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The SS Crete Boom

BALLINA'S CONCRETE SHIP

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Ballina's Concrete Ship

The SS Crete Boom

In Ballina, between the Quay and Belleek Woods there lies a very unusual feature, that of the concrete SS Crete Boom, an old concrete tugboat lying in the River Moy.

Few people will remember when it arrived in the town but many townspeople will have memories of swimming and diving off the hulk in years gone by. Unlike other shipwrecks such as the MV Plassy on Inis Oirr (think of the opening credits of Fr. Ted), the SS Crete Boom was constructed of concrete for its main body.

The SS Crete Boom was part of a fleet of cargo ships designed to transport iron ore from Spain to Britain during World War 1. Given the shortage of steel in Britain as a consequence of the war, a new method of building these ships and boats was needed. It was decided that a concrete fleet of ships would be viable, and an order was placed for 154 units, 24 of them tugboats, at a cost of £4 million.

Production had commenced in 1917 on several tugboats similar to the SS Crete Boom, however, the conflict had ceased before the completion of the vessels. Immediately after the end of the war in 1918 many of the outstanding orders were cancelled and work only continued on those vessels nearing completion.

Only 52 barges and 12 tugboats were completed out of the 154 ordered. Once those boats were complete the building programme was abandoned.

In 1922 a London based shipping company bought the surviving barges and tugboats and set up the Crete Shipping Company. They used the boats to tow coal to the continent from Sunderland.



Image: northmayo.ie

However, by 1924 the company had ceased operations and all its vessels were left mothballed on the River Tyne. The SS Crete Boom was laid up on the River Wear for a number of years before being sold for dismantling. It was stripped of its metal parts leaving only the concrete hulk of the boat.

In 1937 the Ballina Harbour Commissioners purchased the SS Crete Boom along with several other wrecks. It was intended to sink them at the entrance of the River Moy where they would form a sand barrier. The idea was postponed when the Moy Fishery Company threatened legal action to protect the salmon run into the river.

By the time of the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939 the idea had been abandoned. During the move of the tugboat to Ballina in 1937 it was discovered the wreck was taking on water.

It then became evident that the tugboat was in danger of sinking and blocking the whole quay. A decision was made to tow the boat to mid-stream and allow it to sink to the bottom. It sank, and stayed there for almost 50 years.

By the 1970s the River Moy was silting badly and dredging work began. It was decided to move the sunken tugboat from the centre of the river as it was stopping the proper flow of water.

On March 16th 1974, during high tide, the SS Crete Boom was lifted from the mud and towed a short distance to its new home.

Tons of mud that had accumulated in the hulk were cleaned out along with hundreds of eels that had made the boat their home.

In re-surfacing the boat, a new interesting landmark was given to the town of Ballina. The welfare of the fishing industry was also improved, as the removal of the tugboat from the river bed improved the under-water conditions.

The SS Crete Boom never fulfilled the purpose for which it was built, it has however become one of the town's most unusual attractions.

Sources

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