

BOLTON'S TITANIC SAILORS

Almost a hundred years after the Titanic disaster there are still unanswered questions. Some might be resolved by further exploration of the wreck site, others will probably never be known. One aspect which has never received attention is Bolton's connection with the dreadful accident through two ship masters, who were passing. The outline of the story is well-known. The Titanic was travelling very fast, on her maiden voyage, into an icefield that was drifting south on the Labrador Current. The ship had ignored radio warnings, from other nearby vessels, of substantial icebergs, throughout the day, and had neither posted extra lookouts, as was customary, nor allowed the pair in the crow's nest to use binoculars. Their warning of a huge 'berg, dead ahead, was negligently delayed for almost half an hour, by which time a collision was inevitable. The punctured hull rapidly took in water and the boat began to sink. A persistent coal bunker fire had critically weakened a bulkhead, which failed and hastened the sinking. The bravery of some of the people on board the stricken Titanic is well-recorded, such as Phillips, the senior radio operator, who continued to transmit distress signals as the water entered his cabin, while the bravery of others, such as the engineers who kept the dynamos going until the last minutes, has been neglected. All of them went down with the ship.

A boat was spotted about five miles away as the Titanic foundered and the first lifeboats to leave were instructed to pull toward it and then to return for more passengers. This elusive ship has never been identified and didn't respond to either the signal lamp nor to about twenty red, white and blue distress rockets. By a stroke of luck the radio operator of the liner Carpathia, nearly fifty miles away, intercepted the calls for help, as he was untying his bootlaces before retiring for the night. The master of the Carpathia, Capt. Arthur Rostron, calculated the direction of the sinking ship and heroically raced to the rescue. By working the steam pressure 'up to eleven' he managed to exceed the nine year old ship's top speed by a substantial margin. Thirteen crew members stood watch to warn of floating ice and the Carpathia reached the forlorn lifeboats at daybreak and took all of the survivors aboard and most of the lifeboats.

The steamship Californian was carrying a mixed cargo, probably of cotton, wool and animal feed, and was travelling in the same sea lane as the Titanic but had stopped dead when she encountered the icefield. The single radio operator onboard, accustomed to an eighteen hour working day, had attempted earlier in the evening to warn the Titanic of the ice but had been brusquely rebuffed. It was only the second or third time the Californian had sailed with a radio set and, as the steamship slowly drifted through the night, the officers on board watched a ship half a dozen miles away firing white rockets and, later, sailing away. They attempted to communicate by Morse Lamp but saw no reply. The master of the Californian, Capt. Stanley Lord, dozed in the chartroom, rather than sleep, and kept up steam pressure, to be ready to make way at short notice, if it was needed. This was his first encounter, as a ship's master, of floating sea ice. It was not until early morning, when the radio operator resumed duty at 06:30, that they heard of the Titanic going down, just a few miles away.

The Californian also rushed to the scene and then searched, in ever widening circles, fruitlessly, for more survivors. The Carpathia, meanwhile, had sailed away, with the intention of ridding the icefield safely, before dark, and eventually the Titanic survivors disembarked in New York. The Californian continued to Boston. There were two enquiries into the loss of the boat that had been believed to be unsinkable. The first was in America and the other, under the jurisdiction of the Board of Trade, in England. Neither investigation was particularly thorough and both had flaws, with suggestions that the White Star Line, the operators of the Titanic, had pressured witnesses to produce convenient statements. The carpenter of the SS Californian made allegations, originally to

an American newspaper, that Captain Lord had stood by, watching the distress rockets of the Titanic, as she foundered.

Captain Rostron was celebrated and decorated for his splendid rescue of the Titanic survivors. In later life he was both knighted and made a Commodore of the Cunard Line. Captain Lord was blighted for the rest of his life by the suggestion that he'd stood by and done nothing. Lord wanted a trial so that he would have a chance to prove his innocence and in later years his position was simply that "The Californian didn't move". With their single radio operator sleeping they can have heard nothing of the vessel's distress and the Board of Trade insisted from then onward that a ship must always carry two radio operators. The maritime rules, at that time, stipulated that rockets sent up at regular intervals were a distress signal and Captain Lord should carefully have taken his ship closer to investigate. After a full day on an open bridge he was certainly exhausted and probably in the early stages of exposure but, at almost twenty miles from the Titanic, the ship seen from the lifeboats was not his.

Arthur Rostron grew up in a house named Hills Gate, then at 309 Blackburn Road, and he records that he knew he wanted to go to sea by the age of five or six. He attended Bolton Grammar School, under headmaster Hodgson, and left when he was aged thirteen. He joined the HMS Conway, moored off the Rockferry Pier, as a cadet and recalled that his classmates came to the railway station – probably on Great Moor Street - to see him off. The arithmetic he learned from 'Old Tod' helped him to become an excellent navigator. The site of his home is probably now under the curtilage of the ASDA supermarket - Blackburn Road has almost certainly been renumbered in the intervening hundred and thirty years - and the present number 309 is a sari shop. Queen Victoria allowed fifty pounds a year for prizes to the cadets on HMS Conway and this was distributed by the Duke of Edinburgh, in the first of his award schemes.

Stanley Lord grew up at No. 9 Hampden Street in Mere Hall. The street has now been knocked down and was somewhere to the east of the Vernon Street and Mere Hall Lane road junction. It's probably beneath flats now. The school Stanley Lord attended is unrecorded but perhaps it was also Bolton Grammar School, but under headmaster Hewison. The school was then being rebuilt and some of the classes were temporarily accommodated in a pair of thatched cottages, somewhere at the east end of Silverwell Street. Lord also went to sea aged thirteen, but as an apprentice on the privately owned barque Naiad. He too became an expert navigator and passed his sailing exams unusually early. Captain Rostron noted that he passed two steamships four or five miles from the last known position of the Titanic and that "neither of them were the Californian". It seems that Rostron also hadn't fixed his position since the morning before the disaster and had relied on estimates from the log and of the drifting current. Capt. Lord's own papers on the Titanic disaster are lodged at the Merseyside Maritime Museum and are rich ground for further research.

Both of Bolton's sea captains deserve memorial. Captain Rostron made a daring rescue and the austere Captain Lord took blame that was really due to the negligent shipping owners. The new Bolton Grammar School building, that Lord saw being built, still stands, beside the Parish Church. Perhaps a document has survived - confirming Rostron and Lord's school-days – but a photograph of the school has certainly lasted, from the late 1870's. One of the lads either playing or watching football is definitely Arthur H. Rostron but the question is - which one of them? It's another coincidence that the inventor of the torpedo, Robert Whitehead, also attended Bolton Grammar School. One of Titanic's two sister ships sailed safely for another twenty five years, the third, HMHS Britannic, was struck by a German mine and sank in less than an hour. The Aegean Sea was more merciful and there were many survivors, though two lifeboats were crushed by a propeller. This Britannic wreck site was located and explored by Jacques Cousteau, in 1975, and film makers have now received permission to record inside the designated war grave.