

The HM Submarines Memorial Chapel of St Nicholas, Gosport



HM Submarines Memorial Chapel at Fort Blockhouse, Gosport (courtesy of RN Submarine Museum)

Introduction

This Grade II listed Memorial Chapel, built in 1917 and dedicated to the patron saint of seafarers, with its memorials to lost submarines and submariners, is situated in Fort Blockhouse, Gosport, at the tip of the spit of land bordering the west side of the entrance to Portsmouth Harbour. The site was home to the UK's submarine fleet from 1905 – 1994 and became known as HMS *Dolphin*.



Fort Blockhouse, 1900

(Neil Marshall, artist, reproduced with permission, www.neilmarshallart.co.uk)

Fort Blockhouse and HMS *Dolphin*

There has been a military presence recorded on this spit of land since the early 15th century when a wooden blockhouse was built there in 1431 during the reign of King Henry VI (1421-1471). It held one end of the chain boom defence across the harbour entrance, linking to the Round Tower on the Portsmouth side. This blockhouse was regularly modified, strengthened and enlarged, with the whole fort being remodelled in 1813, as testified by an inscription above the fort's main gateway. Further major modifications followed during the Victorian era, and the site became known as Fort Blockhouse.¹ In 1875 the Royal Engineers took over the Fort as a sea-mining base, responsible for laying fixed minefields as harbour defences.²

In 1904, soon after the launch of the first British submarine, Holland 1, in 1901, the fort was handed over to the Royal Navy, becoming a submarine base with the addition of new jetties and submariners' accommodation. The old screw sloop, HMS *Dolphin* (launched 1882), was brought alongside as a depot ship, and in 1912 the submarine base itself took on the name of HMS *Dolphin*. The base would be the home of the Royal Navy's submarine fleet for some 90 years. Many buildings therein are named after famous submarines or commanders, and a Submariner Memorial stands in the garden at the entrance to the fort.



¹ David Moore: Solent Papers 13 – Fort Blockhouse and Fort Monckton (2014)
<https://www.victorianforts.co.uk/flipbook/solent/Blockhouse/index.html#p=1> (accessed 4 May 2022)

² Fort Blockhouse – Victorian Forts datasheet <https://www.victorianforts.co.uk/pdf/datasheets/blockhouse.pdf> (accessed 4 May 2022)

In 1931 the whole of the Fort Blockhouse site was transferred to the care of the Admiralty. After the Second World War the fort was incorporated into the shore establishment HMS *Dolphin*. Defence cuts following the end of the Cold War in 1991 resulted in the submarines being withdrawn to Faslane and Plymouth in 1994. HMS *Dolphin* was formally decommissioned as a submarine base on 30 September 1998 and the site renamed Fort Blockhouse. The Royal Navy Submarine School remained in situ until closing on 23 December 1999 prior to re-opening at HMS Raleigh at Torpoint, Cornwall, in January 2000.³

This latter period, the mid-1990s, coincided with major cuts to service hospitals, the sole survivor being the Royal Hospital Haslar, adjacent to Fort Blockhouse, which became tri-service in 1996. The Defence Medical Services moved into Fort Blockhouse in 1996, establishing the new Royal Defence Medical College there until the latter moved to Birmingham in 2002. Simultaneously, a new field unit, 33 Field Hospital, formed up on site at HMS *Dolphin* on 1 April 1996 to become one of the Army's three Regular field hospitals, taking over premises within the original Fort.

When 33 Field Hospital arrived in 1996 the site was still known as HMS *Dolphin*, and in commemoration of this submarine heritage the unit adopted the twin dolphins into the hospital crest.

This historic link was proudly maintained by the unit until 33 Field Hospital was disbanded on 1 December 2018, after 33 years' existence.⁴



Fort Blockhouse closed as a military establishment in December 2021, thereby ending a long and distinguished military and naval existence.⁵ A new era beckons in a civilian guise, though it is to be hoped that the historic buildings therein, not least the Fort and the Submarine Memorial Chapel, will be treated with due respect when the fate of the site is eventually decided. The Ministry of Defence has been trying to sell off the site since its closure, but had not found a suitable buyer by September 2025. Watch this space...

³ HMS Dolphin (shore establishment) [https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/HMS_Dolphin_\(shore_establishment\)](https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/HMS_Dolphin_(shore_establishment)) (accessed 4 May 2022)

⁴ 33 Field Hospital (Unit History) https://www.friendsofmillbank.org/downloads/33_Fd_Hosp.pdf

⁵ Historic England – Fort Blockhouse <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1001873> (accessed 4 May 2022)

The Memorial Chapel – Its Origins and Memorials

In 1917, at the height of the First World War, the Memorial Chapel of St Nicholas was built on top of the north bastion of Fort Blockhouse to commemorate the many submariners who had lost their lives defending their country, primarily in protecting the Atlantic convoys against depredations by German U-boats. By war's end, 54 Royal Navy and Allied submarines had been sunk, with the loss of 138 officers and 1,225 men, approximately one-third of the Submarine Service's personnel.

The Chapel now also commemorates all Royal Navy submarines lost at other times, especially during the Second World War, during which 74 submarines were sunk out of 206 that put to sea. 3,508 submariners died or were captured out of 9,310 Submarine Service personnel in the Second World War.^{6,7}

The Submarine Memorial Chapel contains a large number of memorial items, each dedicated to specific submariners or submarine squadrons. Among these are: the standards of The Queen's Colour and the International Submariners Association, an icon, prayer desks, a missal stand, lectern, an altar cross, candle sticks, a sanctuary lamp, two fonts, crosses, vases, a chalice, a wafer box, a pewter bowl, and prayer books. The HM Submarines Book of Remembrance is solemnly displayed next to the White Ensign. In 2018, the Memorial Chapel was re-painted by a team of sailors from Victory Squadron, HMS Collingwood.⁸



(photograph courtesy of RN Submarine Museum)

⁶ Historic England - Submarine Memorial Chapel of St Nicholas, Fort Blockhouse <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1470286?section=official-list-entry> (accessed 4 May 2022)

⁷ British Listed Buildings - Submarine Memorial Chapel of St Nicholas, Fort Blockhouse <https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/101470286-submarine-memorial-chapel-of-st-nicholas-fort-blockhouse-st-thomas-ward#.YnJOyIfMK3A> (accessed 4 May 2022)

⁸ Historic England - Submarine Memorial Chapel of St Nicholas, Fort Blockhouse. *Op cit*

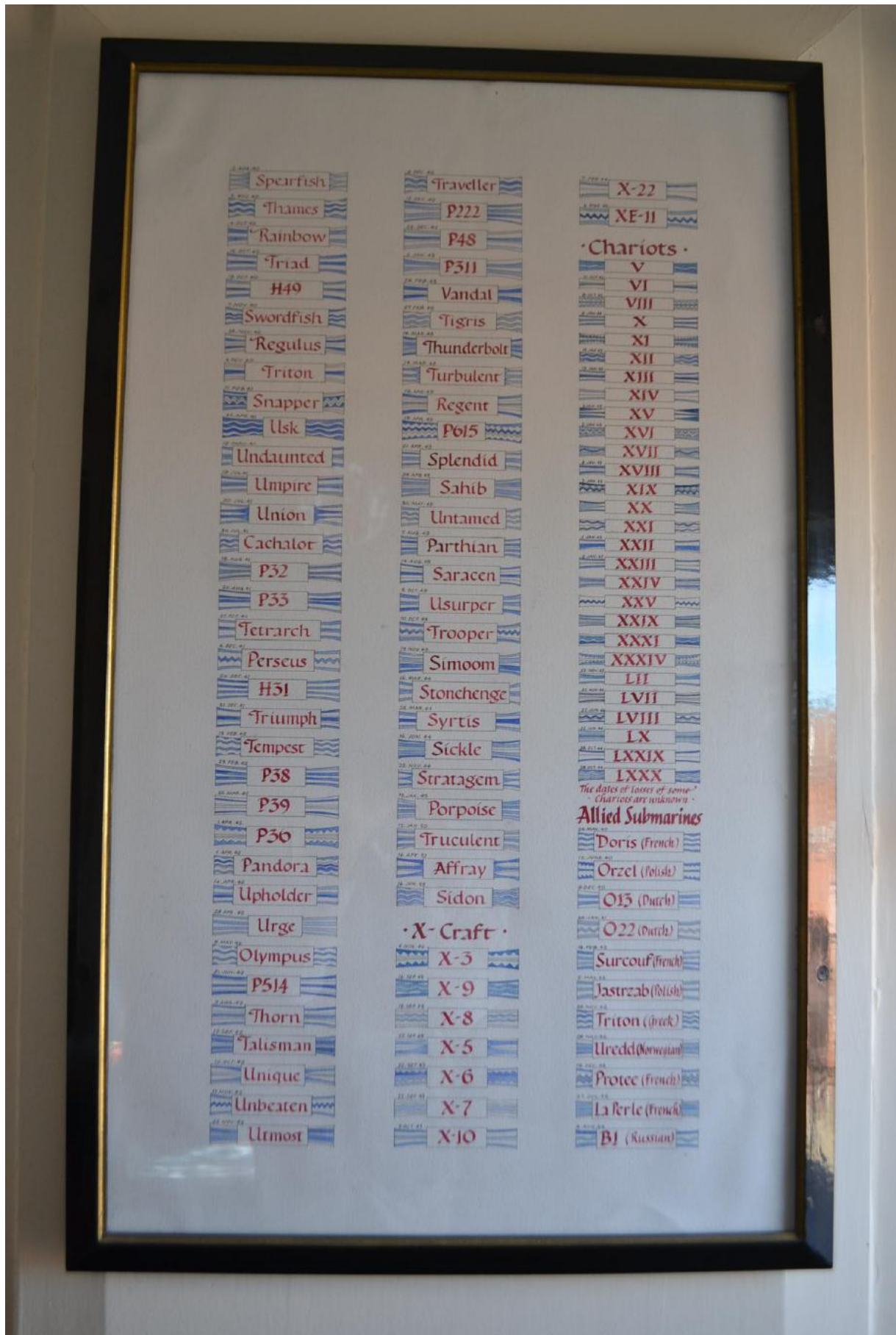


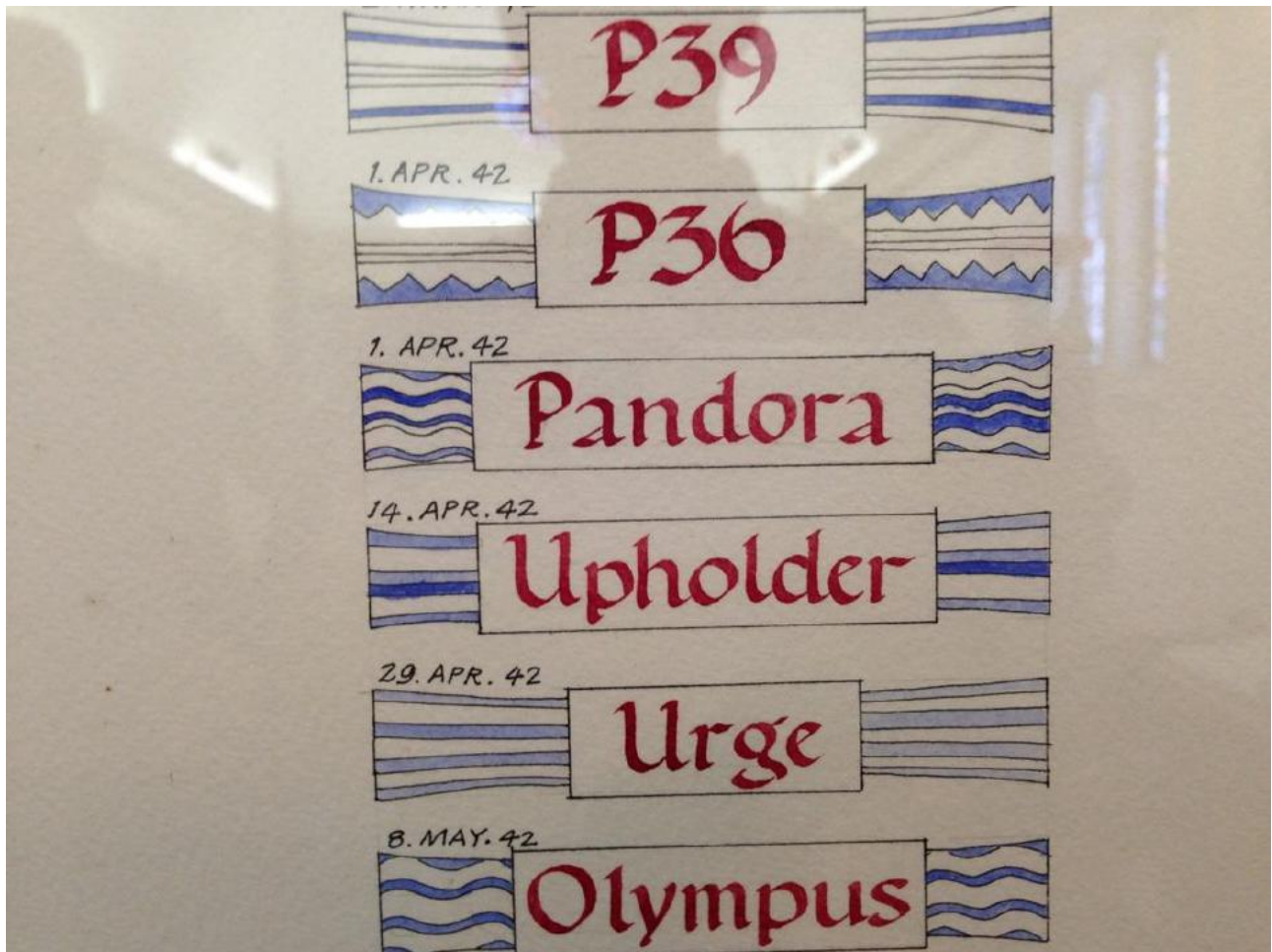
(photograph above courtesy of RN Submarine Museum)

On the south-east wall are chaplains' boards and a list of HM Submarines lost on service









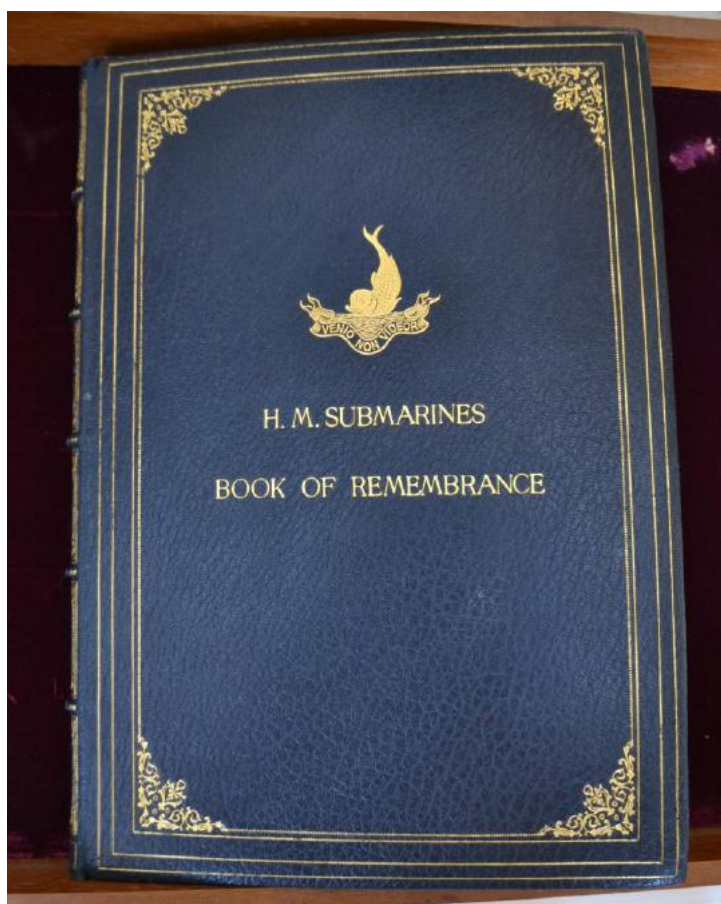
10th Submarine Flotilla losses, Malta, April – May 1942

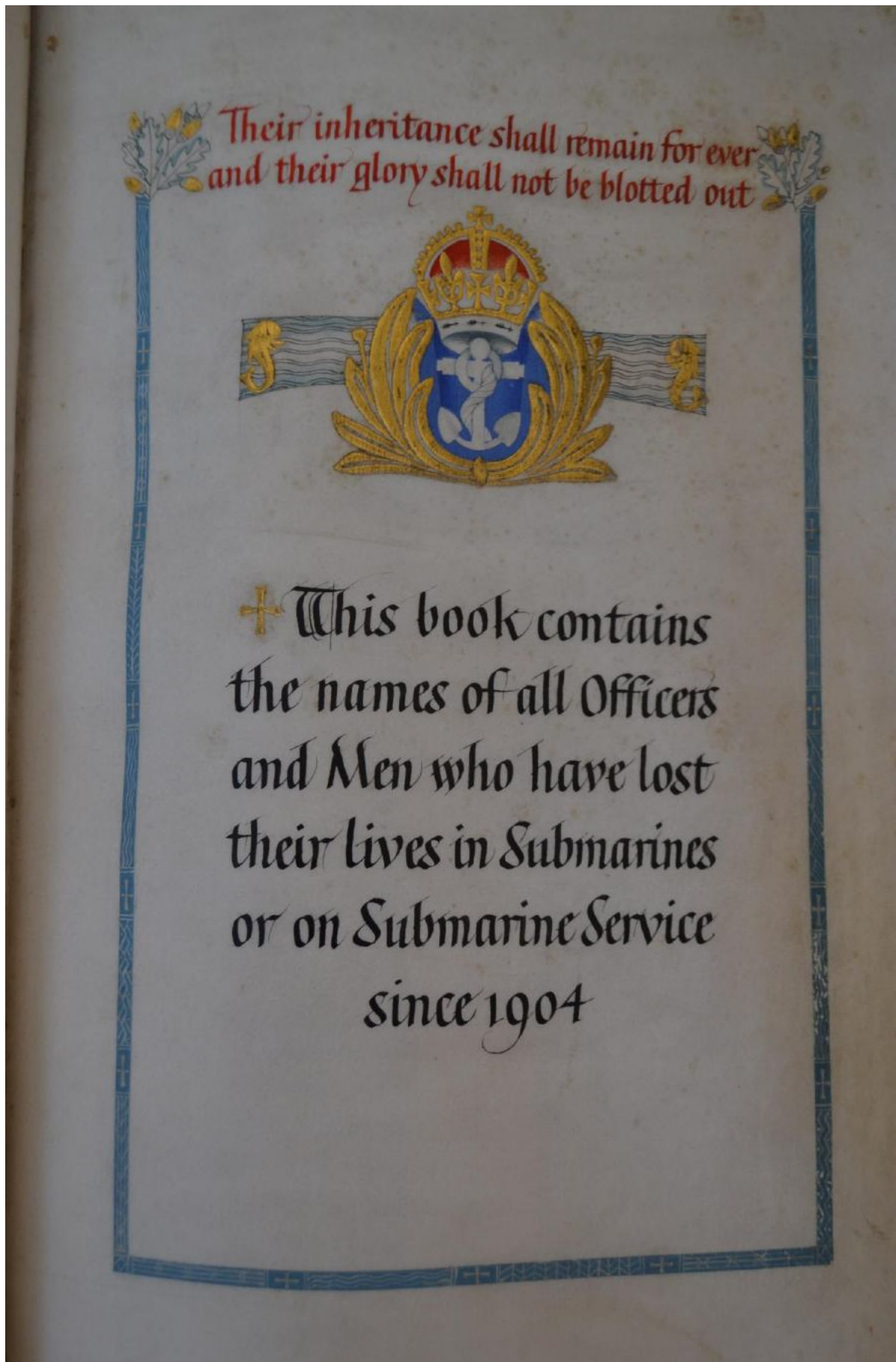


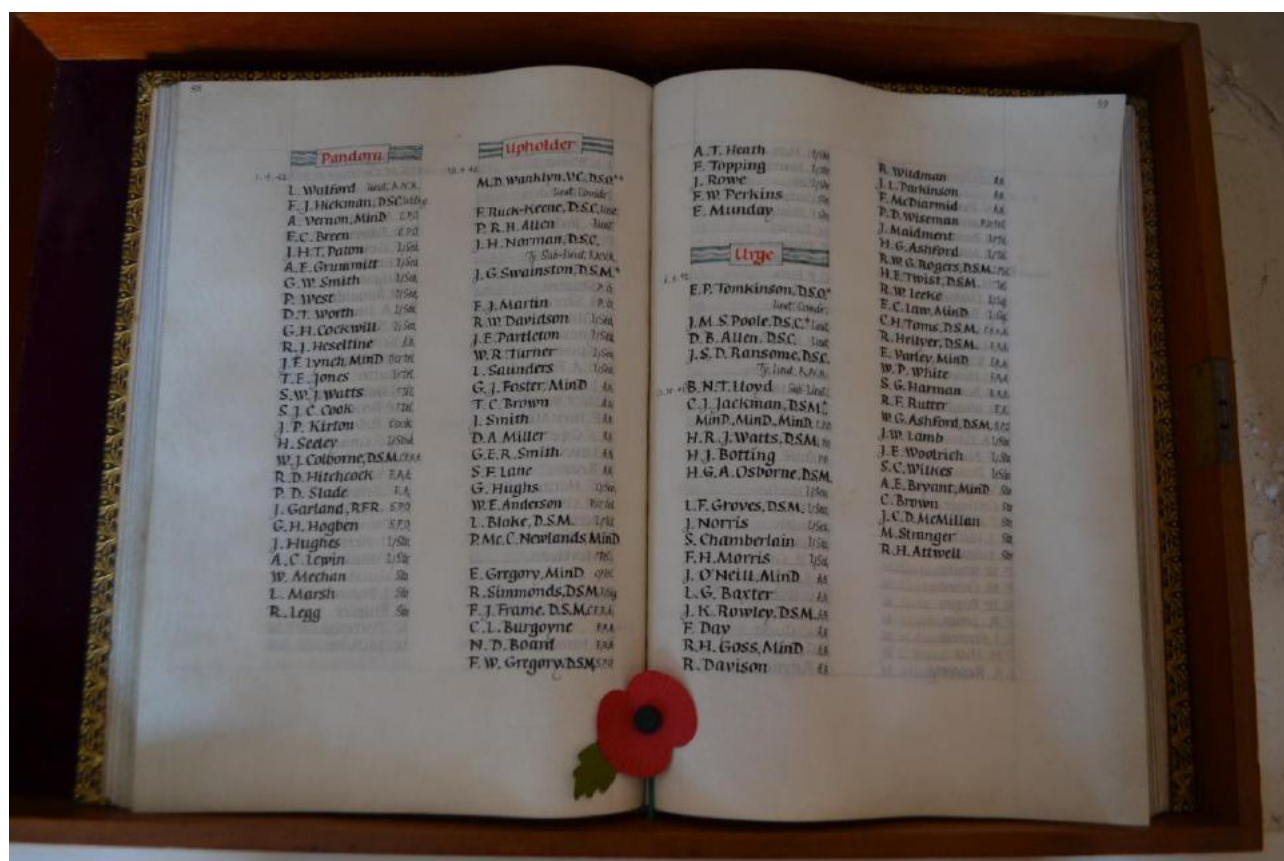
Submarine captains Lt Cdr Tomkinson (HMS Urge) and Lt Cdr Wanklyn VC (HMS Upholder)



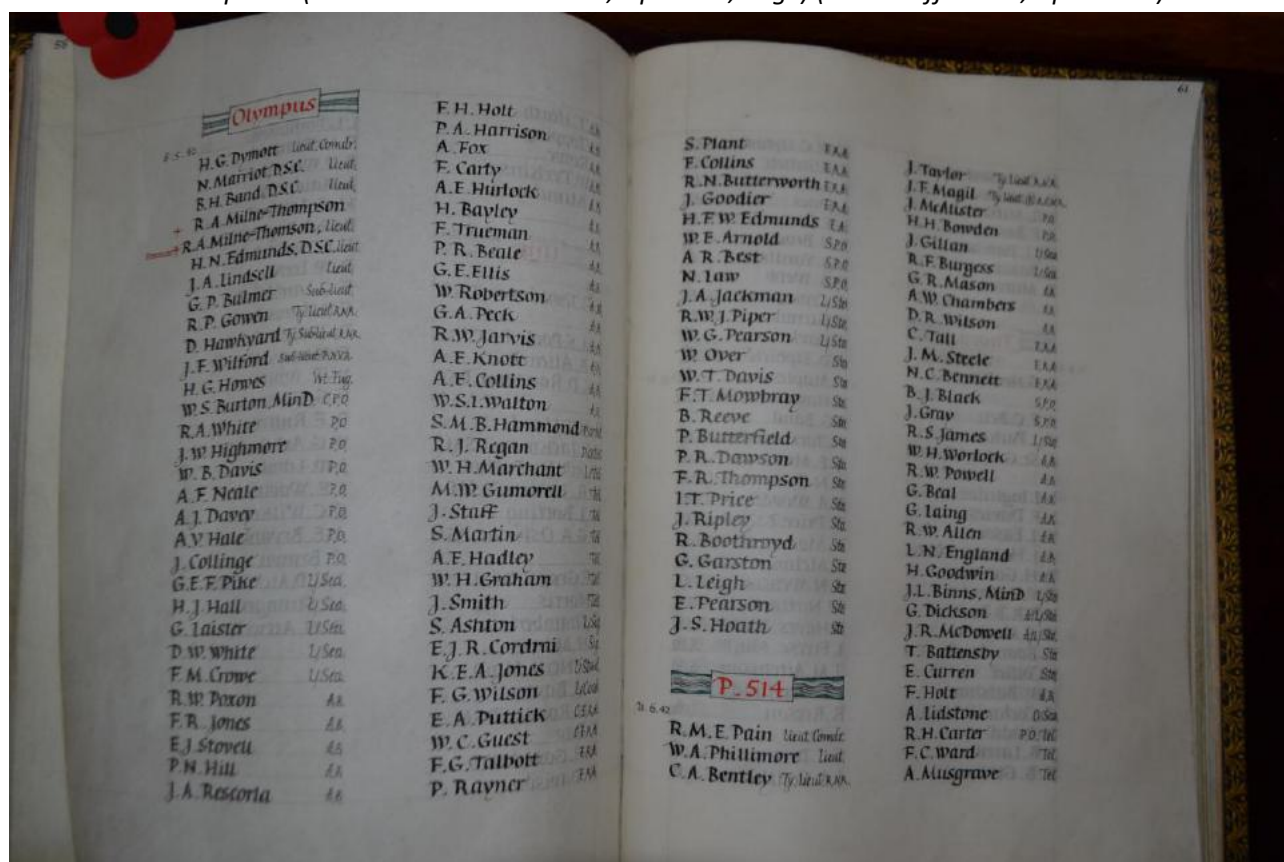
(Photograph courtesy of RN Submarine Museum)







Still on patrol (HM Submarines Pandora, Upholder, Urge) (all lost off Malta, April 1942)



Still on patrol (HM Submarine Olympus, lost off Malta 8 May 1942)

The Memorial Chapel – A Historic Building

The Memorial Chapel has been designated by Historic England as a Grade II listed building:

The Submarine Memorial Chapel of St Nicholas, built in 1917 at the artillery fort and submarine base known as Fort Blockhouse (HMS Dolphin), is listed at Grade II for the following principal reasons:

Architectural interest:

** as an exceptionally rare example of a submariners' memorial chapel in England; * for the elegant interior, including a barrel-vaulted ceiling, raised and fielded timber panels to the walls separated by pilasters, a moulded cornice, and good quality stained-glass windows dedicated to individual submariners and submarine squadrons; * as a well-preserved First World War memorial chapel that is largely unaltered.*

Historic interest:

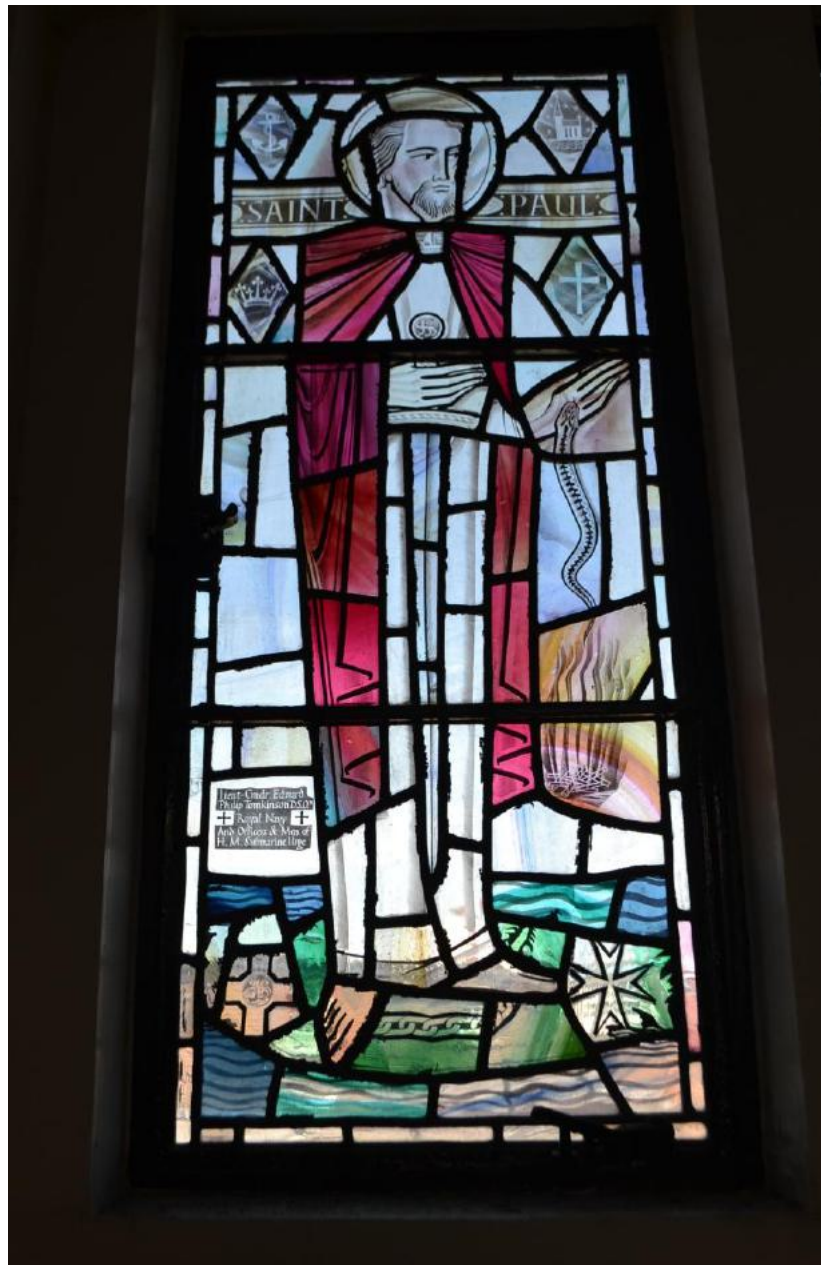
** as a memorial chapel to the Submarine Service of the Royal Navy whose critical role in naval warfare was affirmed in the First World War; * wartime submarine service was extremely hazardous and this memorial chapel is especially poignant given its location at Fort Blockhouse (HMS Dolphin), the principal base and spiritual home of Britain's Submarine Service during the C20, from which many submariners went to sea and lost their lives; * for its historic association with Fort Blockhouse, a bastioned artillery fort that, historically, was central to the defence of Portsmouth Harbour in the C18 and C19, subsequently becoming a Royal Engineers establishment in the late C19, before serving as a principal submarine base during the C20.*

Group value:

** with the scheduled artillery fort, the Submarine Escape Training Tower (SETT), as well as the submariners' memorial stone, the former guardhouse, Thames Block, Arrogant Block, the Admiralty boundary stone, the cannon bollard and the former gatehouse datestone at Fort Blockhouse, all Grade II. In addition, with the Grade II-listed Submariners' Memorial at Clayhall Royal Navy Cemetery, Haslar.⁹*

⁹ Historic England - Submarine Memorial Chapel of St Nicholas, Fort Blockhouse <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1470286?section=official-list-entry> (accessed 4 May 2022)

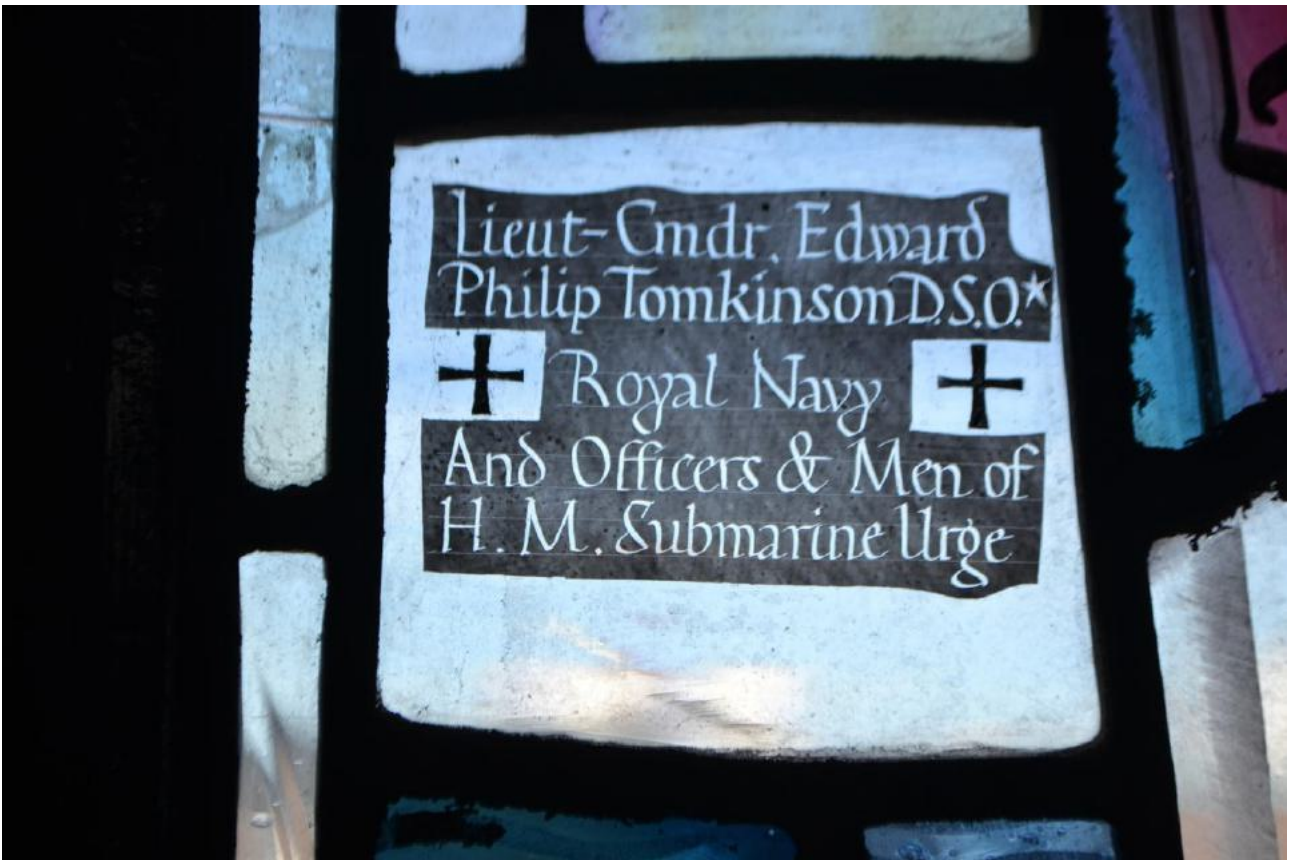
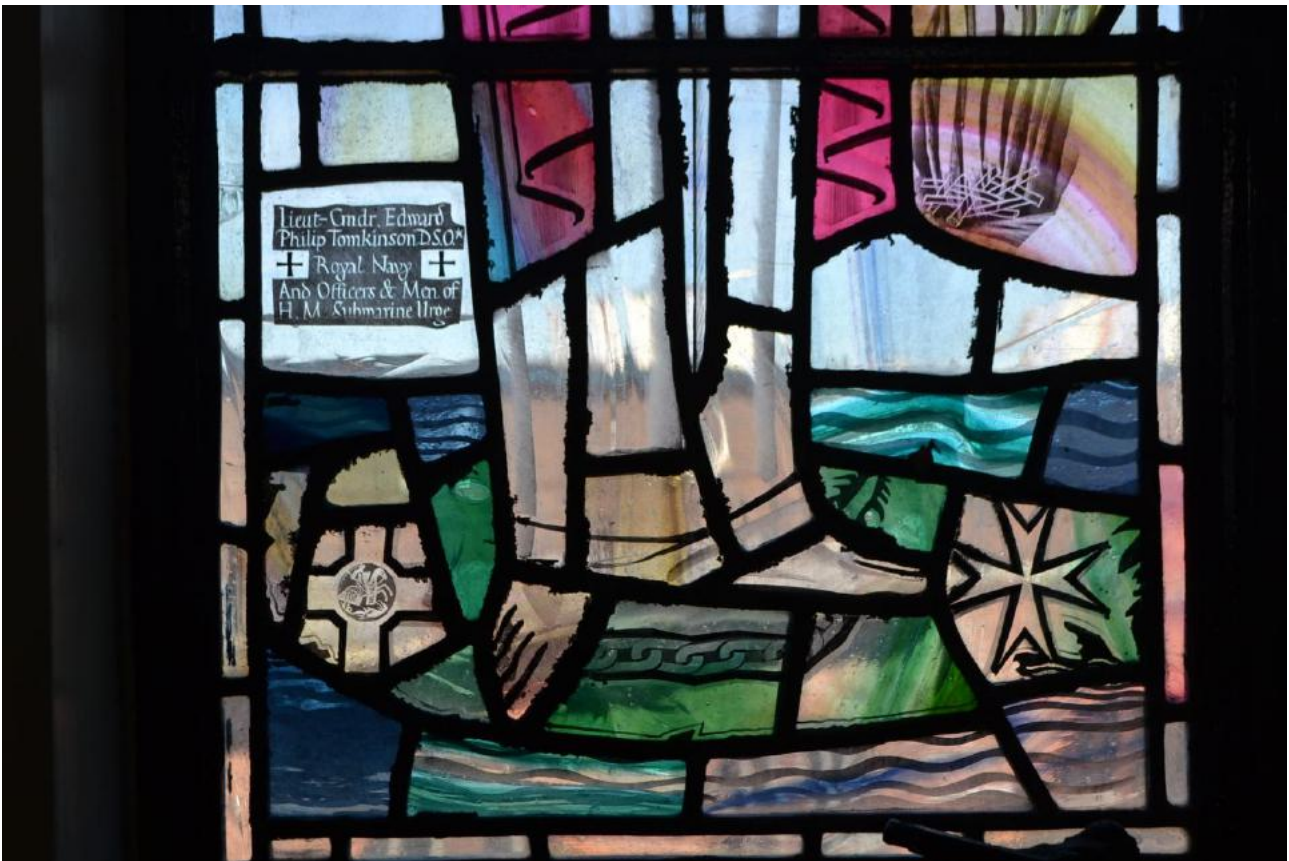
Two stained glass windows grace the north wall of the Chapel, one of which is dedicated to Lt Cdr Edward Tomkinson RN DSO and his crew on HMS Urge, 10th Submarine Flotilla based in Malta during the Second World War. HMS Urge was lost to a mine on 27 April 1942 with the loss of 44 lives. Her wreck was discovered in 2019 and is now a protected war grave, managed by Heritage Malta.¹⁰ A memorial was dedicated to the submarine and her crew at Fort St Elmo, Malta on 27 April 2022, 80 years after her loss, by the President of Malta, Dr George Vella.^{11, 12}



¹⁰ The Virtual Museum – Underwater Malta: HMS Urge <https://underwatermalta.org/discover/hms-urge/>

¹¹ HMS Urge Memorial Unveiled in Malta (Friends of the Royal Navy Submarine website) <https://www.rnsubmusfriends.org.uk/hms-urge-memorial-unveiled-in-malta/> (accessed 4 May 2022)

¹² Heritage Malta - President George Vella unveils a monument commemorating HMS Urge at Fort St Elmo <https://heritagemalta.org/president-george-vella-unveils-monument-hms-urge-fse/> (accessed 4 May 2022)





Memorials at HM Submarine Memorial Chapel



'There is no branch of His Majesty's Forces which in this war has suffered the same proportion of fatal losses as our Submarine Service. It is the most dangerous of all services.'
(Tribute paid by The Rt. Hon. Winston S. Churchill, speaking in the House of Commons in 1941)



*HM Submarine Chapel viewed from within Fort Blockhouse
(Spinnaker Tower, Portsmouth in background)*