

## City's Unsung Titanic Hero

by Fred Leigh

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NO disaster of modern times has quite excited the same horror and at the same time, fascination, doubt, bravery and cowardice as the sinking of the *Titanic*.

Fred Barrett lived in Hanley with his wife and worked in a local pit as a collier. He was tall and strong and a good worker much respected by his mates and employers. Members of a brass band, his father and two brothers and himself would augment their income as buskers.

On his way to the pit one morning, he was informed by a friend that his wife had taken a lover and this man had been seen entering his house when he had left for work. Enraged, Fred returned home to find the insidious pair in his bed. The man sprang from the bed and cowered in the corner of the room.

A fearsome cry and Fred lunged towards him and lifted him bodily from the floor. His eyes blazed with anger and disgust, he paused, trembling, then let him fall to the floor. The man was whimpering like a child and Fred stepped back and glared at his unfaithful wife. She was crying hysterically, holding the bedcovers to her chin as though to ward off the violence she expected to come. Gripping the rail of the brass bedstead he said quietly: "You're not worth the trouble." He left the house and never saw her again.

Fred then went to see his sister in Hanley, Mrs. Ada Leigh, and he told her of his trouble. He said he was going to try and get a job as a seaman and would, later, settle down in America. It was, he said, something he had wanted to do for some time.

Fred soon found work as a stoker. He worked hard and was made a leading fireman.

In 1912 he was offered a job as leading fireman on the *Titanic*. While waiting for the ship to sail he lodged at a public house, the King and Queen, 24 King Street, Houndwell, Southampton.

Wednesday, April 10, 1912, just before 7.30am, Captain Edward Smith (a fellow townsman), arrived wearing a bowler hat and a long overcoat. He began to receive reports from his officers.

### Captain

A few moments before noon, Captain Smith gave the order to sail.

A near collision was averted by the alert action of Captain Smith and the Pilot Bowyer as the water under and around the SS *New York* increased in volume by the movement of the *Titanic*. The mooring ropes broke and the *New York* began to move towards the *Titanic*. An omen? On to Cherbourg, more passengers and cargo. Queenstown, Ireland then into the North Atlantic.

Warnings of ice were telegraphed and were received by the Marconi Wireless Operators Phillips and

Bride from other vessels in the area and were passed to the Captain. One was passed to Bruce Ismay, the owner, who put it in his pocket.

When the liner struck, Captain Smith rushed to the bridge and asked officer Murdoch what had happened. "An iceberg," he replied. "I hard a starboard and reversed the engines and I was going to hard a port but she was too close - I couldn't do any more, sir." Captain Smith gave the order to close the emergency doors, "The doors are already closed sir." replied Murdoch.

Down in boiler room number 6, Fred Barrett had been talking to second engineer Hesketh. The warning bell sounded and the red light flashed above the watertight door. There was a crash and the starboard side of the ship appeared to give way. The sea poured in and the two men leapt through the door as it slammed down behind them.

Fred Barrett saw that the situation was as bad in boiler room number 5. The gash ran about 2ft. beyond the door and a great jet of water was gushing through the hole. The stokers were scrambling up the ladder to topside. The lights went out and Engineer Harvey told Fred, who had stayed behind, to go aft for lanterns. Fred Barrett had to climb to the top of the escape ladder, cross over, and down the other side.

### **Boiler room**

By the time he had retraced his steps the lights had come on again. The Engineer then ordered Fred to get the boilers shut down. The pressure had built up while the ship was at full steam. Fred scrambled back up the escape ladder and gave orders to about 20 stokers he found wandering around "E" deck. It was back-breaking work boxing up the boilers and putting on dampers to stop the steam rising. Clouds of steam gushed through the boiler room as they sweated and toiled.

Boiler room number 5 seemed the only place under control. After the fires were drawn, Barrett sent most of the stokers topside. By this time the ship was down at the head and listing five degrees to starboard. Fireman Barrett had noticed this but decided to say nothing to the engineers who were working on the pumps. Engineer Harvey ordered Fred to lift the iron manhole cover off the floor-plates on the starboard side so that he could get at the valves to adjust the pumps.

Orders came from the bridge for all hands to report to the boat stations. Fred told the remaining stokers to go but he remained behind to assist Harvey and after about a quarter of an hour they were pleased with their endeavours and the room was still dry. Suddenly the sea came roaring through the space between the boilers at the forward end of the room. The whole bulkhead between numbers 5 and 6 collapsed. Harvey shouted to Fred to get out. Foam surging around his knees then upwards to his waist, he struggled to the escape ladder. He looked round for Harvey who was making his way to the pump room where Engineer Shepherd lay (who had broken his leg through falling down an open manhole cover) and then Shepherd disappeared under the torrent of water. There was nothing more he could do but make his way up the ladder as the water followed him.

### **Lifeboat**

Fred Barrett reached the deck and walked aft to deck "A" on the starboard side, where there were only two boats left - number 13 and 15. Number 13 was partly lowered and full.

A call was made for any more women. None appeared and none were visible on the deck, which was

brightly illuminated, Fred Barrett was told to get in and take charge.

The experience of being lowered in a large lifeboat with 64 people aboard was like descending a tall building 75ft above the ground in a continuous series of jerks. When almost to the bottom, a great discharge of water 3ft to 4ft in diameter which was coming from the condenser pumps almost swamped them.

They shouted to stop lowering, Fred and another man pushed the boat away from the side of the ship with oars then shouted to be lowered again. The lifeboat reached the sea which fortunately was as calm as a lake. Fred Barrett shouted "Let go the after falls." None of the crew on the boat deck heard, or were too busy lowering boat number 15. Boat 13 was now drifting below boat 15 and the occupants were in danger of being crushed. Fred, with seconds to spare scrambled across the boat, treading on women and children. He cut the ropes just in time as boat 15 crashed down beside them. "Pull away", he ordered. "As hard as you can." More confusion because the few crew in the boat had never handled an oar before. One of the stokers collapsed because of the freezing cold. A lady passenger draped a coat over him.

They rowed with difficulty for about a mile from the ship when Fred called a halt. The night dark and cold, yet calm, the sky clear and full of stars. They all stared in awe at the demise of the great liner. The lights were still burning, row after row disappearing as she slowly sank. Then, a rumbling noise, as the forward funnel-stays snapped and the giant funnel toppled over in a shower of sparks. The sound of engines, boilers and machinery crashing through the bulkheads.

Dawn came and the responsibility of "Captain" Frederick Barrett came to an end. They were taken aboard the rescue ship *Carpathia*.

After giving evidence in the American and British inquiries, Fred Barrett came to the Potteries once more to visit his sister. No hero's welcome here, his native town were unaware of the role he played in one of the world's greatest disasters. Then went I know not where. So ends a legend.

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