



**Shipwright 1<sup>st</sup>-Class William Henry Percy (also found as *Percey*) of the Royal Naval Reserve, Service Number 123670, is interred in the Old Anglican Cemetery on Forest Road in St. John's, Newfoundland.**

**(continued)**

Shipwright William Henry Percy was a well-travelled and well-seasoned sailor who, having enlisted as an apprentice shipwright\* as early as 1883, had already spent thirty-three years in service with the Royal Navy before he was ordered transferred to Newfoundland in 1916. Unlike many of those with whom he was to serve on HMS *Briton* (formerly HMS *Calypso*), he was not a seaman of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland).

*\* A shipwright, particularly in the days before armoured ships, was one of the more important figures on board ship. Often referred to as the ship's carpenter, he was responsible for keeping the vessel sea-worthy both prior to leaving port and during the voyage. He was also the person in charge of such supplies - wood, metal hardware, rope, the necessary tools and the like which would be indispensable – and unavailable elsewhere during what might be months of sailing without respite.*

*With the coming of the 'Age of Steam' other skills were to be needed, those of pipe-fitting, basic metallurgy, electrical work and hydraulics for example, the shipwright's (ship's carpenter) skills multiplied rather than diminished as His Majesty's wooden ships gave way to those of iron and steel.*

William Henry Percy had been born in the English county of Devon in 1861 in the community of Stonehouse to parents William and Maria Percy, he was also brother to Mary and James. Twenty-two years later, on or about June 1 of 1883 he enlisted, likely at the large Royal Naval establishment at not far-distant Devonport.

From that time on he was to be posted to shore-based stations as many as a dozen times and to one of His Majesty's ships on fifteen occasions. After his marriage to Rosaline Partridge in 1900 and the birth of son William Harold in 1902 it appears that he was to settle down for a ten-year period. It may well have continued thus had not the *Great War* chosen to intervene.

The career of Shipwright 1<sup>st</sup>-Class – he was apparently not to achieve that rank until having joined HMS *Briton* in 1916 – resembles a history of vessels of the Royal Navy from circa 1840 until after the hostilities of 1914-1918. One of the oldest was HMS *Indus*, a wooden ship of the line launched in 1839 but which, together with other venerable vessels, had by the advent of Apprentice Shipwright Percy at Devonport, already become the stationary Guard-Ship and Flagship of the Port Admiral there.

She was subsequently assembled with other venerable vessels at Devonport to be converted into a Royal Navy training complex – the ensemble to be designated as HMS *Indus* – which was to operate well into the twentieth century.

(Right above: *The photograph of HMS 'Indus' at anchor in the harbour at Halifax, Nova Scotia, circa 1858-1860, is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)



(continued)

His tenure at *Indus* having lasted until mid-September of 1883, he was then transferred to an even older vessel, HMS *Royal Adelaide*, launched in 1828, which in 1860 had also been converted for use as a Depot Ship in port at Devonport. She was later sold, in 1905.

(Preceding page: *The photograph of HMS 'Royal Adelaide' in which the ship is shown at Devonport in 1880 and much as Apprentice Shipwright Percy would have seen her, is from the 'Historic Naval Fiction' web-site.*)

HMS *Valiant* was the next ship on which Apprentice Shipwright Percy was to set foot, on July 30 of 1884, and was the first modern war-ship, although still partially reliant upon sail, on which he was to serve. Described in some sources as a battleship, elsewhere she is categorized as an armoured frigate.



(Right above: *The photograph of the British war-ship HMS 'Valiant' in 1863 - this the year of her launching although she was not to have her guns until two years afterwards and be commissioned two years later again - is from the 'laststandonzombieisland' web-site.*)

His apprenticeship as shipwright apparently came to a successful conclusion whilst he was on board *Valiant* since he was to receive two appointments during his posting to her: on December 5 of 1884 he joined the *Carpenter's Crew* and again on July 1, 1885, when he became Shipwright Percy.

On August 22, 1885, after only a year of service on her, he was to receive further orders to report to another vessel. It may well have been on that same August day that the ship herself, *Valiant*, was de-commissioned to be taken out of service.

Those next orders apparently took him to the South Seas, to the *Australia Station*, and to a smaller vessel, the yacht HMS *Dart*, which was to undertake under-water surveys there. This likely does no justice to her work during that time since the *Australia Station* in those years encompassed not only the waters around New Zealand and Australia itself, but eastward as far as the islands of Tonga and Samoa, northward to New-Guinea, and westward to incorporate the Indian Ocean area to the south of India itself.



(Right above: *This photograph, captioned...The crew of 'Dart' in 1885...is from Wikipedia, the crew in question being clad in tropical naval uniform.*)

*It should perhaps be noted here that the dates given of Shipwright Percy's service at different venues is not particularly accurate in a sense in that these are the dates on which his name was placed on the nominal role of a ship or base and not necessarily the exact day on which he walked in or out through the door or on or off a particular ship.*

*For example: Officially he left HMS 'Dart' on August 22 1889 and on the morrow, August 23, is recorded as in service at Devonport with HMS 'Indus'. He was obviously not to make the journey from Australia to the United Kingdom in less than twenty-four hours.*

From the warmer climes of the southern hemisphere, the next posting was to be back at HMS *Indus* at Devonport. It was at most to be a stay of only three months, likely a lot shorter given that during some of the time he was returning from the other side of the world.

HMS *Defiance* is the ship on which he was next to serve, she having been the last wooden and un-armoured vessel constructed for the Royal Navy. Launched in 1861, she was never fitted for – and therefore was never to see - service at sea but, perhaps because of disappointing sea-trials, was to be towed to, and be moored in, the area of the naval port facilities of Plymouth-Devonport where she would eventually, some twenty years later, become the Royal Navy's first Torpedo School\*. The ship would serve until 1931.



*\*Other venerable vessels were added as the years passed and as the School evolved; all of these ships became 'Defiance' plus a number: i.e., 'Defiance' II., 'Defiance' III., etc..*

*(Right above: The photograph of HMS 'Defiance' moored at Saltash and acting as the Navy's Torpedo School is from the 'Ships nostalgia' web-site via Google.)*

It is not far from Saltash and *Defiance*, the home of the Torpedo School, to HMS *Indus* at Devonport, and that was the short journey that Shipwright Percy would make on or about October 1 of 1890. What his duties were to be at *Indus* during the following ten weeks or so is not clear although during that time he was to be elevated to the rank of leading shipwright.

HMS *Agamemnon* was next on Shipwright Percy's postings. One of a pair of ironclad turret battleships, she was commissioned in 1884 only to be taken out of service eight years later and placed in the Reserve Fleet. She would be sold as scrap in 1903.

In the meantime, Shipwright Percy had joined her complement at the end of 1890 while the vessel had been operating in the Mediterranean. He left her on September 13, 1892, perhaps again the date on which the ship on which he had just served was to be withdrawn from service and paid off.



*(Right: This image is of Agamemnon's sister-ship, Ajax, at the 1887 Jubilee naval review at Spithead – and is from Wikipedia.)*

In that September of 1892 he was dispatched to another more modern ship. HMS *Camperdown* was an Admiral-class battleship of some eleven-thousand tons built at a time, 1889, when the Royal Navy was still experimenting in ship designs. The following years of *Camperdown's* career was interspersed with relegations into the Fleet Reserve which may suggest that she was not all that the Navy desired.

However, it would appear that Shipwright Percy was to be present on *Camperdown* on one of the blackest days of the Royal Navy.

HMS *Camperdown* had been in the Reserve Fleet when she had been re-commissioned in July of 1892 and ordered to join the Mediterranean Fleet. After almost a year without incident, while the vessel was on exercises she was to collide with another battleship, HMS *Victoria*, and although *Camperdown* would remain afloat, not so with *Victoria* which sank in thirteen minutes and which took three-hundred fifty-eight to their death including the Commander of the Mediterranean Fleet.



(Right above: *The photograph of HMS 'Camperdown' is from the military-fandom.com web-site.*)

If *Camperdown* was not the solution to the Royal Navy's needs, then the advent of the *Dreadnought*-class battleship seems to have been – even though it immediately rendered obsolete every other battleship in the world and came close to bankrupting the British government.



A bigger vessel, heavier armour, more powerful engines, larger and larger guns and the use of standardized elements. *Dreadnought* was all of these compared to what had gone before. And it was to *Dreadnought* that Shipwright Percy was attached in June of 1894, thus likely ordered to His Majesty's Dockyard in Portsmouth, this to be the site of the vessel's creation.

(Right above: *The photograph of HMS 'Dreadnought' undergoing sea trials, circa 1906-07, is from the 'Wikipedia' web-site.*)

His posting there was to be of a bare three months' duration and the ship's construction was not to formally begin until October of 1905 by which time Shipwright Percy was to have served in two other locations. However, it should be remembered that he was not an ordinary seaman or signaller or gunner; his duties comprised those of construction and repair and there was a great deal of that to do and to be prepared for in 1904, two years before the great ship would be ready.

In September of 1904 he was sent to *Vivid II*, a Division of the by now, since 1890, Royal Navy shore-based establishment of barracks and training facilities at Plymouth-Devonport. *Vivid II* specialized in the schooling of stokers – the Royal Navy ran on coal at the time – and of other engine-room personnel, so Shipwright Percy's attachment there is hardly surprising in those days of technological and mechanical advances.

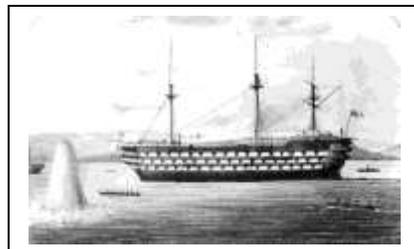


(Right above: *A main gateway to the once-Royal Navy establishment at Plymouth-Devonport – photograph from 2011(?)*)

On the first day of December of that year, Shipwright Percy was placed on the nominal roll of HMS *Cambridge*. She was not a new ship; in fact she was another elderly veteran of the

same ilk as *Defiance* – a *wooden-waller* - and as such had a great deal of work to offer to a shipwright. Like many of the such-like ships that he had known, she was now tied-up and being used for training and accommodation purposes: in the case of *Cambridge*, she was by 1904 a gunnery ship in the vicinity of the south-coast naval port-city of Portsmouth.

(Right: *Built as a conventional wooden war-ship in 1844, she had been launched as HMS 'Victoria', re-named as 'Winsor Castle' in 1855 – and modified partially to steam propulsion – before becoming HMS 'Cambridge' in 1869 and assigned to become the afore-mentioned gunnery school. She operated as such until 1907 when the school moved on-shore, before being broken up a year later, in 1908. – image from Wikipedia*)



There may have been a substantial amount of work to be done on board *Cambridge* as Shipwright Percy remained posted to her for just less than twenty-eight months before he was returned on March 17, 1897, to *Vivid II* where, by contrast, he was to spend only two weeks, much of that time as one of the Division's leading shipwrights.

HMS *Penelope* an old armoured corvette, of the same era and much the same style as HMC *Valiant* (see further above) was his next stop, there to serve a mere thirty-three days, from April 2 until May 5. Having served intermittently in the role of depot ship, in reserve, in the bombardment of Alexandria in 1882, and as a receiving ship in South Africa in 1888, by the time of Shipwright Percy's posting to her, or very soon afterwards during that same year, she was serving as a floating prison.



(Right above: *The photograph of the hybrid (sail and steam) armoured corvette HMS 'Penelope' is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

On the day after having finished work on *Penelope* he was officially on the books of another ship: HMS *Phoebe*. There he was to be employed for almost two years less a month, from May 6, 1897, until March 25 of 1899.

Thus once more he had stepped onto the deck of a more-modern vessel of metal and steam which had been launched less than ten years previously, on July 1 of 1890. During that interim she had served on the *Cape and West Africa Station*, perhaps notably – or notoriously, the subject deserves further reading – as a component of the British *Benin Punitive Expedition* of 1897.



In that 1899 *Phoebe* was to be placed in Fleet Reserve before being ordered to the *Australia Station* for some four years. Perhaps Shipwright Percy was to be involved in the re-fitting of the vessel for that task – but this is only conjecture.

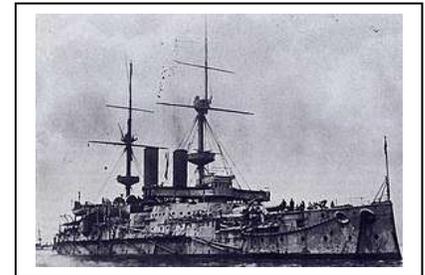
(Right above: *Once more the 'Wikipedia' web-site has been the source of a photograph of one of His Majesty's ships, in this case the Pearl-class cruiser 'Phoebe'.*)

After having served on *Phoebe* which may well have been based at Devonport during that time, Shipwright Percy was to pass the next year and two months – March 26, 1899 to May 31, 1900, at *Vivid I* which was primarily a holding barracks for seamen awaiting a posting to a ship. However, although there is no evidence for this, it is hard to believe that there was no work for him to do during all this time.



In any case, 1900 was the year during which he and Miss Rosaline Partridge were to be wed.

Shipwright Percy was next to be dispatched to a ship on June 1 of 1900. She was the twenty year-old battleship HMS *Colossus* which was apparently by this time the Guard Ship in the small Welsh harbour of Holyhead. In 1901 she was paid off and sent into reserve. Her officers and crew, however, likely including Shipwright Percy, were then transferred to the ship which was to take over the responsibilities of guardian of Holyhead, another elderly battleship, HMS *Resolution*.



Thus he was to spend in total two years, nine months and eight days – until April 8, 1903 – in the Principality of Wales before his next transfer.

(Right above: *Seen here are HMS 'Colossus' (above) and HMS 'Resolution', neither of which were to be involved in the Great War. – Both photographs are from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

After his attachment to those elderly leviathans of the sea, *Colossus* and *Resolution*, Shipwright Percy would be sent to a perhaps already-obsolescent cruiser: HMS *Edgar*. This period of thirty-three days from April 9 of 1903 until May 12, was to be his last posting to a ship until two days prior to the British *Declaration of War* more than eleven years later when on August 2 he reported to duty on HMS *Jupiter*.



(Right above: *The cruiser HMS 'Edgar', Shipwright Percy's final posting on a ship before being pensioned-off (likely half-pension) for some eleven years. The ship, launched in 1900, was to serve in the Gallipoli Campaign and the Mediterranean during the Great War, and was damaged in by an Austrian submarine in April of 1918 but otherwise had an uneventful war-time career. She was broken up in 1921. – photograph, as ever, from Wikipedia*)

After his few days in 1903 on *Edgar* – after which the ship was to sail to serve on the *China Station* - he spent a further three months back at *Vivid I* perhaps before being in turn considered...*obsolete*. In his papers his address and that of his family – their son had by this time arrived – is recorded as having been 8A, Admiralty Street, Stonehouse, Devon, and maybe it was to there that Shipwright Percy was to retire – albeit this address was presumably documented at the time of his re-enlistment.

Great Britain and the Empire were to declare war on Germany on August 4, 1914. Two days prior to that event, in anticipation of hostilities, Shipwright Percy (now designated 2<sup>nd</sup> - Class, perhaps because he had been out of service for eleven years) reported back to *Vivid I*, there to be held in barracks until August 29 when he was assigned to HMS *Jupiter*. This was a pre-Dreadnought battleship, thus obsolete in many ways but still of use to the Navy and thus to the country.

In fact Shipwright Percy may well have joined her before those last days of August since *Jupiter* had already been at Devonport since the beginning of that month – as seen before, Devonport was also the location of *Vivid I* – and was to remain there for some further three months, until October 26, when she sailed eastwards then northwards around the English coast to become an element of the *Channel Fleet* before then taking up the post of Guard Ship at North Shields on the River Tyne.

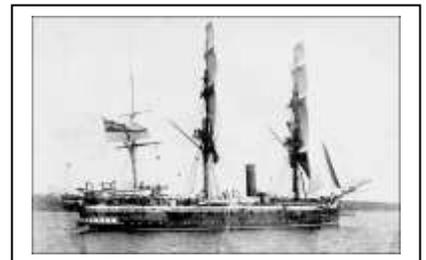


On February 5 of 1915 HMS *Jupiter* sailed under orders northwards again, on this occasion to round the top of Norway and to take up station in Russian waters based on the port of Archangel. There she was to take up the duties of icebreaker while the ship normally assigned this task was to undergo a refit.

Because of ice and other duties it was not until March 27 that Shipwright Percy and *Jupiter* entered the port of Archangel. Just twelve days later, on April 8, she was back at sea, returning to the United Kingdom via Alexandrovsk where there was three weeks of various work to be done.

On May 1 she left Alexandrovsk for Glasgow – until her destination became Birkenhead, a maritime port and shipping-centre adjacent to and part of the Liverpool complex on the River Mersey on England's north-west coast. This was to be HMS *Jupiter's* last port of call as she was now, as of May 19, to be *paid off* – decommissioned and taken out of service for more than three months. After an overhaul she later served as a patrol vessel on the *Suez Canal* before returning to Devonport where she was languish for the remainder of the *Great War*. She was scrapped in 1920.

Shipwright Percy thereupon officially returned to *Vivid II* on the morrow, May 20, 1915, and was to remain there – perhaps upgrading his old skills and learning new ones – until a year later when he was ordered to traverse the Atlantic Ocean to report *to duty* to yet another venerable vessel, HMS *Briton* - formerly HMS *Calypso* - Drill Ship of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland.



(Right above: *At the outset of their career, the Calypso-Class ships were apparently considered to be superior vessels. Hybrids - powered by both steam and sail - they were able to police the outer reaches of the British Empire most efficiently and economically. The rapid progress in engine technology, however, was to mean that HMS 'Calypso' and*

*her sister-ships would soon be out-classed by newer vessels. – This Royal Navy photograph, taken before 1902 when the drill-hall was reportedly built on her upper deck and the funnel removed, is from Wikipedia)*

*Note: During the years preceding the Great War the only military force on the Island of Newfoundland – apart from a handful of ill-fated local attempts – was to be the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland). Even so, it was to be some thirty years after the withdrawal of British troops from the Dominion in 1870 before the Reserve came into being in 1902.*

*Just fewer than four-hundred men were sought to enroll as seamen – apparently automatically at the rank of Able Seaman - and to present themselves annually in St. John's for five years in order to train for a period of twenty-eight days per annum. Allowed to report at a time of their own choosing, it is perhaps not surprising that these volunteers – mostly fishermen – were to opt to train during the winter months when fishing work was minimal.*

*(Right above: Recruits of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) seen here in front of HMS 'Calypso'. The shed-like superstructure seen behind them had been built onto the ship in 1902 to serve as a drill-hall. Whether the vessel was still 'Calypso', or had become 'Briton' by this time (see further below) is not clear. – photograph from Newfoundland Provincial Archives via Wikipedia)*



*Expenses were apparently defrayed for the most part by the British (Imperial) Government and an attempt was made to ensure the number of recruits would be kept constantly at a maximum. This practice and policy was then to be continued up until the onset of hostilities some twelve years later.*

*(Right above: Naval reservists from Newfoundland, during the early days of the Great War, before their departure for the United Kingdom - from The War Illustrated)*

*Of course, the purpose of having a reserve force at any time is to provide a trained force ready at any time to serve at a time of need or crisis. Thus in August of 1914, upon the Declaration of War by the government in London, hundreds of those men of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) were to make their way to St. John's, from there to take passage overseas to bolster the ranks of the Royal Navy.*



*An elderly vessel, HMS 'Calypso', having become surplus to the Admiralty's needs, had been provided to the Dominion of Newfoundland by the Royal Navy in 1902 for training purposes. After some debate it was eventually decided that she would be permanently moored in the harbour of the capital, her superstructure reduced, and a wooden shelter*

**built on her upper deck to provide training facilities and living quarters for the prospective naval recruits.**

**(Preceding page: HMS 'Calypso' in full sail. She was to be re-named 'Briton' in 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was about to be launched by the Royal Navy. – This photograph, taken of her by the Royal Navy in 1898, is shown by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)**



**(Right: The C-Class cruiser 'Calypso' of 1916, seen here on an un-recorded date during the later years of the Great War, was to be sunk by an Italian submarine in 1940. – from Wikipedia)**

**Shipwright Percy was fifty-five years of age when he reported to HMS Briton, likely in the summer of 1916. What his duties were then to be has not been documented but it may be surmised that he had been chosen for this post because of his history of duty on similar vessels – and because, given Briton's age, there was likely often something to be done.**

**And perhaps just to encourage him in his work, on December 29 of 1916 he was appointed to be Shipwright 1<sup>st</sup> – Class.**

**At some unrecorded time over a year later he was to be admitted into the General Hospital in St. John's and diagnosed as suffering from...heart disease. He fell victim to it on June 10, 1918.**

**Shipwright 1<sup>st</sup> – Class William Henry Percy was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).**



**The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to [criceadam@yahoo.ca](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 21, 2023.**

