



## **Belfast's Titanic Tales, The Human Stories Behind the Tragedy**

*A hundred years on, the Titanic disaster still tugs at the heartstrings, and Belfast's intimate connection to the Titanic means there are many moving stories about those who worked, sailed and perished on the ship...*

### **Boy working on Titanic was her first victim**

While much of Belfast's Titanic centenary commemorations are about remembering the 1,517 souls who lost their lives when the ship went down, the city has also remembered the tragic fate of her first victim – a 15 year-old boy.

Samuel J. Scott is believed to be the first death connected to the RMS Titanic.

He accidentally fell and died of a fractured skull while working on the ship in the famous Harland & Wolff shipyard in April 1910.

Until a headstone was finally erected in 2011 more than 100 years after his death, he had lain in an unmarked grave in Belfast City Cemetery.

Titanic also claimed the lives of several other workers while the ship was being built, but Samuel is the youngest – and the only one to feature as the main character in a children's book.

The book, *Spirit of the Titanic*, follows Samuel's ghost as it haunts 'his favourite place in the whole world' after his death.

It was the book's author, Nicola Pierce, who played a central role in the boy being remembered with a headstone.

Having written her book Nicola had been wondering if there was some way the grave could be marked.

The idea reached a community arts organisation, the West Belfast Festival, and it agreed to fund the headstone.

Nicola was a guest of honour at the grave marking ceremony in 2011, and Samuel's niece, Margaret Scott Donnelly, attended the event along with John Andrews, whose great-uncle Thomas designed the Belfast-built ship.

The author will read excerpts from *Spirit of the Titanic* at a special event in Belfast's historic Linenhall Library during the Titanic Belfast Festival (31 March – 22 April), a major series of events running in the city to celebrate and commemorate the iconic ship's centenary.

'Spirit of the Titanic - Children's Reading by Nichola Pierce', will take place on 10 March at 12 noon. Admission is free.

### **Two pennies change Titanic lives forever**

One of the most touching Belfast stories surrounding the Titanic concerns Thomas Millar, an engineer at Harland & Wolff, the company that built the ship.

Millar worked as an engine fitter and helped build the engines for both the Titanic and her sister ship the Olympic.

In 1912, the death of his wife left the 33-year old having to raise the couple's two young boys alone.

He decided that he would sail on the Titanic to New York where he would make a new life for himself and his sons.

Millar signed up for a job as an assistant deck engineer on the ship and made plans to leave Ireland and start again in America.

Before boarding the ship, Millar gave his sons – 11 year-old Thomas Jr. and 5 year-old William Ruddick – a shiny, new penny, each dated 1912.

The boys, who were being left with their aunt in the small village of Boneybefore in County Antrim, 12 miles from Belfast, were told to keep the pennies and not spend them until their father returned.

Thomas Millar's body was never found after Titanic sank.

However, the pennies were passed down through the generations and are now held by Susie Millar, Thomas' great granddaughter, who is the treasurer and media relations officer with Belfast Titanic Society and also runs Titanic Tours Belfast, the only Titanic tour guided by the direct descendant of a crew member.

Former TV journalist Susie has also written a book about her family's experiences.

*The Two Pennies* tells the story of the Millar family in the lead up to Titanic's maiden voyage and provides a unique insight into how the tragedy affected ordinary lives, in particular those of Thomas Millar's two sons.

The story continues to describe the aftermath of Titanic's sinking.

Susie has said her grandfather's account of his father "sailing away on Titanic and how he found out about the sinking as he sailed his own paper boat in the stream at Boneybefore has provided one of the fullest depictions of the effect of Titanic's loss on an ordinary family."

"I'm proud to keep Thomas Millar's short story alive. He was so young – and it's an honour for me to tell people about him. It's thrilling for me personally to see how many people are still interested in Titanic."

In spite of William Ruddick Millar's dreadful start to life, he went on to become a successful Northern Ireland author.

There is a plaque honouring William at the place where his aunt raised him, which is now the award-winning, 250 year-old thatched cottage self-catering destination Fool's Haven, situated at the start of the world famous Causeway Coast and Glens Route, on the shores of Belfast Lough.

### **Benefactor saves family's Titanic letter for Belfast**

A hundred years after it was mailed from RMS Titanic, a letter written on board the ill-fated ship is to return to its intended destination – Belfast, where the ship was built and launched.

The letter, dated 11 April 1912 and written on notepaper headed RMS Titanic, was brought ashore at the ship's final port of call, Cobh (then called Queenstown) in Ireland's County Cork, before the ship set sail for the US.

The letter was from Dr John Simpson, an assistant surgeon and officer on the ship, to his mother Elizabeth who was living in central Belfast.

In it, the married father-of-one, who was then based in Liverpool, said he was tired but settling into his cabin well.

He had previously worked on the Titanic's sister ship, the Olympic, and he told his mother that his accommodation on the new vessel was larger.

The doctor, who treated second and third-class passengers, signed off with 'With fondest love, John'.

Dr Simpson was married and had one son.

Three days after he wrote to his mother, Simpson died along with 1,517 others after the ship struck an iceberg.

The surgeon's family held his letter for generations but it got lost and somehow ended up at auction in New York this March with a reserve price of \$34,000.

But after hearing about a campaign by Simpson's descendants to bring the letter back to Belfast, a mystery donor stepped in to buy it when it did not meet the reserve price.

The person decided the best thing to do was return it to where it was headed all those years ago, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

The surgeon's great-nephew Dr John Martin said he was happy the letter was coming back to where it belonged.

"When I got the phone call I had to sit down very quickly, I was so delighted I was slightly light-headed. I asked the person to repeat the news several times," he told the BBC.

Dr Martin has copies of the letter but has never actually seen the original. It was last in Belfast in the 1940s before Dr Simpson's son moved away.

He said the letter provided a rare insight into the life of one of the ship's officers.

According to witnesses who survived the 1912 sinking, 37 year-old Dr Simpson stood with fellow officers on the deck of the stricken vessel as it went down.

It is planned that the letter will be placed in a permanent Titanic exhibition in Belfast.

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