

## Archibald John Keeping

Archibald John Keeping was born on the 12<sup>th</sup> March, 1884 at 20 Queens Road, St Helier in Jersey. His father was Philip John Keeping who was employed as a Coachman, while his mother was Alice Elizabeth Lock. He had a sister, Ella Dora, who was born on the 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1898.

He attended the Jersey National School at Halkett Place in St Helier, and on leaving school would become a horse driver. Still living on the Island at the time of the 1901 Census, he decided to join the Royal Navy, signing up for a period of 12 years colour service which would begin on 12<sup>th</sup> March, 1902 when he had attained the age of 18 years. However, he had actually joined on 5<sup>th</sup> October, 1901 as a Boy, 2<sup>nd</sup> Class with the service number 217600.

It seems that as a naval rating, he progressed fairly quickly through the ranks, for by the 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1906 he had gained the rating of Leading Seaman while on *HMS Bulwark*, and on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1907 had passed his Petty Officer's educational examination. All was going well until 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1909, for on that date, according to his naval service record he reverted to the rating of Able-Bodied Seaman apparently for being drunk while serving on *HMS Gossamer*! Ten days later, he was assigned to *HMS Vivid I*, the Devonport shore base, and would, on 31<sup>st</sup> July, 1909, leave the RN having purchased his discharge.



The Marriage of Archibald John Keeping and Minnie Victoria Sophia Tibbitt, October, 1912

Civilian Street beckoned! But first, Archibald joined the Royal Fleet Reserve at Devonport on the day following his discharge and given the RFR number B2839. Little more than a month later, he was to be found in London and having enlisted as PC 853 in 'Y' Division of the Metropolitan Police. He would stay with the Police until 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 1914 when the RFR was fully mobilised for war. However, before that happened, he had married an English lady, Minnie Victoria Sophia Tibbitt at St Luke's Church in West Holloway, London on 30<sup>th</sup> October, 1912. The photograph on the previous page of Charles, Minnie and their family and friends was taken at 17, Beacon Hill, Islington.

Back in the RN, his first ship was *HMS Eclipse* and he would remain onboard until 6<sup>th</sup> March, 1915 when he would re-join *HMS Vivid* for a few days before being reassigned to *HMS Severn* on 11<sup>th</sup> March, 1915 and being reinstated as a Leading Seaman.



**HMS Severn**

*HMS Severn*, one of three monitors (the others being *HMS Humber* and *HMS Mersey*) that were originally intended for the Brazilian Navy, had already been in action during the Great War, taking part in actions, with *HMS Mersey*, at Ostend and Dunkirk, as well as covering the BEF's retreat. There would be no respite for these ships, for a month after Archibald having joined *HMS Severn*, they were to be found off Malta waiting to be sent up the River Danube once the Dardanelles Straits had been forced!

But, there was another fly in the ointment, however, in the shape of a German light cruiser, the *SMS Königsberg*, off the East African coast, and it was to East Africa that these ships were dispatched being towed through the Suez Canal on 6<sup>th</sup> May, 1915, arriving at Mafia four weeks later on 3<sup>rd</sup> June.

By the time they arrived the *SMS Königsberg* had been blockaded in the delta of the river Rufiji for some seven or eight months, and so both ships were prepared with the fitting of extra armour plating and sand-bagging of structures, while improvements were also made to the buoyancy with the addition of sealed, empty kerosene cans. A month elapsed during

which time the channels were charted, and on the night of 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> July, 1915 a small fleet set sail, some as a diversionary feint, others to act as flank guard.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 105-D0A3002  
Foto: Dobbertin, Walther | 1914/1915

### SMS Königsberg

With *HMS Severn*, and *HMS Mersey* in the channels, Archibald's ship was the first to fire at the *SMS Königsberg* at a range of nearly 11,000 yards, but was at once answered by the German ship's guns, which soon also had *HMS Mersey* bracketed, causing damage to this ship and its crew. If incoming fire from the *SMS Königsberg* was not enough, shore-based German artillery and machine gun fire also engaged the British ships. Throughout the engagement, which lasted from about 06.30 to 15.30 hours on the 6<sup>th</sup> when the British ships withdrew, it appears that the *SMS Königsberg* was hit six times and that only one of its guns had been put out of action, this being reported through the continued presence of naval spotter aircraft.

With the *SMS Königsberg* still afloat and, comparatively speaking, only lightly damaged, *HMS Severn*, and *HMS Mersey* would again return to the fray on the 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1915, receiving a very 'hot welcome' as they headed into the Rufiji delta at around 11.30 hours. Again, naval spotter aircraft were overhead, one being brought down by shrapnel from the *SMS Königsberg's* quick-firing guns to hit the river upside down. Both aircrew surfaced and were recovered, thankful that crocodiles, normally resident in the Rufiji, had left for quieter surroundings! During the period following its arrival, *HMS Severn* was getting a good proportion of its shells on target, and at about 12.40 hours three explosions were heard in

succession. Soon afterwards, the *SMS Königsberg* sank in the shallow waters, and the engagement was over.

One must presume that Archibald Keeping was on board throughout this action, though I cannot find mention of his contribution. He is not mentioned in the dispatch regarding the action that was published in London Gazette 29395 dated 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1915 nor is there any reference in his service record except to state that he was part of *HMS Severn's* crew at this time.

Archibald would remain a member of *HMS Severn's* crew until 13<sup>th</sup> October, 1916 when he would be transferred to the cruiser, *HMS Hyacinth*, another ship on the Cape station, having seen the German surrender at Dar es Salaam on the 4<sup>th</sup> September.



**HMS Hyacinth**

What happened to Archibald next is somewhat unclear thanks to the dark patches on the reproduction of his service paper! His entry for *HMS Hyacinth* is from 14<sup>th</sup> October, 1916 until 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1917 when there is the dreaded naval annotation of 'DD' – Discharged Died! However, it appears that the dark patches partially conceals a note of "Missing, believed wounded", while another reference states that he was "Mentioned for meritorious service whilst serving with the Naval Lewis Gun Detachment (this is followed by an undistinguishable word – but probably an African town name in present day Tanzania) 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1917". However, the fog lifts a little with a reference to a document (NP 4601/17) which stated that he was 'DD' on the 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1917 (per German Report), and advises that he "Died of Wounds whilst interned as prisoner of war in a German East African Hospital after an Operation".

So, can we assume that he had been put ashore as a member of the Detachment which had encountered strong German opposition? Almost certainly, and in this, he had been severely wounded and could not be recovered to safety, thus becoming a prisoner. Injured and/or seriously ill, he had been operated on, but had then died. He has no known grave, and is commemorated on the Dar Es Salaam British and Indian Memorial.

Minnie, the radiant bride of 30<sup>th</sup> October, 1912 had now become a widow. But it is clear that she had visited Jersey while Archibald was serving off East Africa, for she travelled on the SS Alberta between Jersey and Southampton on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1916. At some stage following the news of Archibald's death, she would meet another Jerseyman, William George Stephens who was working for the Headquarters, Jersey Military District in the Government Offices, an ex-soldier from the Dorsetshire Regiment who had lost his right arm in the early days of the Great War, and they would later marry.

**Author's Note:** With thanks to Richard Stephens, the grand-son of William and Minnie Stephens, for the wedding photograph and the information that was used in the first four paragraphs of this article.