

## 'THE MYSTERIOUS LIFE OF WALTER HENRY'

By Howard Nicholls January 31<sup>st</sup> 2012 at The Probus Club Of Gillingham Dorset



Howard Nicholls spent 24 years in the Ambulance Service, followed by a second career as a staff instructor, working for the RNLi on lifeboat crew training. He is now an accomplished speaker and this talk was one of a number in his repertoire. It was only towards the end of his talk that it became apparent that 'Walter Henry' was in fact the grandfather of the speaker.

The son of a coachman, Walter Henry Nichols was born in 1876 in Knightsbridge. Due to his father's early demise at the age of 41, the family (Walter was the seventh of eight children) was broken up, and for a number of years Walter grew up in a 'child's boarding house' in Drury Lane, until he

was rescued from this existence by his elder brother, who was a seaman. So Walter began a career at sea by signing on as a steward on the American Lines ship *SS St Paul* - an emigrant ship sailing out of Southampton destined for Ellis Island, New York. Due to a collision with a British cruiser *HMS Gladiator* off Bembridge, Isle of Wight the *SS St Paul* was put into dry dock for repairs. In 1912, Walter, then aged 36 signed on as a second class civilian steward on a new ship of The White Star Line about to embark on its maiden voyage across the Atlantic. The name of that ill-fated ship was....*The Titanic*.

As a certificated Board of Trade Lifeboatman (an oarsman), Walter was assigned to Lifeboat No.15 in the event of an emergency. After the disaster and subsequent rescue, Steward Nichols gave an eye-witness account to the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* and the *New York Times*. He described the confusion and the dramatic events of that terrible disaster when the ship hit an iceberg. The lifeboats, which had to be launched in strict sequence, were not all filled to capacity as they should have been, and lives were needlessly lost. Lifeboat 15 was actually one of the last few to leave, and saved over 70 lives – mainly Irishwomen and children, and others plucked out of the sea.

In his interview, he told how the Cunard ship *Carpathia* rescued the survivors, although the expectation was that the *Titanic's* sister ship *Olympic* would arrive to assist. Men climbed rope ladders thrown down the side of the ship, whilst the women were lowered by bosuns' chairs and children were put into sacks. For his story, Walter was paid 69 dollars – which for him, was a comparatively large sum. When he was paid off by the White Star Line, he received the princely sum of 15-shillings for his work on the voyage (pay stopped when the vessel sank after four days at sea).

He returned from the USA to Plymouth UK and was detained initially as an illegal immigrant as he had no passport (*because he was ship-bound while working on ships Walter never possessed a passport*). He had difficulty in finding work until the outbreak of the First World War, where the story gets a little murky and mysterious. Walter signed on the crew of the *SS Royal Edward* – which was used as a troopship. His duties were recorded as being 'On His Majesty's Government Service' with no indication of what those duties actually were. Despite undertaking diligent

research, his grandson Howard has to this day never been able to find this out – probably due to restrictions under the ‘100 years rule’ for the release of information. From 1915 to 1918 Walter disappears from all the known records. In 1918, however, he was recorded as a member of the crew of *HM Hospital Ship Panama*, and subsequently on a former Russian ship, *SS Czar* - operated by Cunard - for several voyages, again as OHMGS.

From 1920, normality seemed to return to Walter’s life and he worked on passenger ships, including *SS Orbita* and *Orduna*, until he came ashore to become village postmaster in West Moors, Dorset. During the the second world war, Walter returned to working ‘On His Majesty’s Government Service’ again (in what capacity we do not know), spending time at the military establishments at Holton Heath and the Red Barracks, Weymouth. In 1958/59 he was interviewed by the Rank Organisation researchers undertaking research for the film about the Titanic docudrama ‘*A Night to Remember*’.

Walter Henry Nichols died in 1961, aged 86 at West Moors, taking his secrets to the grave. This interesting and intriguing talk held the interest of members; the vote of thanks was given by Mike Robinson.