

## Excuse Sending ... Am Half Asleep

by Jemma Hyder

### ***Titanic Research***

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#### **The experience of Carpathia Wireless Operator Harold Cottam**

At the beginning of 1912 Harold Thomas Cottam already had a wealth of experience behind him. The youngest graduate from his class at Wireless Telegraphy school, he had operated at an early age on routes as far flung as Australia, as well as on shore stations working for the Post Office before he was selected above a number of other applicants to take up his place as the sole Operator under Arthur Rostron on the Cunard Liner *Carpathia* in February 1912. Mature beyond his years he was a rather small man, but there are still those alive today who comment on how handsome he looked when he returned home to Nottinghamshire dressed up in full Marconi uniform. Born at the end of January in 1891, Harold was the eldest son of William Cottam, a local builder and his wife Jane Powley, whose family origins were of a farming nature further north. Four more sons followed as the years progressed and they had somewhat of a reputation locally, but whatever Harold got up to, he never warranted the notoriety of Oscar, three years his junior.

<sup>th</sup> Harold admitted he had ‘nothing much to work on,’ and on hearing how pushed at his key Jack Phillips was aboard the *Titanic*

*Titanic* disaster is often summed up as being solely played out in the early hours of the morning on Monday 15<sup>th</sup> April 1912. The Twenty One year old had almost turned in for a well-deserved rest when he picked up Phillips’s desperate distress call, reported it to the bridge and sent the *Carpathia* speeding towards the aid. During the four-hour voyage to the scene of the White Star Liner’s demise he kept up a continuous stream of transmission. He advised *Titanic* of their progress, helped her Operators by re-transmitting messages they were unable to hear and kept up to date with the sinking ship’s progress, but often overlooked is the fact that his role remained pivotal long after the *Titanic* had sunk beneath the surface of the North Atlantic.

on Monday morning, but for Harold, already more than 24 hours without sleep, his role was to be virtually uninterrupted until she docked in New York the following Thursday. Monday began with an endless stream of traffic. All the surrounding ships pressing the young Operator continuously for information. He found himself repeating his story time and time again as more ships arrived at the scene, 'Titanic sank 2am, rescued 20 boatloads'; On top of this came the correspondence between the various ships; captains, mainly Haddock of the

*Olympic*. In all he passed on 322 names of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> class passengers and the *Olympic* Operator noted that 'During transmission it was evident he was tired'; Harold eventually gave up, promising that the names of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Class Passengers and the Crew would follow.

*Carpathia* was Harold Bride. The 22-year-old Londoner had been recovering somewhere below decks ever since Monday morning, suffering from frost bitten feet among other ailments, and there he probably would have stayed if not for receiving a visit telling him that the ship's Wireless Operator was 'Getting queer'; He could have been forgiven for refusing to assist in his condition, but nevertheless Harold hobbled up to the top deck on his crutches to lend a hand. Cottam was to remain doing most of the transmitting whilst Bride made himself useful by sitting on the bed with his leg propped up on a pillow organising the traffic. It certainly took some of the pressure off of Harold Cottam who was able to break for meals on Wednesday and take a catch up on a few hours sleep.

### *Chester*

*Carpathia* approached New York Cottam turned over the headphones to Bride for the last time to go and eat. The *Titanic's* Junior Operator was at the key when she docked and the New York Times reporter arrived with Marconi to collect his exclusive version of events. In more than 150 hours since Friday morning Harold Cottam would have had approximately 20 hours sleep before reaching New York so it is little wonder that he slipped away into the city as soon as the ship landed

*Carpathia* reached New York Harbour, it appeared to those ashore that information was being withheld. After Official traffic the ship was flooded with not only every message any survivor on board wanted to send, but also every family member, friend, loved one, and acquaintance of anyone who was or might possibly have been on the looking for information. Not surprisingly messages went astray and some important people didn't get answers to the questions they were asking. Marconi himself asked why he could get no news, to which he received no reply, (on Rostron's instruction) and the Secretary

of the U.S Navy launched an investigation using radio experts as to why President Taft's message asking for news on Archibald Butt and the other American passengers went unanswered. Jack Binn's, Radio Operator of *Republic* fame put the apparent silence down to the inadequacy of the wireless equipment and the atmospheric conditions at the time, whilst Moore, the *Olympic*

*Carpathia* with Marconi himself. One suspects that if he had been so keen to make himself some easy money he wouldn't have made the sharp exit from the dock that he did. As it was, Harold didn't enquire after permission to sell his story until the early hours of the next morning when he telephoned Mr. Marconi himself. He eventually received \$750 for the story that appeared alongside Harold Bride's in the *New York Times* on April 19<sup>th</sup>

Harold Cottam retired from sea ten years later to marry Elsie Shepperson, the daughter of a local gardener. He appeared as the guest of honour at a local premiere of *A Night to Remember* in 1958 and gave the odd interview recounting the night of the sinking. He passed away in 1984 at the age of 93.

\*This idea was later abandoned quite sensibly when the *Rostron* considered how traumatic it would be to transfer the survivors to the sister of the ship that had just sank from underneath them.

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## References

*New York Times*, April 19<sup>th</sup> 1912  
*Carpathia* Log BT100 Series, PRO

*New York Times*, April 20<sup>th</sup> 1912

*New York Times*, April 16<sup>th</sup> 1912

*New York Times*, April 21<sup>st</sup> 1912

*Newark Advertiser*, 1958

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