.M.S. Leinster was owned and operated by the City of Dublin Steam Packet Company which ran a mail and passenger service from Dublin to Holyhead (in Wales). There were four ships in the fleet and each ship was named after an Irish province.

On the morning of 10 October 1918, the R.M.S. Leinster left Dún Laoghaire (called Kingstown at the time). Close to 800 people were on board the ship. Most of the passengers were members of the military, soldiers, sailors, airmen, and nurses. Some had been on leave and were now returning to war. There was also the crew, civilian passengers, and Post Office employees, who worked in the mail room sorting letters and packages for the next stage of the journey.



(Postcard of the R.M.S. Leinster 1897)

■ The First World War

Four years had passed since the outbreak of the First World War. Although the end of war was drawing near, no peace was agreed, and fighting continued.

During the war at sea, Britain's Royal Navy used blockades to stop supplies from reaching Germany and patrolled the seas looking for German ships. Imports of food and essential supplies to Germany were heavily affected. Supply chains were disrupted in order to weaken the other side.

German U-boats (military submarines) were used to carry out underwater attacks on the Royal Navy and allied vessels. In an effort to stop supplies from reaching Britain, U-boats attacked merchant ships: these ships carried goods and passengers.

The R.M.S. Connaught, which belonged to the City of Dublin Steam Packet Company, was taken for use by the British military during the war. It was torpedoed in the English Channel and sank. Attacks in the Atlantic, Celtic Sea, and the Irish Sea became a common threat for vessels. The Leinster, along with the other two remaining ships in the fleet, was painted in camouflage and fitted with guns. ¹

■ What do you know about the Lusitania?

In May 1915, the Lusitania was attacked by a German U-Boat and sank off the coast of Co. Cork. Almost 1,200 people died: 128 were American citizens. America was still neutral in the war, but the American Government demanded that attacks on merchant vessels stop, and Germany stopped its policy of unrestricted attacks at sea. In an effort to beat the Allies, Germany began unrestricted attacks again in the early months of 1917, and within a few months the United States declared war on Germany. German submarine attacks was one of the main reasons for US involvement in the First World War.

■ 10 October 1918

The Leinster set sail before 9am, and shortly before 10am the first of three torpedoes was fired at the ship. Some passengers later reported that they thought they had seen a dolphin or a whale moving through the water. What they saw was in fact a torpedo that had been fired by a German U-boat, UB-123. ²

The first torpedo missed. In an attempt to save its passengers, lifeboats were launched and the Leinster managed to send out an SOS. A second torpedo hit the port side (left) of the ship - this was the location of the postal sorting room. The ship was hit again, this time on the starboard (right) side and sank quickly. A surviving officer told newspapers that the ship 'smashed into matchwood'. ³

Survivors waited in lifeboats, while some clung to the remains of the ship. Due to heavy seas, rescue work was slow and dangerous. The ship's captain, William Birch, was pulled from the water into a lifeboat. The lifeboat later capsized as those on board were being rescued and William Birch was lost. One of the rescue vessels that arrived on the scene was the Helga: the same ship that was used to shell Dublin city during the 1916 Rising.

¹ Philip Lecane, 'Remembering the RMS Leinster: the greatest ever loss of life in the Irish Sea' in Century Ireland <https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/remembering-the-rms-leinster-the-greatest-ever-loss-of-life-in-the-irish-se>

² Ibid.

³ *The Irish Independent*, 11 October, 1918.

The Helga was later taken over by the Irish Free State and re-named the Muirchú.

On its return voyage to Germany, UB-123 hit a mine in the North Sea Mine Barrage (off the north-eastern coast of Scotland, near the Orkney Islands). On board the U-boat was a crew of approximately 36 people. There were no survivors.

One month after the sinking of the R.M.S. Leinster an armistice was signed and the First World War ended on 11 November 1918. The official death toll for the Leinster was 501 people. This is the highest ever loss of life on the Irish Sea. Recent historical research places the actual death toll at 569.⁴ Many who died were returned for burial to their home countries, which included England, Canada, and America. A large number of deceased military were buried in Grangegorman Military Cemetery. In the 1990s, the Leinster's anchor was raised from the sea and placed near the piers at Dún Laoghaire.

■ Glasnevin Cemetery

Below is information on some of those who were on board the R.M.S. Leinster and are buried in Glasnevin Cemetery.

■ John Higgins

John Higgins lived next to Glasnevin Cemetery in Prospect Square. He worked as a Sorter for the General Post Office. He was the only postal worker to survive the sinking of the R.M.S. Leinster. When the torpedo hit, the postal sorting area was flooded with water. Higgins was able to hold onto the electrical wires and the rising water lifted him towards the staircase opening. He provided an account of events and stated that, 'The force of the explosion knocked me down and partly stunned me. We were left in the dark, while the seawater was rushing in...' He got into a lifeboat and, 'After being some hours adrift we were rescued by a British destroyer [type of ship]. I was taken to the Red Cross station at Dún Laoghaire where I received every attention and afterwards rode in a military lorry to the G.P.O. where I got down as I did not wish to go to hospital.' John cycled back to his home, and to his family, who had heard the news of the sinking.

The memories of that day stayed with John for life. 'I am not likely to forget the happenings of that day, but one particular occurrence which is burned in my memory is when the Leinster plunged to her last resting place to see hundreds of people who could not get off in time being brought down with the ship.'⁵ John Higgins died in 1955 and was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery.



Commemorative Stamp issued by An Post in 2018.

⁴ See: <https://www.rmsleinster.com> and the National Maritime Museum of Ireland <https://www.mariner.ie> .

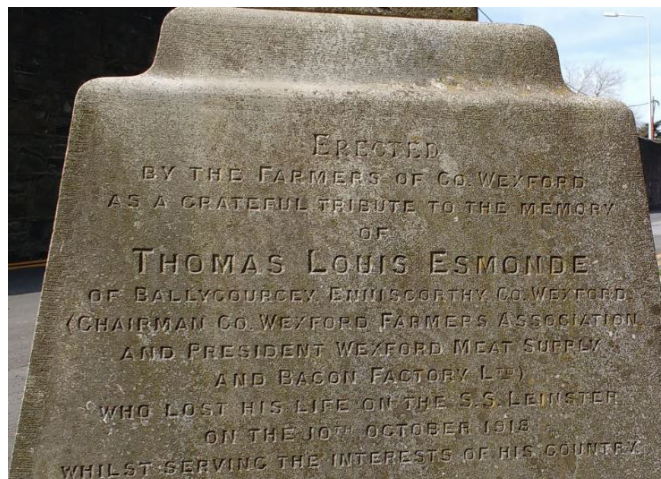
⁵ Philip Lecane, *Torpedoed! The RMS Leinster Disaster* by Philip Lecane, Periscope Publishing (2005), pages 145 - 147.

■ Charlotte Foley

Charlotte Foley lived on Leinster Road, in Rathmines, Dublin. She was married to Thomas Foley who worked as a clerk for Dublin Corporation. Charlotte's brother was a soldier in the British Army. He was badly wounded in France and was brought to hospital in England. Charlotte and her husband Thomas, were on their way to visit him when the R.M.S. Leinster was attacked. The couple did not survive. They left behind ten children who were later cared for by Thomas' sisters. Charlotte was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery.

■ Thomas Esmonde

Thomas Esmonde lived in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford and was heavily involved in agriculture. He was chairman of the Wexford Farmers' Association. Newspapers reported that he was travelling to London on business when the R.M.S. Leinster was attacked. He died at the age of 53. The inscription on his headstone records the sinking.



A. Primary Sources: Working As A Historian

1. Edited extract from a report in The Belfast Newsletter, October 11, 1918.

THE BELFAST NEWSLETTER, OCTOBER 11

'A discharged New Zealand soldier, who had been visiting friends in County Galway, said the vessel (the Leinster) had a full complement of passengers, and most of them, if not all, were wearing lifebelts, which were put on when they were leaving the harbour, "I was down below," he continued, "when I heard a terrible crash, and, rushing on deck, I found that the boats were being lowered, and the women and children being put into them. The words 'submarine' and 'torpedo' were on everybody's lips and there was a good deal of excitement, but no panic. A torpedo had struck the vessel astern, and shook her like a leaf. There was an awful explosion, in which, I think, the men in the stokehold must have been killed. But even after that the Leinster remained afloat. The engines were working, and efforts were being

made to get back to port, but some minutes afterwards another torpedo was fired, and that finished her. The Leinster began to go down, and soon disappeared. One can never forget that moment, for while the excitement was mostly suppressed, many women with children were shrieking and calling for help. Everywhere there was commotion. Lots of people were got into the boats, but most of the craft were, I think overturned, partly owing to the suction caused by the vessel and partly on account of the rough sea. I was one who got into a boat, but it capsized on reaching the water. I clung to the overturned boat, as did others... Eventually I got on to a raft, and stuck to it until I was picked up. Many people were saved, even after the boats had capsized, by clinging to wreckage.'

■ Pair/Group Work

1. Examine this primary source. What information is revealed about the sinking of the R.M.S. Leinster?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using a first-hand account as a primary source?
3. This source is a newspaper interview. Can you think of other types of first-hand accounts?

■ General Lesson Activities

1. What was the R.M.S. Leinster used for?
2. How did the First World War affect ships on the Celtic and Irish Seas?
3. Provide one reason to explain the involvement of America in the First World War.
4. On what date did the First World War officially end?
5. What did you learn from John Higgins' account?
6. Based on your study of the past, can you think of other historical events that happened in 1918?

B. Discuss 3-2-1

Identify and agree on:

- 3 - Facts of information that were new to the group.
- 2 - Questions that you have about this time in history.
- 1 - Fact that you thought was the most interesting or surprising.

C. Create and Discuss

Independent Work or Pair/Group Work

Historical events are commemorated in different ways, including the issuing of special stamps. The stamp on page 3 was issued by An Post to mark the centenary of the sinking of the R.M.S. Leinster.

1. What are the advantages of commemorating an event through a stamp?
2. Can you think of any recent issues or events that were remembered and communicated through the use of a stamp?
3. Pick one historical event that you would like to commemorate. Create a design for a commemorative stamp that reflects and commemorates this event. Also write a paragraph to explain your design. To get started draw a template of a stamp and place your design inside the template.

Or

Imagine that you are a newspaper reporter in October 1918. Write a report to inform readers of the sinking of the R.M.S. Leinster. Remember to include the 5W's and How: Who, What, When, Where, Why and How? Try to locate primary source material to include in your report.

■ Further Reading:

To learn more about the R.M.S. Leinster and the people who were on board visit: <https://www.rmsleinster.com/> and <https://www.mariner.ie/>