

Alfred William (Willie) Thomas

Willie's story is being pieced together by his granddaughter, Gwenno, who lives in Aberystwyth on the West Wales coast. This is the location of the National Library of Wales, where Gwenno is a volunteer focusing on maritime history. Together with her colleagues, Gwenno's researches have turned up a host of fascinating detail about the scale and importance of shipping to the economy of West Wales in the late nineteenth century. Small ships from every seaside village were plied with farming produce and salted fish, as well as ores and slates from the mines of the mountainous hinterland to be despatched to every corner of the world, often via Liverpool. As Gwenno says, these small ships were the Eddie Stobart freighters of their age.

Willie was born in the small Pembrokeshire village of St David's in 1886. Like many of his local contemporaries, he sought a career at sea. We know little about his early life but we do know that he was brought up in his parents' bakery shop in the small estuary port of Aberteifi (Cardigan), some thirty miles north of St David's. As a young man, he was active in his local church, serving as secretary to the Sunday School. It is likely that Willie started his training as an engineer close to his home port, as was customary in the first decade of the 20th century. He met and married local girl Bella on the first day of the New Year, 1914.



Willie and Bella, c1914

We know that Willie worked for Elder Dempster Lines (EDL) for at least six years - on the same steam-powered cargo ship, the Memnon. This ship was most regularly used on the West Africa-UK run, but also transported goods between West Africa and the USA. We don't know exactly where Willie trained as a ship's engineer but his local newspaper, The Tivy Advertiser, reported that he

qualified as 2nd marine engineer in 1910, aged 24. EDL company records show that Willie was a 3rd engineer in 1911 and gained the rank of 2nd engineer by the time he was in his late-twenties.

Despite regular sailings from Liverpool, Willie's home was firmly in South West Wales, Bella setting up home in Llandudoch (St Dogmael's), a few miles south of Aberteifi, following the wedding. Their son, Alfred David, was born in January 1915.



Bella and Bill, 1915

Indeed, we know that Willie had sailed on the Memnon in 1911 because of a fascinating account recorded by the Master of the ship, F M Gibson. During March of that year, the Memnon was moored at Winneba (Ghana) when it was found that a seaman had gone overboard in the middle of the night. A boat was launched, but in the meantime Willie had jumped overboard and supported the man until the boat arrived. This is an extract from the letter the Master sent to the managers of Elder Dempster:

"I cannot speak in too high a praise of this action, not only his swimming to the aid of the man, but of his alertness and intelligence in discovering some person was in trouble....It was a truly brave action to rescue the seaman at 2 o'clock in the morning, in shark infested waters, and I trust you will recommend him to the Royal Humane Society and that he will gain some recognition for his gallantry."

For this act, Willie was presented with a silver medal from the Royal Humane Society (RHS), plus a silver medal and vellum certificate from the Liverpool Shipwreck and Humane Society. Both societies recognise acts of bravery by people who voluntarily put their own lives or safety at risk by saving or attempting to save other people who are in danger of drowning.



Willie's medals:

Liverpool Shipwreck and Humane Society (left) and Royal Humane Society (right)

The RHS Silver Medal dates back to 1775 and is the Society's oldest award. It is the highest honour that the Society can bestow. Only a small number of Silver Medals is awarded each year.

We next encounter a record of Willie's seafaring story in the National Maritime Museum's archive. This contains details of the voyage he undertook in October 1915. By now, Willie was the 2nd Engineer on the Memnon, when she sailed from Matadi in the Congo to Liverpool via Sierra Leone and points in between. The Liverpool Customs Bill of Entry provides a detailed breakdown of the cargo she collected at each port of call. As might be expected, the great bulk of the cargo loaded at the twenty-four ports strung along the West Africa coast was palm oil and unprocessed palm kernels. Other typical cargo included cocoa, coffee, tobacco, rubber and hides from the Belgian Congo (now The Democratic Republic of the Congo), ebony from Libreville in French Equatorial Africa (now Gabon), mahogany and cotton from Grand Bassam on the Ivory Coast. There are several intriguing entries of undisclosed goods collected from British Crown Agents dotted along the coast, such as from Bimbia, a small fishing village in the then German-controlled Cameroon. Sadly, the ivory trade was in full swing at this time. Some pieces of ivory were taken on board at almost every port but perhaps the largest haul was the 128 ivory tusks collected at Cape Lopez (Gabon). The Memnon transported personal as well as commercial goods. Scientific instruments and a telescope were amongst the personal effects collected at Matadi, while a case of hair restorer, another of hats, two bedsteads and a typewriter found their way on board at Cape Palmas, Liberia.

The make-up of the Memnon's crew in 1915 is available in a National Maritime Museum record. The list contains the names and origins of eighty-four crew members. It is likely that there were thirty or so crew members working at any one time. The origin of these seafarers provides a glimpse of the national and international nature of crews a century ago. Of the eighty-four, ten were from Liverpool, five from Wales and a further fourteen from the rest of the UK. Other northern hemisphere seafarers came from Scandinavia (six) and North America (six), probably joining the ship for the two voyages she made in 1915 to and from New York and West Africa. More than half the crew came from West Africa, particularly from Sierra Leone. Willie worked alongside several fellow countrymen. The Chief Mate, Second Mate, Chief Engineer and Third Engineer were all Welsh, reflecting the strong maritime links between Wales and Liverpool. These crews often stayed with the same ship too; nineteen of those listed in 1915 had sailed with the Memnon previously.

Elder Dempster Lines held a near-monopoly on West African-Great Britain cargo routes in the early 20th century and so the role of ships such as the Memnon was critical in maintaining regular supplies of food and other essentials, especially palm oil and kernels, during the war. But EDL's home port of Liverpool could not cope with the huge volume of shipping and processing of raw materials. Congestion at Liverpool docks encouraged firms in other places to import palm kernels for the first time. A new kernel crushing plant was developed at Hull and EDL agreed to deliver kernels to Hull at the Liverpool rate from 1915.

We next hear about Willie in 1917. In March of that year, the Memnon was carrying palm kernels and oil from Dakar (Senegal) to Hull. When she was on the home straight, she was torpedoed without warning some twenty miles SW of Portland Bill. Willie, along with the 4th Engineer and four others, was killed instantly. According to Imperial War Museums information, German U boats initially obeyed 'prize rules' during their WW1 attacks, surfacing before attacking merchant ships and allowing those on board to escape. Clearly this rule was not adhered to in the case of the Memnon.

The Chief Engineer, W Hughes, a long-standing friend and colleague of Willie's from Port Dinorwic in North Wales, gave this account:

" Mr Thomas had just gone below five minutes before it occurred. He and the Third (Engineer) and the donkeyman were therefore in the engine room when it happened and without a doubt the three were killed instantly by the explosion. I was at the time in my room and failed for a few minutes to get out, the door being jammed in. When I managed to get out, I stepped into the engine room and called out but the place was already full of water.....the torpedo struck the ship right in the engine room, and anyone in the engine room at the time had not the slightest chance. The ship sank in less than 10 minutes and we were in the water for 8 and a half hours before we were picked up and taken into Weymouth.....I can hardly realise yet that Mr Thomas has gone, as he and I were such very great friends; in fact I feel as if I had lost a brother."

Willie's young widow was informed about Willie's death by Charles Lees, Superintendent of Elder Dempster. In due course, she re-married but had no more children. So Willie and Bella's son (named Alfred David but known as Bill in memory of his father) grew up without siblings. Like so many families who lost husbands and fathers in the First World War, the next generation was also affected by these deaths because of the absence of grandfathers and cousins. Willie would no doubt have delighted in knowing that the next three generations - his son, granddaughter and great grandchildren - all became scientists or engineers, following in his footsteps.

Ann Lees (Gwenno's sister-in-law) March 2017

Sources:

Photographs reproduced courtesy of Gwenno Watkin

National Maritime Museum Ref BT 400/3451/19A and 19B (crew list 1915)

The Elder Dempster Fleet in the war, 1914-1918. Liverpool Elder Dempster Co., Ltd., 1921

Cardigan and Tivy (Teifi) Advertiser (Archive report of Willie Thomas qualifying as 2nd engineer 02.08.1940, and his obituary 23.03.1917)

Royal Humane Society: www.royalhumanesociety.org.uk (details of medals and other awards for bravery)

London Metropolitan Archives www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/lma (award of Silver Medal to Willie Thomas, 1911)

National Maritime Museum: Liverpool Customs Bill of Entry, October 30 1915

www.wrecksite.eu (details of the ship's location and journey when the torpedo struck)

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