

Broughty Ferry Man Sinks the Titanic?

By Professor Hugh M Begg

Introduction

The wreck of the Titanic was found in 1985, and one of the most poignant images captured by underwater photography was the crow's nest from which the lookouts first warned of the danger.

On 22 September 2007, a key with a tag inscribed Crows Nest Key Telephone was sold by Henry Aldridge Auctioneers of Devises for £90,000. The auctioneers were convinced that the key was used either to lock the Graham and Co Navy type portable telephone in place or to lock the crow's nest locker which may have kept a set of binoculars.

The auction of the key and postcard led to a flurry of interest in the press and other media. Just to take one example, The London Evening Standard of 28 August 2007 trumpeted: *"It was perhaps the most catastrophic lapse of memory in history, costing more than 1,500 lives. A sailor called David Blair forgot to leave behind a key as the Titanic set off on its maiden voyage. Without it, his shipmates were unable to open a locker in the crow's nest containing a pair of binoculars for the designated lookout..."*

These notes address head on the question: was David Blair from Broughty Ferry "The Man who sank the Titanic"? I have gone to the extensive evidence provided at the two contemporary public inquiries -American and British- and drawn upon a limited number of other authoritative sources. I have abandoned as simply fantastic the array of wilder theories about how and why the "unsinkable" Titanic foundered and sank. There is more than enough factual information to inform reputable research without veering away into the fiction of the movies and the wilder speculations of the press.

The Second Officers, the Binoculars and the Lookout

As an introduction, the basics are well known: RMS Titanic, was a passenger liner operated by White Star Line. In the early hours of 15 April 1912, while the ship was on its maiden voyage from Southampton to New York, the vessel collided with an iceberg some 700 nautical miles east of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Although some 710 survivors in Titanic's lifeboats and life rafts were rescued by the RMS Carpathia a few hours later, over 1500 passengers and crew died in the icy waters of the Labrador Current. There was initially confusion over the extent of the disaster with some newspapers reporting that the ship and the passengers and crew were safe. However, by the time the Carpathia reached New York, it had become clear that the Titanic was lost and many had died. One of those who might have sailed on the maiden voyage, but did not, was Second Officer David Blair.

David Blair was born on 11 November 1874 in Newport, Isle of Wight, a son to Lt. Col. John and Clementina Ross (Stewart) Blair. David married Madeline Temple Mackness on 2 September 1905 in Broughty Ferry; and his marriage certificate shows his address as 11 Newington Terrace which is now 17 The Esplanade. His daughter, Miss Nancy Blair, was born in 1909 at "Finella", 5 Whinny Brae, Broughty Ferry.

A merchant seaman with the White Star Line and aged 37, Blair was the Second Officer on the Titanic during its trial voyages taken to test the ship's seaworthiness after its construction at the Harland and Wolfe yard in Belfast for the White Star Line. The RMS Olympic, the Titanic's sister ship, was then undergoing repairs following an unfortunate collision with a naval vessel, and it was decided to have her Chief Officer, Henry Wilde, on the Titanic rather than Blair in the light of Wilde's experience with the sister ship.

Some days before the vessel left for Southampton, Blair had written about his dismay at losing his position on the Titanic. In a postcard dated 4 April to his sister-in-law, who lived in Hill Cottage, Broughty Ferry, he remarked: "*This is a magnificent ship, I feel very disappointed I am not to make her first voyage.*" NOTE 1

In his haste to leave the Titanic on 9 April 1912 Blair took with him the Crow's nest telephone key; moreover, the binoculars used by him during the voyage from Belfast to Southampton and the subsequent berthing there were not to be found in the crow's nest itself. There is much debate to this day about whether binoculars would have helped the lookouts in the crow's nest to see the iceberg in time and thus avoid the tragic collision. One of those, 25 year old Frederick Fleet, was a witness on day 4 and day 5 of an American Inquiry into the disaster. The crucial, and oft quoted, elements of Fleet's testimony run as follows: *Senator Smith: Suppose you had had glasses such as you had on the Oceanic, or such as you had between Belfast and Southampton, could you have seen this black object a greater distance? Mr. Fleet: We could have seen it a bit sooner. Senator Smith: How much sooner? Mr. Fleet: Well, enough to get out of the way.*

On the face of it, that evidence suggests that the absence of binoculars for the lookouts in the crow's nest was a crucial factor in a disaster which could have been avoided had David Blair of Broughty Ferry not forgotten to leave with his successor as Second Officer, Charles Lightholler, the key to the locker in which the binoculars were normally stored. Indeed, it was that evidence which provided the basis of the newspaper headlines in 2007 and speculation about the role of the binoculars -or rather their absence. NOTE 2

Reports of the American and British Inquiries

Official inquiries were set up without delay both in the United States and in the United Kingdom to investigate the circumstances of the sinking. Before examining the role of the lookouts and the binoculars (or rather their absence) it is worthwhile turning to the evidence given by an array of survivors and expert witnesses and relating that to Fleet's apparently damning testimony.

Some of the essential facts as they emerged, and not subsequently disputed, are as follows. On 14 April 1912 off the coast of Labrador, six wireless messages were received on the Titanic from other ships in the vicinity warning of drifting ice, reputedly the worst for any April in the North Atlantic for 50 years. Nevertheless, Captain Smith of the Titanic and "the owner", J Bruce Ismay, the Chairman and Managing Director of the White Star Line who was a passenger decided that the ship's speed should not be reduced, and she continued to steam at 22 knots, only a little short of her maximum speed. {NOTE 3}

It is worth noting that, at that time, it was widely believed that ice posed little risk to vessels of the size of the Titanic; near misses were not uncommon; and even previous head-on collisions had not

been disastrous. The standard maritime practice was as Lightholler put it: *"to go ahead and depend upon the lookouts in the crow's nest, and the watch on the bridge, to pick up the ice in time to avoid hitting it."*

As Titanic sped towards her fatal crash, command of the bridge passed from Second Officer Charles Lightoller to First Officer William Murdoch from Dumfries. The lookouts, Frederick Fleet and Reginald Lee, were in the crow's nest some 29 metres above the deck. The air temperature had dropped to near freezing and the sea was completely calm. Had the sea been rougher, breaking waves might have been seen at the foot of the icebergs in the vicinity. Lightoller had ordered the lookouts to *"keep a sharp look-out for ice, particularly small ice and growlers"*. At 23:39 hours Fleet spotted an iceberg in Titanic's path. He rang the lookout bell three times as procedure required and telephoned the bridge to inform Sixth Officer James Moody, who asked: "What do you see?" Fleet replied: *"Iceberg right ahead."*

Murdoch, upon hearing of the telephone message, relayed by Moody, immediately rang the engine order telegraphs to STOP and then to FULL ASTERN. Although Titanic's course was changed just in time to avoid a head-on collision, the iceberg struck the ship a glancing blow. An underwater spur, not visible above the waves, apparently scraped along her starboard side. A short while later all of Titanic's engines were stopped, leaving the ship facing north, drifting in the Labrador Current, and fatally damaged. She foundered 2 hours and 40 minutes later.

The inquiry by a subcommittee of the Commerce Committee of the United States Senate, to which Fleet had given the evidence noted above, was chaired by Senator William Alden Smith. Hearings began on 19 April 1912 and a report was presented to the Senate on 28 May 1912. A reading of the extensive evidence suggests that the Inquiry was poorly managed by the Senator and had as a thinly veiled objective a demonstration of incompetence by the White Star Line in order that survivors and others might claim compensation for their losses. However, and crucially, the Inquiry could not find the White Star Line negligent under existing maritime laws because it was evident that standard maritime practice had been followed. Accordingly, the Commerce Committee had no option but to conclude that the disaster could be described only as an "act of God".

The Inquiry by the British Wreck Commissioner on behalf of the British Board of Trade was held in London from 2 May to 3 July 1912 and overseen by the High Court judge, Lord Mersey. The final report was published on 30 July 1912; and the crucial item was that: *"The Court, having carefully inquired into the circumstances of the above mentioned shipping casualty, finds, that the loss of the said ship was due to collision with an iceberg, brought about by the excessive speed at which the ship was being navigated."* There was a further array of findings including agreement with the Senate Inquiry that the number of lifeboats and rafts available was totally inadequate to meet the needs of the passengers and crew in mortal danger.

Of particular importance for the reputation of David Blair, and despite the evidence provided by Fleet to the American Inquiry, neither of the American nor the British Inquiry gave any weight in their respective reports to the notion that the absence of binoculars in the crow's nest was a determining factor in the collision and the subsequent events.

Evidence on the Binoculars

With all that as background we can now turn to the detail of the evidence which led the inquiries to disregard Fleet's evidence that the absence of binoculars in the crow's nest was a factor in the disaster. NOTE 4

A useful starting point is that it is possible from the Inquiry evidence to establish beyond doubt the sequence of events which led to the lookouts in the crow's nest being without a set of binoculars on the night of 14 April 1912. One of the team, George Hogg, testified at the British Inquiry that on the trip from Belfast to Southampton, the lookouts had been provided with a pair that were marked "Second Officer, S S. Titanic." Upon the vessel's arrival at Southampton, Blair, who, as Second Officer, had particular responsibilities for secure berthing, had been in the crow's nest using the binoculars himself. Hogg was asked (17501): *When you left the ship at Southampton, what did you do with those glasses? Answer: Mr. Blair was in the crow's-nest and gave me his glasses, and told me to lock them up in his cabin and to return him the keys (17502). Who returned the keys? Answer: I gave them to a man named Weller, as I was busy on the forecastle head. (17503) As far as you were concerned, the glasses, you were told, were to be locked up in the cabin of the second officer? Answer: I locked them up.*

From that exchange there seems to be no doubt that the binoculars used at the time of berthing by David Blair had been returned to his cabin. Indeed, it seems possible that the binoculars were his personal set and were not the property of the White Star Line. However, having been provided with a pair for their use on the trip from Belfast to Southampton, the team of lookouts expected that they would have a set available to them for the next leg of the voyage: to Cherbourg. Lookout George Symons stated (in response to question B11324): *"After we left Southampton and got clear of the Nab Lightship, I went up to the officers' mess-room and asked for glasses. I asked Mr. Lightoller, and he went into another officer's room, which I presume was Mr. Murdoch's, and he came out and said 'Symons, there are none.' With that I went back and told my mates."*

While the failure to provide binoculars apparently came as a surprise to the team of lookouts, we should be cautious about shifting the blame for their absence onto Lightoller along with any consequences for the efficiency of the lookouts. Of critical importance, it seems that The White Star Line was ahead of the times in employing specialist lookouts; as a further safety measure it placed two men in the crow's nest; and it was unusual in providing the lookouts with binoculars.

Second Officer Lightoller testified (B14327) that there were five pairs of binoculars on board the Titanic: *"A pair for each Senior Officer and the Commander, and one pair for the Bridge, commonly termed pilot glasses."* At sea with a normal watch on the Bridge, the pilot glasses were used by the officer of the watch, this being either the Chief Officer, or the First Officer, or Second Officer; and they were stowed in a teak box located on the bulwark of the Bridge wings. Accordingly, we can conclude that even if the whereabouts of the Second Officer's pair of binoculars was unknown, another pair could have been provided to the lookouts if that been deemed appropriate. It was not and it is worth investigating further why not.

At first sight it seems strange that binoculars were not provided as standard equipment for the crow's nest. However, not one of the four captains of other ships questioned at the American and British Inquiries was of the opinion that such provision was desirable, and some were even outspoken against them. Even Sir Ernest Shackleton, who appeared as an expert witness, stated (B25058) that he "did not believe in any look-out man having any glasses at all." Second Officer

Lightoller took much the same point of view when asked (B14293) if binoculars would have helped the lookouts identify the iceberg sooner: *"He might be able to identify it, but we do not wish him to identify it. All we want him to do is to strike the bells."* In short, the warning of any danger would come from the lookout: it was for the officer on the Bridge to identify the nature of the danger and order the appropriate action after examining the object through binoculars.

Leaving definitive identification of a hazard to the relevant officer rather than the lookout was an unremarkable feature of the Edwardian class structure. However, of greater importance, it also made good sense given the rudimentary nature of binoculars in 1912; essentially these were little more than two short telescopes fastened side-by-side. Using the naked eye to scan a broad expanse of ocean was more efficient than using the rudimentary binoculars simply because in using them something of importance could be easily missed. There was general agreement that binoculars were useful for specific identification only after an object had been picked up by the naked eye. Moreover, the optics of the binoculars used aboard the Titanic had significant limitations in detecting icebergs at night.

Drawing these strands together we can conclude that definitive identification of the iceberg was not expected of the lookouts -Fleet and Lee -and, moreover, even if that had been their task the binoculars which might have been made available to them would have been of little practical use on the night of April 14/15 April 1912. That was the evidence of Captain Rostron of the Carpathia (B25401) and the Board of Trade Inquiry relied on that testimony in its conclusion: *"... it was quite possible on this night, even with a sharp look-out at the stemhead, crow's nest and on the bridge, not to see an iceberg at this distance...."*

Before the sinking of the Titanic Charles Lightoller, at the age of 38, had already had a colourful career which had included an unsuccessful trip to the Klondike in 1898 in search of gold. He survived the sinking and, as the senior surviving officer was, as we have seen, a key witness in both of the public inquiries. His evidence to the American and British Inquiries was crucial to maintaining the reputation of the White Star Line and also the numerous, and largely substantiated, accusations of complicity and cowardice levelled against J Bruce Ismay. Lightoller's loyal support did his career no harm and he retired from the White Star Line with the rank of Commander. In his biography "Titanic and Other Ships" published in 1935 he made a number of revisions to his testimony as given at the American and British Inquiries. Subsequent scrutiny of his evidence suggests that, giving him the benefit of any doubt, he may have told the truth at the Inquiries and in his book but by no means the whole truth; and that view is supported by subsequent anecdotes from his granddaughter Mrs Lavender Patten wife of the Conservative politician, Chris Patten.

Nevertheless, Lightoller's bravery cannot be in any doubt not only as the Titanic sank, as he strove to save others in the icy sea around the sinking ship, and also thereafter. In 1940 he commanded his own motor yacht, Sundowner, as one of the "little ships" who sailed from Ramsgate to lift British and Allied soldiers to safety from the carnage on the beaches at Dunkirk.

And what of David Blair of Broughty Ferry? He went on to be First Officer on the SS Majestic in 1913. When a coaler went overboard, and while a lifeboat was being organized, Blair swam towards the man. Although the boat reached the man first, Blair was commended for his action in the New York Times and was awarded a medal from the Royal Humane Society.

In 1914 Blair, along with Charles Lightoller, was aboard the Titanic's sister ship, Olympic, then requisitioned by the Admiralty for war duties, when she ran aground. Blair was the navigator at the time and at the subsequent court martial at Devonport in November he was found guilty of "*stranding or suffering to be stranded*" the Oceanic, and reprimanded.

Neither the suggestion at the American and British public inquiries that Blair was somehow involved in the disaster in April 1912, nor the court martial in 1914, fatally damaged his subsequent career. Lieutenant-Commander David Blair, R.N.R was awarded a CBE in 1918 and, like Charles Lightoller, he rose to the rank of Commander with the White Star Line. David Blair died on 10 January 1955 in Hendon, Middlesex. NOTE 5

Conclusion

The centenary of the loss of the "unsinkable" ship the RMS Titanic sparked renewed interest in the array of current newspaper accounts, numerous books, films and television documentaries which, over the years, have sought to unravel the causes of the disaster sifting out truth from conjecture, and fact from fiction. As we have seen, one of the lines of inquiry which re-emerged was the role of the lookouts as the Titanic approached the iceberg which was to be her nemesis, and related to that, the role of David Blair in the tragedy which unfolded.

There is no doubt that due to his hasty departure from the Titanic on 9 April 1912, David Blair accidentally kept a key to a storage locker believed to contain binoculars intended for use by the crow's nest lookout. However, there were other pairs binoculars available had it been deemed necessary to provide a pair for the lookouts. In any event the primitive binoculars available at the time would have been of limited use in the conditions found on the night of 14th April 1912. The overwhelming body of evidence supports the conclusion that neither the missing key nor the lack of the binoculars in the crow's nest played any significant part in the sinking of the Titanic.

Even if these findings are all rejected the absence of binoculars could only be a contributory factor amongst many in the fate of the Titanic. A fair reading of the evidence at the American and British Inquiries, and all subsequent authoritative investigations, drives one to the conclusion that neither Blair's forgetfulness nor the absence of binoculars for the lookouts was a material cause of the disaster. There were numerous "intervening causes" including the speed of the ship, the absence of sufficient lifeboats on the "unsinkable" vessel, and the chaos following the collision. These and other reasons have been the subject of seemingly endless debate: and no doubt that will continue.

NOTE 6

In short, David Blair of 17 The Esplanade Broughty Ferry may have been forgetful but he was not the man who sank the Titanic. It was RMS Titanic Captain Edward John Smith and his "passenger" J Bruce Ismay, Chairman of the White Star Line between them who have that dubious honour: but that is another story.

Note 1: The following is a transcript of the postcard that offered for auction on the 22nd September 2007 written by Blair postmarked Southampton 11pm. APRIL 4th 1912. It was addressed to his sister-in-law MISS MACKINNESS, HILL COTTAGE, BROUGHTY FERRY, FORFARSHIRE, SCOTLAND.

The message reads: "ARRIVED IN TITANIC FROM BELFAST TODAY, AM AFRAID I SHALL HAVE TO STEP OUT TO MAKE ROOM FOR CHIEF OFFICER OF THE OLYMPIC WHO WAS GOING IN COMMAND, BUT SO MANY SHIPS LAID HE WILL HAVE TO WAIT. I HOPE EVENTUALLY TO GET BACK TO THIS SHIP. MANY THANKS FOR PARCEL AND LETTER, NANCY WILL BE PLEASED AS SHE ALREADY SPOTTED THE CONTENTS AS SHE WAS TOO QUICK FOR US. SO GLAD WINNIE IS COMING. NANCY EAGERLY LOOKING FORWARD TO HER VISIT. YOU SAY SHE TRAVELS MONDAY NIGHT? SHE SAID FRIDAY, SO WE ARE IN DOUBT AS TO WHEN SHE WILL ARRIVE. I SHALL AWAIT LONDON TRAINS TOMORROW IN CASE. BEEN HOME ALL DAY AND DOWN TONIGHT ON WATCH. THIS IS A MAGNIFICENT SHIP, I FEEL VERY DISAPPOINTED I AM NOT TO MAKE HER FIRST VOYAGE.

LOVE TO ALL - WITH GREAT AFFECTION.

DB

Note 2: The following is a text of a letter dated 11 October 1958 which was sent to Dr Paul Lee, an historian of the Titanic disaster by Ms Nancy Blair resident as a child at 5 Whinny Brae, Broughty Ferry, and referring to her father David Blair who lived, before she was born, at 11 Newington Terrace now known as 17 The Esplanade:

"My father, the late Commander David Blair, was with the White Star Line for many years and was to have sailed in the Titanic ... I have a picture postcard of the ship which he sent to his sister-in-law + on it he said "I feel very disappointed I am not to make the first voyage I hope eventually to get back to this ship." In the rush to pack his belongings + get off before she sailed he came away with a key in his pocket + there was no opportunity to return it. This is now in my possession + I treasure it as a unique memento [sic]. On one side of the brass label to it is engraved "R.M.S. Titanic" + on the other "Crows Nest Telephone Key."

We were living in Southampton at the time +, although I was too young then to remember anything about it, I have heard my mother say that she had tea on board the day before the sailing + there was still work people racing to finish the laying of carpets etc. in time. My aunt has told me that my father showed her all over the ship + it took them three hours to go round, she was so large.

Commander Lightoller (or "Lights", as we always called him) was a great friend [sic] of my fathers, in fact they were shipmates for many years. Latterly they both lived near London + saw each other frequently.

My aunt is a friend of Miss Moody, sister of the young Moody who was drowned. He was a frequent visitor at our house in Southampton."

Note 3: Charles Lightoller, the senior surviving officer whose testimony was to play a central role in the subsequent inquiries described what happened as follows: *"Unfortunately whilst in Southampton, we had a reshuffle amongst the Senior Officers. Owing to the Olympic being laid up, the ruling lights of the White Star Line thought it would be a good plan to send the Chief Officer to the Olympic, just for the one voyage, as Chief Officer of the Titanic, to help, with his experience of her sister ship. This doubtful policy threw both Murdoch and me out of our stride; and, apart from the disappointment of having to step back in our rank, caused quite a little confusion. Murdoch from Chief, took over my duties as First; I stepped back on Blair's toes, as Second, and picked up the many threads of his job, whilst he - luckily for him as it turned out - was left behind. The other officers remained the same. However, a couple of days in Southampton saw each of us settled in our new positions and familiar with our duties."*

Note 4: In passing it is important to discard the “faction” of the films “A Night to Remember (1953) and “Titanic” (1997). In the course of its production by James Cameron the latter ruthlessly and without any factual basis whatsoever blackened the name of a brave officer-First Officer Murdoch from Dalbeattie - preferring throughout to tell romanitised fiction rather than to portray the facts of the matter. Of particular interest to this note are the numerous errors of fact and omission in the scenes leading up to the collision. Thus, for instance, the canvas weather cover at the rear of the crow's nest in which the lookouts-Fleet and Lee- were stationed is missing. Fred Fleet, the man who warned the bridge, should be on the portside not starboard of the crow's nest; and he should have a Liverpool accent. It is mentioned that the binoculars intended for the crow's nest have not been seen since Southampton. However, there is no recognition of the fact that the officers on the bridge, including Murdoch and Lightoller, had binoculars and were using them as established practice required.

Note 5: On 22 June 1915 the claimants case for compensation was raised in the United States. On 28 July 1916 the judge signed a decree ending all Titanic suits. The White Star line settled out of court, paying \$664k (\$160million at 2014 prices) in compensation for loss of life and luggage. Despite the best efforts of Lord Mersey who had overseen the British inquiry it was in effect an admission of guilt by the White Star Line

Moving on from there, it is interesting to speculate what might have become of the Titanic had she not been lost on the night of 15 April 1912. A clue comes from the history of her sister ship the Olympic. After serving as a troopship during World War I, she was refitted, and throughout the 1920s until sent to the breaker's yard in Inverkeithing in 1935 she was a favourite liner of the rich and famous.

Britannic, the third and largest sister of the famous Olympic-class trio, was launched on the eve of war in February 1914. Requisitioned by the Admiralty in November 1915, the Britannic came to the aid of the thousands of injured and sick troops brought home from the Mediterranean theatre. However, on 21 November 1916, in the Aegean Sea, there was an unexplained explosion and Britannic sank in less than an hour – three times faster than her sister ship Titanic. However, thanks in no small measure to the improvements in safety instituted following the Board of Trade Inquiry 1,032 of the 1,062 persons on board survived.

Note 6: By a stranger co-incidence the Captains of two of the ships who were in the vicinity were both from Bolton in the north of England. Captain Arthur Rostron was master of the steamship Carpathia which came to the rescue of over 700 survivors. Properly lauded as a hero his reputation is in stark contrast to that of Captain Stanley Lord who was in charge of the S S Californian. Although his vessel was some 23 miles distant from the scene at the time both the American and British inquiries found that the SS Californian was in the vicinity and concluded that her Captain Lord failed to provide proper assistance to Titanic. The British Inquiry, in search of a scapegoat, further reached the now hotly disputed conclusion that, had the Californian responded to Titanic's rockets and gone to assist, it “...*might have saved many if not all of the lives that were lost.*” Whatever the truth of that matter there is one further link with Dundee: the SS Californian was owned by the Leyland Line, part of J.P. Morgan's International Mercantile Marine Co., and it had been constructed by the Caledon Shipbuilding & Engineering Company on the banks of the Tay.