

THE FORGOTTEN HEROES

Jackie Macadam describes the background to a new war memorial to be unveiled in Leith later this month.

“THE merchant navy lost around 32,000 men during the Second World War, and 15,000 in the Great War.

There were others lost in the Falklands, and in the Malayan campaign. Add to that the other people who work on the sea, or rely on the sea for their livelihood, like fishermen, oil workers, cruise ships and container ships and the toll is staggering.”

Professor Gordon Milne is talking about the largely unrecognised sacrifice made by the men of the Merchant Navy – a sacrifice that is still being made today, and still goes largely unremarked.

Unrecognised and unmarked – until now.

Thanks to a campaign by a small but determined group of people, later this month (November), a monument to all those who serve and make their living on the sea will be erected in Leith, Edinburgh.

The Rev Ian Gilmour, minister at South Leith Parish Church, takes up the story.

“Leith, and South Leith church has always had an incredibly strong association with the sea, and with merchant shipping in particular. It was built in 1483 by the trades guilds connected with ships and the trades connected with the sea – the maltmen, the hammermen, shoemakers and so on, and was originally called

St Mary’s. In 1609 it was renamed South Leith Parish Church. The church has an annual service for seafarers on the third Sunday in November. At that service, the master mariners of Trinity House, men who have successfully gone through all their maritime exams and achieved the title Master, all sit in the special ‘Trinity House

Gallery' at the back of the church.

“The idea of the memorial came from Gordon Milne and when it was suggested, it really resonated with a huge number of people in Leith and all around. Leith had been Scotland's premier port for around 300 years. It just seemed to be the right time and the right place to build this memorial.

“John Hume, one of the regular contributors to Life and Work, became involved and asked four sculptors to offer designs for consideration. The design that was picked, by local artist Jill Watson, is an obelisk topped by sculptures of the prows and sails of different types of ships and covered on all four sides by bronzed representations of ships and the wide variety of work done by seafarers, from lifeboats to ships at war, clippers, fishing boats and tugs. There will also be the words from Psalm 107 to those ‘who go down to the sea in ships’. It will stand in a prominent point on The Shore at Leith, opposite the former Seamen's home, and will become a permanent reminder and focus for those who have lost loved ones or comrades at sea.”

“The memorial is specifically to commemorate the loss of more than 6,500 Scottish Merchant Navy personnel who gave their lives during the two World Wars and other theatres of conflict, and in peacetime service along the trading routes of the world, as well as the fishermen

who have died in active service or in pursuit of their trade in peacetime,” says Gordon.

“We'd also like it to recognise the 132 years of service to the Merchant Navy of the Leith Nautical College and its training ship, ‘The Dolphin’.

“There is a big monument to the Merchant Navy on Tower Hill in London, but this is the only national one in Scotland, and we hope it will become a real focal point.”

“Scotland was the starting point for two Arctic convoy routes, assembling at Lyness

and Loch Ewe and the Arctic convoys were under almost constant attack from the U-boats that hunted them. They took terrible losses.

“We set up The Merchant Navy Memorial Trust (Scotland) in order to raise the £175,000 needed to commission and build the memorial,” Gordon says.

“The response from local businesses and the public has been incredible. In around a year, we have managed to raise £143,000, enough to start work on the project, and hope to have the rest very soon.”

The memorial is due to be unveiled on November 16 following a service of dedication at South Leith Church to the memorial, and then a parade of guests down to the Monument for the official unveiling. All the armed forces will also be represented.

“Who go to sea in ships, and in great waters trading be,
Within the deep these men God’s works and his great wonders see,
For He commands and forth in the stormy tempest flies,
Which makes the sea with rolling waves aloft to swell and rise. “

Psalm 107

We will remember them.