

Find leads to tribute to forgotten tragedy

By James Connolly

A caretaker was only two months into a new job in Sandbach when he uncovered the "tragic story" of a wartime treasure while rooting around in a dusty cupboard.

Steve Hyland, (67), had been encouraged by bosses at the town council to get familiar with the buildings he would be looking after, including the town hall, which is how he happened upon a plaque.

Displaying a golden crest with the word *Vimiera* engraved across the top, the black, gold and red plaque appeared to be a coat of arms and it sparked Mr Hyland's curiosity.

He discovered, after immediate research, that the plaque was a reward for Sandbach's war support activities during WWII.

It was part of a campaign known as Warship Week, a National Savings week in which cities, towns and villages throughout the country were given a target for money invested in the new Government savings scheme — effectively lending money to the Government to spend on the war. If it hit its target, a town would be allocated a naval vessel and its crew for adoption.

Local charities, churches and schools would then provide the crew of the adopted ship with gloves, woollen socks and balaclavas. Children would often write letters and send cards and officers and men from the adopted ship would visit the town.

Sandbach was given a target of £120,000 and managed to raise £163,880. In return for the monumental sum, the town was allocated a V-class destroyer, HMS *Vimiera*, as its adopted ship, and the former Sandbach Urban District Council was given the commemorative plaque.

Mr Hyland, who moved to the town from Edgworth near Bolton almost three years ago, explained: "When I found it, I had no idea what it was, but it was clearly of some importance because it is very heavy. It is actually quite well documented on the internet.

"Sadly, there is a very tragic story to this because, although the plaque was presented in September 1942, the ship that Sandbach sponsored was sunk earlier that year. It hit a mine in the Thames Estuary and 96 lives were lost."

HMS *Vimiera*, a V-class destroyer, had been used before the war on a mission to promote negotiations as part of the Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement in 1921, but was later chosen to be converted into an escort destroyer with anti-aircraft and anti-submarine capabilities.

It was just five weeks after the fundraising in Sandbach that the ship sunk.

Of the 96 who died, it is believed that more than 90 were sailors, while a further four of the 38 survivors later died as a result of their wounds. Eight out of nine officers survived and *Vimiera's* commander, Lt Angus Alexander Mackenzie, was put in charge of another ship.

Mr Hyland continued: "There is no public memorial to the ship being sunk. There are individual memorials around the country with the names of some of the sailors who lost their lives, but there doesn't exist a complete list with a memorial plaque."

At a meeting of Sandbach Town Council on Wednesday, he gave a presentation about the plaque and subsequently proposed that it be displayed once again in the town hall. Councillors were in agreement and Mr Hyland has announced plans for an unveiling ceremony to take place on 9th January — the 81st anniversary of the ship's sinking.

Town mayor Coun Kathryn Flavell said: "I am looking forward to giving this plaque the prominence it deserves, and I am grateful to Steve for his enthusiasm and hard work which led to the discovery."

Wikipedia states that *Vimiera* was chosen for conversion to an escort destroyer with an "enhanced anti-aircraft and anti-submarine capability" as part of a naval rearmament programme preceding the outbreak of war in September 1939. In January 1940 she joined the Nore Command for coastal convoy escort duty in the North Sea and English Channel. Her company was formed largely of men from the Clyde Division of the Royal Naval Reserve, HMS *Graham*.

In April 1940 she was transferred under the command-in-chief, Dover, to support military operations in France. This included the Battle of Dunkirk to providing additional anti-aircraft defence in Dunkirk and assisting in the evacuation of allied personnel from Flushing. With HMS *Wolsey* she provided naval gunfire support for military operations at Escaut. On 19th May she rescued survivors from HMS *Whitley* and in the following days she assisted both in taking reinforcements to Boulogne and in evacuating wounded soldiers and medical staff. She saw action around Boulogne and Calais, during which *Wessex* was sunk and *Vimiera* sustained substantial damage. She was taken into repair on 25 May 1940, and so was not involved in the evacuation from Dunkirk.

In December 1941, she was adopted by Sandbach. Under the command of Lt-Comdr Angus Alexander Mackenzie, RNR, she was sunk by a mine in the Thames estuary off East Spile Buoy on 9th January 1942 with



Mr Hyland has worked with town mayor Coun Kathryn Flavell on plans to install the plaque in the town hall. (22-49-004).



HMS *Vimiera* in 1918. (Photo: Oscar Parkes / Imperial War Museums / Wikimedia Commons).

the loss of around 96 hands. Lt Cdr Mackenzie was found blameless in the sinking, and was put in command of HMS *Liddesdale*. *Vimiera's* loss was commemorated on a memorial within HMS *Graham*. She was named for the Battle of Vimero

(1808), when Gen Arthur Wellesley (later the Duke of Wellington) defeated the French under Maj-Gen Jean-Andoche Junot near the village of Vimero, ending the first French invasion of Portugal.

Campaigners boosted by news of wildlife site

Campaigners fighting plans for a 225-home development in Knutsford have been boosted by news the land has been made a formal local wildlife site.

The site, which is east of Longridge, was removed from the green belt in 2017 as part of the Cheshire East local plan and an application from Dewscope to build homes there is due to be considered by Cheshire East at the end of January (writes local democracy reporter Belinda Ryan).

But Knutsford residents have said the land had become a re-wilded meadow after not being farmed for 50 years and was home to hundreds of species of

been officially designated as a local wildlife site."

A report from the council's nature conservation officer to Cheshire East Council's planning department said: "As of the Local Wildlife Steering Group meeting of 23rd November, the application site has been selected as a local wildlife site due to the grassland, mammal and amphibian assemblages which qualify the site for local wildlife site selection under the local wildlife site selection criteria."

Cheshire Wildlife Trust has already objected to the 225-home proposal.

This latest development has led to a further objection, with