

A different course for Titanic tale

The disaster that overtook the ill-starred Titanic 100 years ago is known the world over. But what might have happened if 'Iceberg Charlie' had taken charge of the 'wonder ship'?

Steve Snelling examines a seafaring legend.

The image is as beguiling as it is strangely endearing. It is of the greatest ocean liner captain of his day all at sea at the helm of a humble river boat. Apocryphal or not, the light-hearted tale of Charles Bartlett, one-time senior master of the White Star Line, steering into troubled waters on the Norfolk Broads adds an amusing aside to one of the greatest of all maritime 'what ifs'.

For just as his freshwater mishaps became part of family folklore and the source of much light-hearted banter, so there grew a legend that endures to this day of the man who might have saved the 'unsinkable' Titanic from her unthinkable fate 100 years ago.

The story of Charles Bartlett, or 'Iceberg Charlie' to give him his celebrated epithet, is, indeed, a tantalising one. It is of a man awash with sea-going achievement but whose greatest claim to fame, it could be argued, was his association with a command he never held but forever wished he had.

To unravel a remarkable story of what might have been inevitably involves steering a sometimes speculative course, though it is one based on compelling, if largely circumstantial, evidence passed down through the family.

Richard Ellis, who is Bartlett's great nephew, has long been fascinated by his distinguished forebear's Titanic connection. The co-founder of Norfolk Country Cottages and chairman of Norfolk Tourism and Visit East Anglia, he has traced his family's history back to 17th century Great Yarmouth.

Nephew of the late, great naturalist and founder of Wheatfen, Ted Ellis, he has unravelled a colourful pedigree peppered with tailors, basket makers, freemen and even a wig-maker. But few among a long list of successful artisans come close to matching the spectacular career of the man who married his great aunt Edie in 1898.

"Charles was remembered, quite rightly, in the family as the boy who made good."



says Richard. "I was told he was born illegitimately yet rose to the highest rank of the White Star Line, which was then considered the most senior sea-going position in the Merchant Navy. And when I began researching him I discovered from the records it was all true."

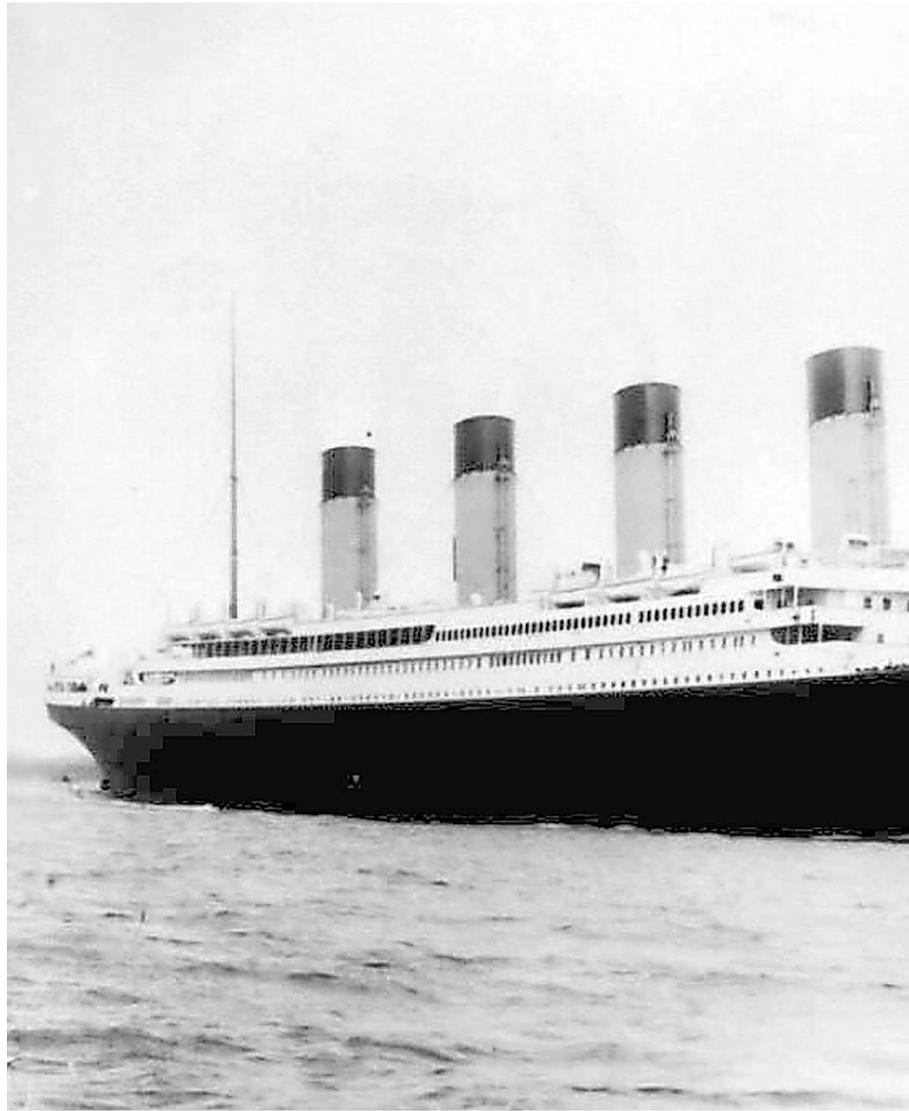
Indeed it was. Charles was born in 1868, the son of Captain Sir John Webb and Miss Ellen Bartlett, who came of a family of Brixham trawlermen. Apprenticed aboard a barque operating on the trade routes to Australia, he later moved on to the British India Line before joining the White Star Line in 1894 as 4th officer of the Germanic.

From there, Richard charted his rise, via spells on the Doric, Gothic, Teutonic, Oceanic and the Georgic, to chief officer of the Celtic and his captaincy of the Armenian, a cargo vessel flying the flag of the Leyland Line, a White Star subsidiary. Swift promotion followed his first command and he captained a succession of White Star's premier passenger liners. But it was his links to the Titanic, the most fabulous and luxurious ocean-going liner of her day, that excited him.

"By this time," says Richard, "Charles had acquired a reputation as an excellent seaman and a safe captain. He was evidently a strict disciplinarian who wouldn't take any nonsense from anyone, but despite all of that he was well-respected and even liked by his crew who had total faith in his ability to get them safely from one place to another."

"What's more, it was said that he had an uncanny knack of being able to smell icebergs and, therefore, avoid them. It sounds extraordinary, but that's how he came by his famous nickname, 'Iceberg Charlie'."

"And the story goes that he was in line for the captaincy of the Titanic but aunt Edie was taken ill with appendicitis and that, according to the account handed down in the family, was why he didn't get the command. I've not been able to prove or disprove the story, but that was what we were always told and the feeling not just in the family was that if he had been captain of the Titanic it might never have sunk because he was a notoriously



“He had the uncanny knack of being able to smell icebergs”

'Iceberg Bartlett': Charles Bartlett, senior White Star captain and the man who legend has it might have saved the Titanic from disaster 100 years ago.

cautious seaman who could supposedly sniff out icebergs."

But that is not the end of the story. To this alluring speculation has been added another memory that raises further possibilities about the decision to appoint the respected and long-serving Edward John Smith as captain of the Titanic.

It comes from Alasdair Fairbairn, Charles Bartlett's grandson and keeper of the family's archive. He confirms that 'Iceberg Charlie' was in the running to take charge of Titanic "but lost out to Captain Smith in the boardroom politics, much to his dismay".

"Under the circumstances," he added, "this troubled him for the rest of his life as he was adamant that he would never have taken that route."

He stressed that this was "hearsay" based on what he had heard from his mother, but "hearsay" or not it certainly fits with a man known to take no risks, especially where ocean-going liners and icebergs were concerned, and even if it occasionally meant running foul of management.

What is beyond question is that Charles Bartlett was closely involved with aspects of Titanic's ill-fated maiden voyage and, given his ambitions and reputation as one of White Star's foremost captains, it

is hard to imagine him being anything other than desperate to command the line's grand new flagship.

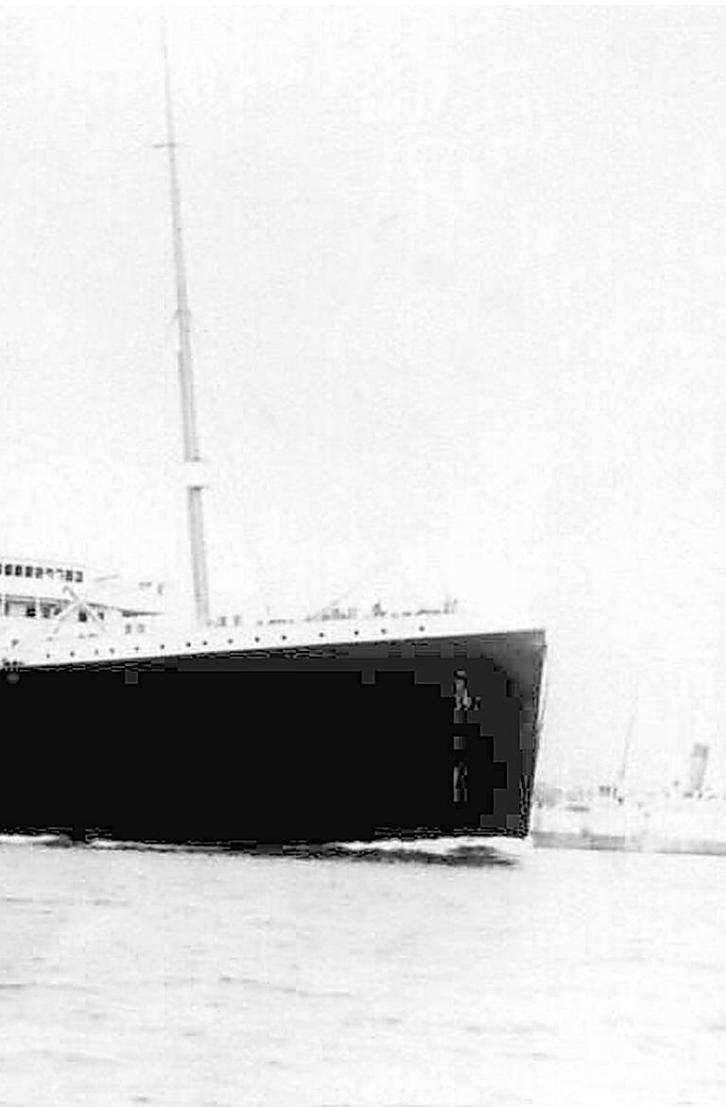
As White Star's recently appointed marine superintendent based in Liverpool, he not only oversaw the liner's planned first Atlantic crossing to New York, he also selected her officers.

There are suggestions that, following six hours of sea trials, he may even have skipped the Titanic during her 550-mile preparatory journey from Belfast to Southampton before handing over command to Captain Smith. Still more intriguing is the speculation that he was in line to succeed Smith on the completion of the maiden voyage after which it was said the veteran captain might retire.

As it was, instead of taking up position on the bridge of the Titanic he had to confront the consequences of an appalling disaster that claimed the lives of more than 1,500 passengers and crew.

Called to the inquiry that was convened in the wake of the ship's calamitous collision with an iceberg 500 miles east of Cape Race, Newfoundland, White Star's marine superintendent was among a host of witnesses facing up to awkward questions about why the liner came to grief and why so many people died.

In particular, he was asked about the



Messing about in boats: Above, in retirement 'Iceberg Charlie' and his Great Yarmouth-born wife Edie enjoyed exploring the waterways of the Norfolk Broads in a variety of boats they kept at Horning Ferry.

hull into a series of compartments with specially extended watertight bulkheads designed to minimise flooding in the event of damage.

Yet, sadly for all that, her fate would be little better than her hapless sister. As Richard Ellis succinctly put it: "Britannic had the peculiar record of being built as the largest liner in the world and yet never carried a single fare-paying passenger and went to the bottom of the ocean without ever having done the job she was built to do."

As with the loss of the Titanic, the sinking of the Britannic would also be mired in controversy, only in this instance no fault lay with captain, crew or designers - and there wasn't an iceberg anywhere to be seen!

Her career as a hospital ship was short. In all, she completed just five voyages to and fro the Aegean. At one point, following the evacuation of Gallipoli, it appeared her days ferrying wounded were over, but the Allied lodgment in northern Greece ensured an extension to her wartime role that effectively sealed her fate.

The end came suddenly at 8.12am on November 21, 1916, while steaming at full speed through the Kea Channel, a waterway separating the Cyclades archipelago from mainland Greece that had only just been swept for mines.

A nurse on board recalled hearing a "loud report". It sounded as though something had clashed against the ship's side. "We all stood up," she wrote, "some rushed from the dining hall. There was a loud clatter of falling plates and glasses, the stewards were ready to dash out of the room then suddenly came to their senses and told us to sit down and have our breakfast as we had only run into a barge. I sat down and resumed breakfast when the order rang out 'Ladies go to your cabins, put on your lifebelts and go up to the boat deck'."

In fact, Britannic had almost certainly struck a mine newly laid by the German submarine U73 in the supposedly cleared channel. Moments later, there was a second explosion as the ship's coal bunkers ignited. Six of her forward compartments began flooding fast.

Doomed youth: Left, Charles Bartlett's son, Charles Sidney Ellis Bartlett, who died as a 15-year-old midshipman when his ship was torpedoed in 1915.

Thanks to Alisdair Fairbairn for photos from the Bartlett family archive.

adequacy of the liner's assortment of lifeboats, the number of seamen available to man them and the reasons why some were lowered half-empty.

Questioned also about the lookouts not having binoculars and the ship having no searchlights, he felt neither would have made any difference, though no reference was made to his own, more unusual, means for detecting the whereabouts of potentially lethal crags of floating ice.

Appalling though the catastrophe was, no blame was directed towards 'Iceberg Charlie'. His career continued to prosper, though his life would soon be blighted by tragedy of a more personal kind.

Less than a year into a conflict in which Titanic-style lists of casualties quickly became everyday occurrences, Charles and Edie Bartlett were mourning the loss of their only son. A midshipman aboard HMS Goliath, he died one night in May, 1915, when torpedoes from a Turkish destroyer sent the venerable battleship to the bottom of the Dardanelles. He was 15 years old.

By then, 'Iceberg Charlie' had capped a short and successful spell as commodore in charge

of North Sea drifter patrol vessels, for which he was subsequently decorated, by being given the prestigious command of Titanic's grand sister ship, then in the process of being completed.

Originally christened the Gigantic, the third and last Olympic-class four-funnelled liner was designed to be the largest and most magnificent of all the ships built for

Atlantic duty. Greatly modified to take account of tragic sister's defects, the Britannic, as she was renamed, was not launched until February 1914 and was not ready for service until December 1915.

But by then everything had changed. Instead of transporting thousands of passengers, many of them in opulent style, the 48,158-ton liner was requisitioned by the Admiralty and converted into a hospital ship, its extravagant interiors transformed into dormitories and operating theatres, capable of carrying more than a thousand casualties.

She was said to have been one of the safest ships ever built. Stung by the criticism over the heavy loss of life when the Titanic went down,

White Star had given Britannic a double skin hull and divided the



But even then, 'Iceberg Charlie', who had rushed onto the bridge in his pyjamas, was confident of saving his ship. With all the safety modifications in place she had been designed to stay afloat three hours in the event of such damage. His plan was to drive the great ship inshore and beach her.

"By all accounts," says Richard Ellis, "he would have made it, too, but by a mischance the nurses had thrown open all the portholes that morning in order to air the wards in readiness for receiving the wounded aboard. And as the listing ship drove on, the water poured in and flooded one too many compartments."

Whatever the cause, and for all her safety modifications, Britannic sank in just 55 minutes, barely a third of the time it took the Titanic to take her final death plunge.

Through all of that time, 'Iceberg Charlie' stuck to his post, barking out orders to all and sundry as his command sank beneath his feet. According to one account, he didn't so much abandon ship as calmly step from the bridge into the water that was lapping at his feet. "In classic tradition," says Richard, "he was the last to leave the ship."

Incredibly, of the 1,125 people aboard only 30 lives were lost - a figure in stark contrast to the Titanic's death toll. "If a couple of seamen hadn't panicked and lowered the lifeboats without instructions, it seems likely none would have died," says Richard. "For the deaths all occurred in those lifeboats which were smashed by the propellers."

The "ghastly whirl" which minced men and boats was witnessed by an Anglo-Irish nurse Violet Jessop who, amazingly, had survived not only the sinking of the Titanic but the collision between the Olympic and a British warship.

As Britannic sank, never to be seen again until the legendary French undersea explorer Jacques Cousteau found it almost 60 years later, Charles Bartlett whose conduct had been exemplary throughout swam to a nearby ship from where he co-ordinated the rescue effort.

In hindsight, the admiral commanding in the Aegean thought it was "tempting Providence to send the Britannic out here". What 'Iceberg Charlie' thought is not recorded and probably not printable. Either way, his lost command had the unenviable distinction of being the largest ship of any nation to be sunk during the war.

Thereafter, Charles Bartlett's career sailed serenely on to retirement in 1931. Having resumed his old job as marine superintendent, he served a spell as aide-camp to King George V, was honoured with an appointment as Commander of the British Empire, and promoted to the most senior rank of commodore.

A brief interlude followed in Norfolk, where Charles and Edie enjoyed 'messing about in boats' and where he earned his, probably undeserved, reputation for mishandling small craft. "Apparently," recalls Alisdair Fairbairn, "his wife used to joke, saying 'you may be able to look after the Britannic, but you can't operate a boat on the Broads'."

To this day, Alisdair retains affectionate memories of his by then landlocked grandfather. One in particular stands out. It is of a visit to his grandfather's house in Crosby during the second world war and being marched with his siblings round the garden with forks and spades for guns, "pretending we were the British army ready to take on Hitler".

'Iceberg Charlie' died, aged 76, in February 1945, leaving a swirl of seafaring history trailing in his magnificent wake and a Titanic tale of what might have been that continues to tantalise a century later.

See Monday's EDP for the story of Norfolk's Titanic ties.