



# 100 YEARS

## HMS *Belfast* Factsheet



HMS *Belfast* welcomes visitors on board to uncover the ship's fascinating history that extends to the Arctic convoys, D-Day, the Cold War, Korea and beyond. Journeying through the ship's nine decks, visitors can duck through the same hatches and climb up and down the same ladders to discover what life was like for the 950-strong crew who served on her. From the heights of the Flag Deck, where visitors can take in panoramic views of London, to the depths of the Engine and Boiler Rooms that lie below the waterline, there are facts and personal stories to uncover around every corner.

### Brief history

- HMS *Belfast* was launched by Anne Chamberlain, wife of the Prime Minister, on St Patrick's Day, 17 March 1938.
- The vessel was commissioned into the Royal Navy in August 1939 and joined the war effort in September. She was tasked with imposing a maritime blockade on Germany and searching merchant vessels to prevent would-be soldiers or contraband supplies reaching the enemy.
- HMS *Belfast* was hit by a magnetic mine in November 1939, which put her out of service for 3 years whilst the hull was repaired.
- In February 1943, the ship acted as an escort for convoys crossing the Arctic Ocean to and from Russia. Conditions in the Arctic were appalling: so cold that metal and skin would freeze tight against each other in an instant; so dark in the winter that dawn and dusk were only an hour or two apart; seas so mountainous that a gun turret roof could be ripped off by the force of a single wave.
- The cruiser played a pivotal role in the Battle of North Cape, December 1943, assisting with the sinking of the German ship *Scharnhorst*.
- HMS *Belfast* led the fleet on D-Day, 6 June 1944 prior to the Allied invasion of France, Operation Overlord. For five weeks, HMS *Belfast* supported Allied troops as they fought their way inland. It was 8 July when she fired her guns in anger for the last time in European waters.
- In June 1945, the ship headed to the Far East, where she helped to liberate Shanghai internment camps and aided in the escape of HMS *Amethyst* from the Yangtze River.
- HMS *Belfast* also saw action in the Korean War 1950–52. In all, *Belfast* put in 404 days of active service during the war, operating close in to the enemy-occupied shoreline in order to extend her range inland.
- After her involvement in the Far East, HMS *Belfast* faced an uncertain future. She was rebuilt and used for peacetime exercises before landing at Portsmouth in 1962, to be paid off into reserve, on the verge of being scrapped.
- HMS *Belfast* was saved from scrapping by the Belfast Trust charitable trust, who docked it in London and opened it to the public in 1971.
- IWM took ownership of her in 1978, and HMS *Belfast* has been one of our branches ever since.

### Did you know?

- HMS *Belfast* was supposed to fire the first shots of D-Day, but another trigger-happy ship stole her thunder by about a minute.

- Some crewmen knew they would be drowned if it meant saving the ship. If the *Belfast* received a hit that threatened an explosion in the magazines, the area could be rapidly flooded to keep the vessel intact. The 22 men at action stations down there would have had little chance of escape.
- Prime Minister Winston Churchill intended to witness the Normandy landings first-hand from the decks of HMS *Belfast*, and only pulled out when King George called Churchill's bluff and offered to witness too. This was a risk that even Churchill was not prepared to take, so the plan was shelved.
- HMS *Belfast* is so long that you could almost lie Big Ben's clock tower along its decks . . . twice.
- If the guns in 'A' and 'B' turrets were fired in their current position, their shells would land some 12.5 miles to the north-west – on the M1 service station at London Gateway.
- If you stand on deck, you could find yourself about six metres higher or lower than when you started, due to the shift of the tide on the River Thames.
- The sailors of HMS *Belfast* used to cool off in the shark-infested waters of the Far East by swimming inside a big net attached to the ship.
- The ship's weight is 11,553 tons – just over the combined weight of 11,553,000 bags of sugar.
- During the Korean War, HMS *Belfast*'s crew consumed over 56,000 pints (32,000 litres) of rum

### Things to look out for

- **Ribbon** from the bottle of champagne used to launch HMS *Belfast* on St Patricks Day in 1938.
- **D-Day photo** showing Rear-Admiral Dalrymple-Hamilton watching events unfold in the early hours of D-Day, 6 June 1944. HMS *Belfast* led the bombardment which preceded the Allied invasion of France.
- **Gun Turret Experience.** A sailor's Story, 1943, which transports you back to Boxing Day of that year, when HMS *Belfast* helped to sink the German battle cruiser *Scharnhorst*. Experience what it was like to be in the heart of the action as lights, imagery, smoke effects, vibrations, sounds and smells recreate the intense atmosphere of battle inside a cramped gun turret.
- **HMS *Belfast* ship's bell** – presented to the ship by the people of Belfast in 1948. The less valuable original was rung every half hour to mark the passing of each watch - a welcome sound at the end of a cold spell of duty.
- **Image of HMS *Belfast* entertaining young British internees at Shanghai.** After years of living in Japanese-run camps, where hunger was rife, on 1 October 1945 young internees were welcomed aboard HMS *Belfast* and treated to jellies, cake and chocolate, as well as swings and slides constructed by the ship's crew.
- **The Arctic Messdeck.** Get a sense of what it was like to live on board the *Belfast* during the Second World War. See the tightly packed hammocks, slung just 21-inches apart, and listen to the words of a genuine letter home written by a sailor relaxing between shifts.
- **The HMS *Belfast* pound.** On the verge of disposal, *Belfast* was handed over to the Belfast Trust in July 1971 with the aim of preserving her for the nation. IWM 'bought' the ship from the Trust for one pound and, on Trafalgar Day (21 October) 1971 at her new berth on the banks of the Thames, HMS *Belfast* opened to the public for the first time.

–ENDS –

### Notes to Editors

For more information about HMS *Belfast* and for image or interview requests, please contact:  
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### HMS *Belfast*

HMS *Belfast* is the most significant surviving Second World War Royal Navy warship, with a history that extends to the Arctic Convoys, D-Day, the Cold War, Korea and beyond. Moored on the River Thames between London Bridge and Tower Bridge, HMS *Belfast* tells the story of life on board and explores how war affects and impacts on the morale, resilience and determination of a ship's community. We take visitors on a journey though the ship's nine decks and show them what life was like for the 950 strong crew, through the real life stories of the people who served on her.

Open Daily: Last entry an hour before closing. (Closed 24 – 26 December)

Summer Hours: 10am – 6pm (1 March 2017 – 31 October 2017).

Winter Hours: 10am – 5pm (1 November 2017 – 28 February 2018)

Admission\*: £16 Adults; £12.80 Concessions (Senior, Student, Disabled); £8 Child (5- 16); Free Child (under 5); Family tickets available; Special rates for groups of ten plus.

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\* Please note entry prices include a voluntary donation, making a valuable contribution to the care and conservation of this historic site

## IWM

IWM (Imperial War Museums) tells the story of people who have lived, fought and died in conflicts involving Britain and the Commonwealth since the First World War.

Our unique Collections, made up of the everyday and the exceptional, reveal stories of people, places, ideas and events. Using these, we tell vivid personal stories and create powerful physical experiences across our five museums that reflect the realities of war as both a destructive and creative force. We challenge people to look at conflict from different perspectives, enriching their understanding of the causes, course and consequences of war and its impact on people's lives.

IWM's five branches which attract over 2 million visitors each year are **IWM London**, IWM's flagship branch that recently transformed with new, permanent and free First World War Galleries alongside new displays across the iconic Atrium to mark the Centenary of the First World War; **IWM North**, housed in an iconic award-winning building designed by Daniel Libeskind; **IWM Duxford**, a world renowned aviation museum and Britain's best preserved wartime airfield; **Churchill War Rooms**, housed in Churchill's secret headquarters below Whitehall; and the Second World War cruiser **HMS Belfast**.

## IWM Centenary

2017 marks Imperial War Museums (IWM) centenary. IWM was established while the First World War was still being fought. Since its establishment people have entrusted IWM with their stories of war from 1917 to the present day, in the knowledge it will continue to share these stories with future generations. IWM will commemorate its 100 years through a centenary of stories from its rich collections across its five branches (IWM London, IWM North, IWM Duxford, Churchill War Rooms and HMS Belfast).



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## First World War Centenary

2014 - 2018 marks the centenary of the First World War, a landmark anniversary for Britain and the world. IWM is marking the centenary by leading a vibrant, four year programme of cultural activities across the world. For more information visit [www.1914.org](http://www.1914.org)

