

FROM THE ARCHIVES 2014

I usually give you an account of the many varied enquiries from the UK and abroad, and indeed, this year has been just as interesting. Very busy, intriguing and unexpected.

The centenary of the First World War has focused our minds on our own families who fought in the Great War. Frodsham is commemorating this event and the History Society is making its own contribution. So I decided to change the format of my report and begin with one of two articles from the archives, giving a clearer picture of the war time experiences of Frodsham people.

In the 1992 Journal, the late Bill Hawkin, a past Chairman of the Society, wrote of Frodsham's link with the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915. I feel sure that members will find this article very interesting.

FRODSHAM & THE LUSITANIA by W. R.

HAWKIN

At ten minutes after two on a sunny afternoon on 7th of May 1915, the great Cunard liner 'Lusitania' was inward bound on the last stage of her voyage from New York to Liverpool. She was just off the Old Head of Kinsale in Southern Ireland when a torpedo from the German submarine U 20 hit her starboard side. Over half of the people on board perished, men, women and children, many of whom were Americans including several well known people. It became the one incident which, more than any other, eventually resulted in the U.S.A. becoming involved in the First World War.

"What," you may say, "is the connection with Frodsham?"

The following account, from the Warrington Guardian of the 15th of May 1915 answers the question.

A vivid account of the tragic happenings during the last few moments of the Lusitania was given to our representative by Mr. George Hutchinson, the chief Electrical Engineer on the liner.

Mr. Hutchinson, who was interviewed at his parents' home, Manor House Farm, Frodsham, showed signs of his terrible experiences. His left leg is bruised but he is recovering from the shock and exposure.'

"I was in my room at the time we were struck," said Mr. Hutchinson, "preparing my list in readiness for reaching Liverpool. Then there was a bang and I feared that the ship was doomed. I rushed to

the alleyway and met the chief engineer. Then I rushed below deck to see to the dynamos and by this time the water tight doors had been closed. When I got down, the lights failed and knowing nothing could be done with the dynamo, I hurried on deck to render what help I could.

I got a life belt and dashed to the wireless cabin to see that the operator was getting his current. For some minutes I remained with him and left him when he received an answer from Queenstown (Cobh). The ship was now listing very badly and I returned to my room. When I came out of it, I again met the Chief Engineer and he said, "Come in, Hutch. Come down and see what we can do."

I replied, "Perhaps we will all be below shortly." I shook him by the hand and said, "Goodbye old chap. I think it is everyone for himself now."

This was in the last few minutes, and asking him to follow, I slid on my back down the side of the ship and felt many of the rivets! The force with which I went down was such that I went to some considerable depth in the water, and when I rose to the surface, the huge propellers were up in the air over my head. Some debris fell and knocked me under the water again.

When I came to the top a second time the 'Queen of the Atlantic' had disappeared below the seas. It was a beautiful sunny day and the water was calm and it was owing to these conditions that so many were saved. The water, however, was very cold but it could have been worse.

The first woman I met in the water was struggling desperately to keep herself afloat and I gave her my lifejacket, but what became of her I could not say, although I don't think she was saved because she was nearly dead then.

There was a man shouting for help. His lifebelt was not properly adjusted, in fact he had not got his head through it. I went to his assistance and he shouted, "I am Vanderbilt" (Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt the multi-millionaire) I was treading water and it was extremely difficult for me to give him help. I did all I could to save him, but I had no lifebelt. He went despite my efforts. I was with him for quite a long while.

Swimming about for some time I came across many in their last moments and eventually I was lucky enough to get a plank - one of those I had seen many a time on board."

Whilst on this plank, Mr. Hutchison said he saved two men and two women and was eventually picked up on a collapsible boat and later transferred to the trawler, Brock, after being in the water for four hours.

"On the Brock," he continued, "we found that a doctor was amongst the survivors and he gave much assistance. I felt fit and was able to give help to that gentleman. Amongst his ministrations he was able to set the leg of a 10 year old boy named Freddie Hook, but I don't know to what place he was

going. The Chief Engineer's shirts were brought out and these I tore to make bandages. The Captain of the trawler, Captain Carmel, knew me, we having met when he crossed the Atlantic in our ship.

When we landed at Queenstown, a large crowd had gathered and cheered us, I was introduced to the Lord Mayor of Cork and met Miss Ballantyne of Glasgow, whose life I had been instrumental in saving, and we kept together until we reached Liverpool. Great kindness was shown to us.

We went to Kingston (Dun Laoghaire) and reached Holyhead about 12.30 on the following morning. Whilst there, a lady who was very much upset, came to us and said to me, "Do you know anything about Grace Hutchison? I see there is a G. Hutchison amongst the saved."

When I stated that I knew nothing about the lady and that my name was George Hutchison and it would be myself who was reported saved, she fell back in a faint and was caught by one of those around. She had a fur coat over her arm which she said belonged to her daughter.

Two of the company's officials visited me and did all they could to make things comfortable and just as we were about to leave the refreshment group, a person came along and said that Mrs. Hutchison had sent the fur coat and I placed it on Miss Ballantine.

When we arrived at Lime Street Station, Liverpool at 6 o'clock, we met Dr. Belhue, who had sailed in the Lusitania in January. He took me to the St. George Hotel and later, when I was taken to the hospital in Knotty Ash, I was attended to by three other doctors, then afterwards had a bath and some breakfast.

Arriving at Widnes shortly after three o'clock, I walked to the Transporter Bridge and met my mother waiting for me in a pony and trap. I played the man until I reached Runcorn and then I played the child - I broke down."

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George Hutchison had worked for the Northwich Electricity Supply Company before going to sea, but after the loss of the Lusitania, he seems to have "swallowed the anchor" and joined the army. He died of pneumonia in the Military Hospital, Catthays Barracks, Cardiff in June 1919 at the age of 31, a Lance Corporal in the 4th Cheshire Regiment.