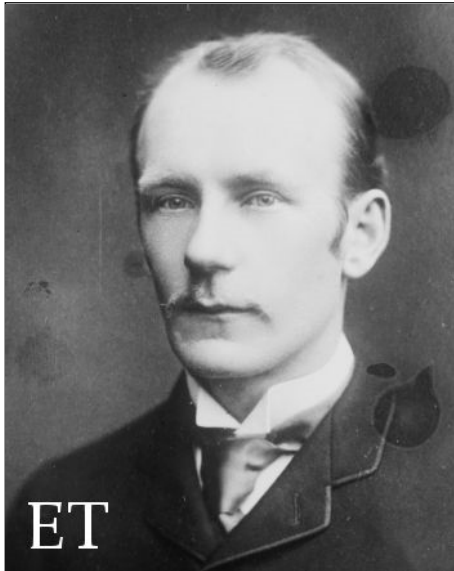


Titanic's Supreme Survivor

by Senan Molony

ET Research

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Sydney Buxton as a new MP

SYDNEY BUXTON, President of the Board of Trade, is the *Titanic's* supreme survivor.

How he managed to avoid disgrace - and the loss of his glittering career - over the failure to reform lifeboat provision for steamers in some twenty years represents one of the Great Escapes of parliamentary democracy, or what passed for it in early 20th Century Britain.

What should have sealed his fate is the fact that he actively misled the House of Commons, usually a capital offence in politics. Instead Buxton went on to become an Earl and Governor-General of South Africa. How on earth did he get away with it?

BORN IN 1853, the Right Honourable Sydney Buxton MP, was a venerable 59 by 1912, when he found himself President of the Board of Trade at the time of a catastrophic sinking. His career had already been illustrious.

He first entered parliament at the age of thirty, in 1883, representing the town of Peterborough for the Liberals. In 1886 he was elected member for Poplar, and would occupy that constituency's seat to the Commons for the next 28 years. Buxton's first promotion came when he was appointed Under-Secretary for the Colonies in 1892.

It was a reward for an already-demonstrated dexterity in politics - within two years of reaching Westminster, neophyte Buxton had confidently, even cockily, produced a book entitled *A Handbook To Political Questions Of The Day*. It argued the pros and cons of such subjects as Irish Church Disestablishment, Free Schools and whether the illiterate should be allowed to vote. It would go on to enjoy a dozen editions as Buxton developed new themes for changed times, such as the Home Rule question that would come sharply into focus by the time a new liner left Southampton in 1912.

By then Buxton had penned a couple more books - including an appreciation of Cardinal Manning, an analysis of finance and politics over the previous century, a pamphlet on the Boer War, a study of Gladstone, and the apparently ill-sitting *Fishing and Shooting*.

It was this latter work that most endeared Buxton to his peers, for in spite of his erudition he was an immensely clubbable man. He forged alliances easily, was liked for his easy manner as well as his intellect, and became admired for the very fact that this energetic and rigorous individual could also, apparently, relax.

It is doubtful whether his fishing tips helped him hook the important post of Postmaster General, but his overall reputation certainly did. He would head the post office from 1905 to 1910. Wireless telegraphy became one of his portfolios, and he entered into early dispute with the Marconi company over compulsory acquisition of some coastal stations by the Post Office, then muscling in on the exciting new medium for reasons of national security.

In 1910, Sydney Buxton became President of the Board of Trade, one of the most important posts in the Cabinet of Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith.

Now 57 and on his second wife - his first, a daughter of Lord Avebury died in 1892 and he had remarried four years later one Miss Mildred Smith - Buxton may still have harboured hopes of one day entering 10 Downing Street as the Head of Government.

He had lost none of his drive, although on entering the Board of Trade he became preoccupied with protectionism. A Copyright Act in 1911 was the highlight of his handling of the post before disaster struck in the North Atlantic.

Immediately on the thunderclap of the *Titanic* sinking, some chickens began winging home to roost. Buxton had ignored reform of the shipping regulations, as had his fellow Presidents of the Board of Trade long before him. All of them had relaxed on the wrong issue, but he was the one left at bay.



Photo, Elliott and Fry.

MR. SYDNEY BUXTON,

As President of the Board of Trade much affected by the "Titanic" Disaster.

Titanic had lifeboats sufficient for only half aboard, even though she had been half empty in the first place.

Although 2,208 placed their lives aboard her in April 1912, the new White Star liner had certified permission to embark no fewer than 3,547 passengers and crew. At the same time, her legally-

permissible 16 lifeboats provided accommodation for only 990.

The four additional collapsibles were not required by the Board of Trade. These optional - almost whimsical - extras contributed a theoretical 188 additional places. This brought the total number of lifeboat places on all *Titanic* boats to 1,178 [leaving a notional 2,369 to die in a case of maximum load].

Only 712 were saved as it turned out, while over 1,500 did actually go to their deaths, a survival rate of slightly less than one in three. When this became known, coupled with the fact that the *Titanic* had survived on a calm sea for two hours and then two-thirds of a further hour, the outrage became palpable.

Yet the *Titanic* exceeded, in all respects, what was legally required. The law had not been amended for 18 years, having originally been framed for vessels up to a maximum envisaged displacement of 10,000 tons. The sunken White Star Liner was four and a half times bigger.

At House of Commons questions on Thursday, April 18, one MP hit the nail on the head when he asked: "Having regard to the rapid growth of vessels between 1894 and 1911, have not the Board of Trade been slow in making regulations for vessels over 10,000 tons?"

Sydney Buxton "did not reply to the question," the newspapers reported the next day. But its truth was abundantly clear. Buxton ought perhaps to have resigned at this point, even if he had only been carrying political responsibility for two years. The point was that ultimate accountability for the Board's prolonged failure rested with Buxton.

The *Daily Mail* screamed: "The want of boats was the cause of the fearful tragedy on the *Titanic*, whereby 1,635 persons lost their lives, and the insufficiency of boats must be ascribed to the Board of Trade.

"No excuses, no special pleading, can get over this grim fact."

The Daily Mail this morning points out that one of these questions must be the inaction of the board of trade. It says: "The country has still to learn why it was that this department, charged with a duty so important and so grave, neglected the duty and failed to re-model its regulations determining the provision of boats for passenger steamers so as to keep pace with the rapid advance of these vessels in size.

Was Lack of Boats.

"The want of boats was the cause of the fearful tragedy on the *Titanic*, whereby 1,635 persons lost their lives, and the insufficiency of boats must be ascribed to the negligence of the board of trade.

"No excuses, no special pleading can get over this grim fact: yet, even now, though many great shipping companies have taken action, the board of trade remains inert."

It was in the same House of Commons, in which a defensive Buxton kept parroting that the *Titanic* had more boats than the law required (insensitive to the bereaved, one would think, even if instinctively protective of ship owners), that he strayed into an extreme parsimony with the truth.

Buxton said: "In view of the increased size of modern passenger vessels, the Board of Trade last year (1911) referred to an advisory committee the question of revision of those rules.

"After considering this report, the Board was not satisfied the increased (lifeboat) provision recommended by the committee was adequate, and within the past few days referred the matter

back to the committee for re-examination."

After considering this Report, together with the views of their expert advisers, the Board of Trade were not satisfied that the increased provision recommended by the advisory committee was altogether adequate. After additional investigations and tests in regard to the best type and proportions of lifeboats, the Board, within the last few days, referred the question back to the committee for further examination. I mention this in order that the House may understand that, before the recent terrible disaster occurred, the Board of Trade, in concert with the best expert authorities available, had been carefully and practically considering the question of the revision of the scale of boat accommodation prescribed for large ships.

Buxton's misleading reply to MPs that recommendations from a lifeboat advisory committee in July 1911 were "not... altogether adequate."

In fact, while interim increases in lifeboat provision could have been adopted, one proposal would have seen nearly two lifeboat places for every one person on the *Titanic* on her maiden voyage to New York. (Hansard)

The notable phrase above is "within the last few days." Action to close the stable door came only after the horse had bolted. Yet the report had been with the Board of Trade since July of the previous year! Nine months in which it had done nothing.

Buxton also blustered: "Before this terrible disaster occurred, the Board had been carefully considering the question of the revision of the scale of lifeboat accommodation for large vessels." But he had misled the House of Commons. He told MPs that the 1911 committee recommendations were "not adequate."

Yet, in fact, had they been implemented, it would have been a legal minimum requirement in 1912 that the *Titanic* carry should four more collapsibles or auxiliary boats than she did in fact carry. Although still falling far short of boats for all, another 188 boat places would have been provided for those *in extremis* in the ice of the mid-Atlantic.

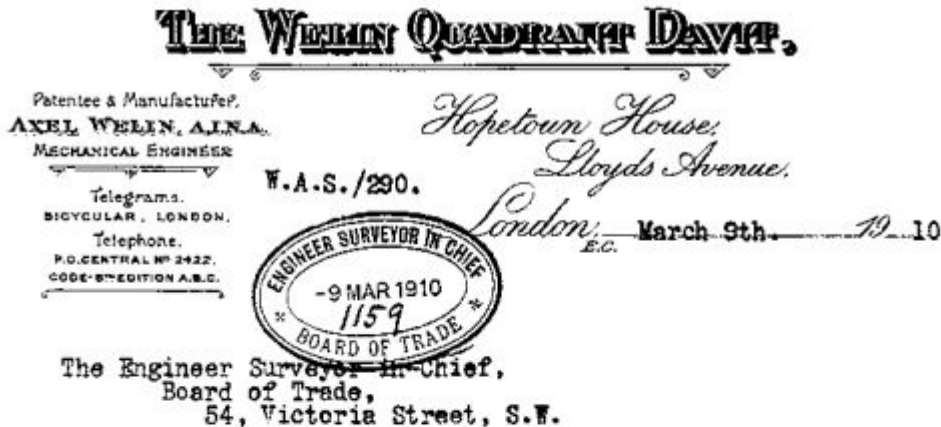
And the truth was that it could have been, nay should have been, done at the stroke of a pen. The 1890 Merchant Shipping Act allowed such matters to be governed by regulation. Buxton, the responsible Minister, could have promulgated the recommended increase by decree, without further legislation.

It could have been done in July 1911 as an interim step, while he referred the "inadequate" recommendations back to the committee. He might have pocketed the extra lifeboat accommodation they offered and sent them back to consider doing more.

Buxton's use of the careful phrase "not adequate" suggested the committee's recommendations would not have made any difference. But the fact is that they would have made that difference of an extra four boats - as was discovered when the report of the committee was quietly printed by the Board of Trade two days later.

In fact, the most senior adviser to the Board wanted to go even further, arguing for substantial increases in lifeboat numbers, pro rata, for the larger ships. It is well known that the White Star company, resisting further lifeboats like other shipping lines and taking every advantage of bulkhead concessions on the argument that the ship would be her own lifeboat, knew change was coming.

The *Olympic* class boats were fitted with Welin double-acting davits. It is known that plans were drawn up to provide 32 lifeboats for the class of the *Titanic*, then shelved when the threat of action by officialdom receded. (Designs for 64 and even 82 lifeboats had been around since 1909! - see the evidence of Alexander Carlisle.)



Dear Sir,

Referring to my interview with your Mr. Carlton this morning, I now beg to hand you blue print showing the general arrangement of the Double-Acting gears, size "D-A²". While these gears are, subject to your approval, to become of a standard type, they are primarily to be used for the "*Titanic*" and "*Olympic*", now building by Messrs. Harland & Wolff to the order of the White Star Line.

I also confirm that the number of sets is 32, and the size of the boats to be handled is 30' x 8' x 4¹."

Yours faithfully,



Letter from Axel Welin confirming *Olympic* and *Titanic* plans.

Papers in the British National Archives show exactly when that was – on the 19th April 1910, the question of requiring inboard boats beside those rigged in the double-acting davits was deferred "for future consideration" by the Board of Trade.

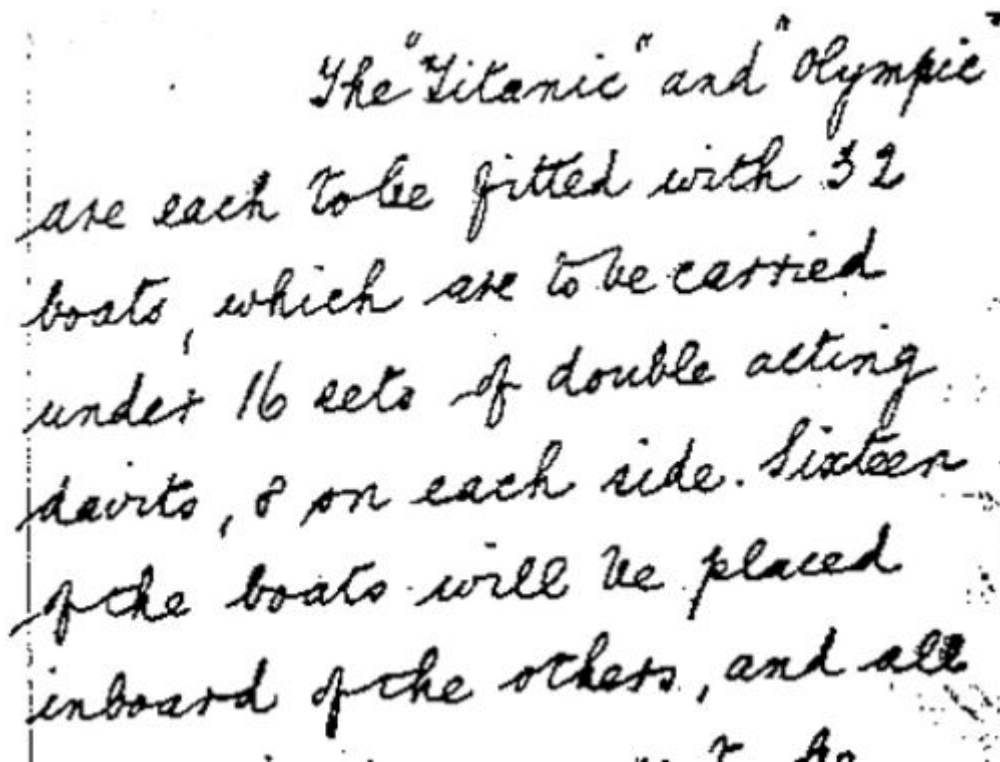
A paper designated MT15/114M6587, submitted within the Board of Trade and dated Mach 9, 1910 – just one month before – had promised that the *Titanic* and *Olympic* would each have 32 lifeboats. When the political pressure came off, so did the lifeboats.

In another document of 1910, a report to the Engineer Surveyor-in-Chief at the Board of Trade, Alexander Boyle, noted that there would be 16 lifeboats immediately under davits "as required by the rules at present."

The report, by one William Reeder – presumably a senior surveyor or Marine Department mandarin - added: "This seems a very small number for such large ships, and it is for consideration whether it can be regarded as complying with the spirit of the rules."

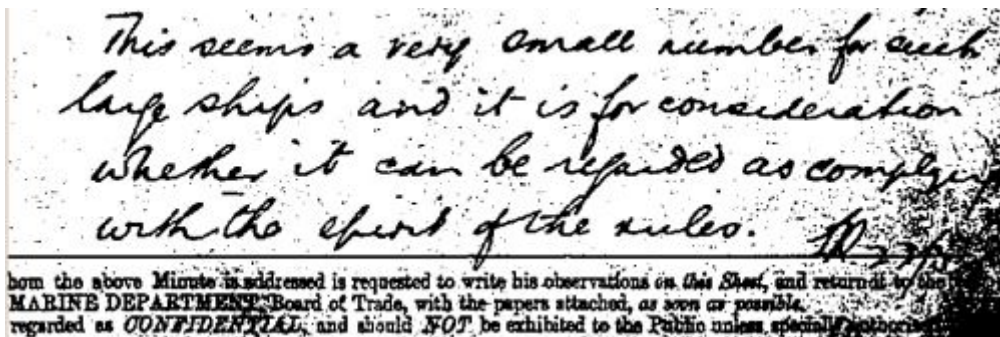
Politically, this is close to a smoking gun, particularly in light of what did happen – nothing -

when the advisory committee reported a year later in 1911, many months before the *Titanic* sailed.



The "*Titanic*" and "*Olympic*"
are each to be fitted with 32
boats, which are to be carried
under 16 sets of double acting
davits, 8 on each side. Sixteen
of the boats will be placed
inboard of the others, and all

Board of Trade 1910 document making clear the *Titanic* would have 32 boats, with two boats for every set of lifeboat davits.



This seems a very small number for such
large ships and it is for consideration
whether it can be regarded as complying
with the spirit of the rules. W. Reeder

from the above Minute is addressed is requested to write his observations on this Sheet, and return it to the
MARINE DEPARTMENT, Board of Trade, with the papers attached, as soon as possible.
regarded as *CONFIDENTIAL*, and should *NOT* be exhibited to the Public unless specially authorized.

Report from Board of Trade official William Reeder declaring that the subsequent reduction to 16 standard boats "seems a very small number for such large ships..."

The internal Board of Trade reply to this expression of concern would have been equally politically destructive, had it come out. It took the form of a note, forwarding the file to Sir Alfred Chalmers, the Nautical Adviser to the Board of Trade up until August 1911.

We need not interfere
in this case, and the matter
can be further gone into as
soon as the proposed new rule
is settled - This should be
expedited, and it is not
clear what we are waiting for.
A.B.
23.3.

Note from Alexander Boyle advising against 'interference'



British Prime Minister in 1912
Herbert Henry Asquith

The note was from Alexander Boyle, the Engineering Surveyor-in-Chief to the Board. He wrote: "We need not interfere further in this case [*Olympic* and *Titanic*] and the matter can be further gone into as soon as the proposed new rule is settled."

Boyle then added, in a more personal comment: "This should be expedited, and it is not clear what we are waiting for."

Anyone who knows anything of the internal workings of a bureaucracy will realise at once that there was some external force acting on Boyle for him to communicate a decision "not to interfere further."

Shadows of the political wranglings between officialdom and the shipping industry are everywhere evident in the files. Someone in the Board of Trade, higher up than its Engineering Surveyor-in-Chief (who communicated his own views in an aside) decided to capitulate to pressure from White Star. Their immense new ships went to sea with a fig-leaf of lifeboats.

Boyle was called to the British Inquiry. His attendance is seen, in light of the eventual opening of the files, as humorously brief. He was asked perfunctorily about a few issues. He was not asked about his views on lifeboats.

Nautical adviser Alfred Chalmers took a different view when eventually called to give evidence, long after the initial public anger had subsided. He offered an obtuse argument that more boats would have required the shipping companies to carry more men uselessly across the Atlantic to operate them who could be put to no other useful purpose. The claim is, of course, absurd.

But Chalmers' fundamental attitude was the same one adopted in the immediate wake of the tragedy – that such an incident could not have been foreseen. In his first House of Commons utterances, Sydney Buxton, President of the Board of Trade, allowed that the disaster "weighed heavily" with his bailiwick, as it must have done with him personally.

In modern times, such a phrase would suggest the honourable member had taken the honourable course – and offered his resignation. But that might have wrong-footed the Prime Minister, no less a personage than Herbert Asquith. It was the PM who told the Commons that the disaster that befell the *Titanic* had "baffled foresight." It was not for a Cabinet colleague to resign and suggest otherwise.

If offered, Buxton's resignation was refused by Asquith, who was looking to a larger picture of Government and national well-being... which so often means the preservation of the status quo and the powers that be, even if the status quo had brought them to this impasse. They were all in it together.

Yet internal Board of Trade documents from two years earlier, no less than persistent Parliamentary Questions since about 1908, prove to the contrary that the Board of Trade might have known and *should have known*.

Buxton claimed to accept 'full responsibility' for what the Board of Trade may have left undone over the years, but he did not give practical effect to the sentiment. Yet what he carefully omitted to tell the House of Commons was that the recommended increases from the committee – which he rejected as 'inadequate' - amounted to only the lowest common denominator of their pooled opinion.

And he failed to disclose that four separate reports on lifeboat provision, each recommending that many more escape craft be provided on giant liners, were received prior to the formation of the committee *but were not submitted to it*.

knowledge. As to the points raised by the hon. Member who first spoke, I take full responsibility as President of the Board of Trade for what that Board may have done or left undone in past years, but I venture

Quote from Sydney Buxton to the House of Commons. But he didn't take "full responsibility," despite his claim to do so. That would have meant resignation for what was "left undone."

One of these reports comprised recommendations by William David Archer, the Principal Surveyor of the Board of Trade, who argued that for a ship of 45,000 tons [as with *Titanic* and *Olympic*, the new behemoths] there should be a minimum number of 24 boats placed under davits.

Not only this, but Archer urged that such ships should carry 22 "additional boats" [such as rafts or collapsibles] sufficient to hold a total of 2,493 persons.

Here was the principal surveyor of the Board of Trade effectively calling on his boss, Mr Buxton, on February 28, 1911, to provide **46** lifeboats (more than double *Titanic's* eventual number) on ships of 45,000 tons.

The *Titanic's* complement in April 1912 was 2,200 passengers and crew and Archer's proposal would have provided 2,500 lifeboat spaces. *What was "not adequate" about Mr Archer's recommendation?*



What was wrong with the other three reports, at least one of which was calling for lifeboat accommodation sufficient for all certified to go aboard, and which would have provided nearly two places for every one person on the *Titanic* on her maiden voyage?

The Advisory Committee was asked to begin deliberations anew, without access to the four most recent reports, in April 1911. It came back in July with recommendations that were "not adequate." And still Buxton did not move.

This is the key to his personal dilemma. He is fixed with direct moral responsibility throughout. As the Attorney General later told the Mersey commission, if Archer's advice had been followed, "that would give sufficient for all" on the *Titanic*.

Thus, Buxton's excuse for not implementing the committee recommendations - that they were "not adequate" - falls far, far short of the real truth. If this was the real reason, then Buxton's failure to make an interim order is all the more deplorable, and by his own standards. He is hoist on his own petard.

Aside from misleading the Commons, he might have resigned for what he patently omitted to do. Buxton had effectively stalled a series of recommendations. It did not benefit the travelling public, who were drowned by the thousand-and-half just nine months later. Yet the Board of Trade was charged with regulating the shipping industry and protecting travellers against unscrupulous operators.

As Horatio Bottomley MP, a long-time lifeboat campaigner (who had almost single handedly forced referral to the advisory committee in 1911) would declare: "I shudder at the thought of what must have been the reflections of the victims of this disaster when they looked wistfully

and hopelessly for the lifeboats which were not there, and of what they thought of the British legislature, which is responsible for their safety.”



Meeting that might have been: Did Asquith (right) refuse Buxton's resignation?

PRIME Minister Herbert Asquith told the Commons on the day the extent of the North Atlantic tragedy became known that it was "one of those terrible events that baffle foresight." Thus was provided an infamous line of defence for the Establishment from the earliest moment.

It was hardly surprising that Lord Mersey would provide exactly that conclusion when his Court of Inquiry reported in July 1912, exactly a year after the blinkered advisory committee. Mersey concluded the disaster was an Act of God, utterly unforeseeable, but that its reoccurrence would fix blame for any similar accident in the future.

This finding essentially absolved the White Star Line and the Government from fault, much less criminal neglect. And who had appointed Mersey to investigate the adequacy of lifesaving provision on British merchant vessels? - Why, Sydney Buxton, President of the Board of Trade!

Meanwhile one of Lord Mersey's assessors was Captain A.W. Clarke, an inspector with the Board of Trade, but a man less senior or experienced than the troublesome Archer, Principal Surveyor.

THE STEAMSHIP companies and general public had long known the dangers posed by ice, even before a time when the speed of ships on the North Atlantic had been increasing in leaps and bounds.

In February, 1911, repeated lifeboat questions by Bottomley and others in the House of Commons had resulted in a decision to appoint the advisory committee. As Lord Mersey succinctly remarked at the Inquiry: "Apparently the Board of Trade, did not move of its own initiative."



PRIME Minister Herbert Asquith at the Despatch Box in the House of Commons at the time of the *Titanic* sinking. Sydney Buxton is visible to



Horatio Bottomley

Mr Bottomley's question, over a year before the *Titanic* sailed, was: "To ask the President whether he will state the date of last regulations made by the Board of Trade in reference to the number of lifeboats necessary to be attached to passenger vessels and whether, having regard to the increased tonnage of modern ships he will consider the desirableness of revising the Regulations."

Mr Buxton answered: "Those Regulations were last revised in 1894. The question of their further revision is engaging the serious attention of the Board of Trade, and I have decided to refer the matter to the Merchant Shipping Advisory Committee for consideration and advice."

It was a delaying tactic. The Board had finally been pressured to act as a result of Bottomley's persistent calling attention to glaring inadequacies. Yet referral to a committee is a classic timewasting ploy.

As far back as November 1910, Bottomley had asked a question in the Commons as to whether the President of the Board of Trade's attention had been called to the fact that the White Star Line's new super-ship, the *Olympic*, was to be provided with 14 lifeboats only.

Mr Tennant, the Parliamentary Secretary of the Board of Trade, replied on Mr Buxton's behalf: "I understand that the *Olympic* will be provided with 14 lifeboats and two ordinary boats of an aggregate capacity of 9,752 cubic feet [sufficient for 975 persons] which is in excess of the requirements of the Statutory Rules." The 1894 rules again.

The shipping companies were very much against increased lifeboat provision, arguing that they "cluttered the decks." Large numbers of them could also defeat advertising claims of practical unsinkability.

It is known that Sir Walter Howell, head of the Board of Trade's Marine Department, and the Board's long-time Nautical Adviser, Sir Alfred Chalmers, were opposed to extra lifeboat provision being made mandatory, preferring their "bigger picture" approach of trading lifeboat obligations for better superstructure integrity in terms of increased bulkheads.

This was the canonisation of the argument that the ship should be its own lifeboat - and it led to what Lord Mersey would describe as "bribing" ship owners to improve the watertight attributes of their vessels with a promise that if they did so, they need not provide as many lifeboats.

Chalmers held this view "very strongly," and it happened to suit the steamship lines to a nicety. It thus became the infallible doctrine of the Board - yet everything then depended on the bulkheads, and the inviolability of watertight doors.

Which brings us to the final reason Sydney Buxton ought to have resigned. Because even if the prevailing orthodoxy was unknowably faulty, the Board of Trade failed to even get the White Star Line to provide the necessary quid-pro-quo.

There is a devastating document in the Public Records Office in Kew, London, entitled M-28910 (390) describing action taken by the principal surveyor "as regards the bulkheads of ss *Olympic*."

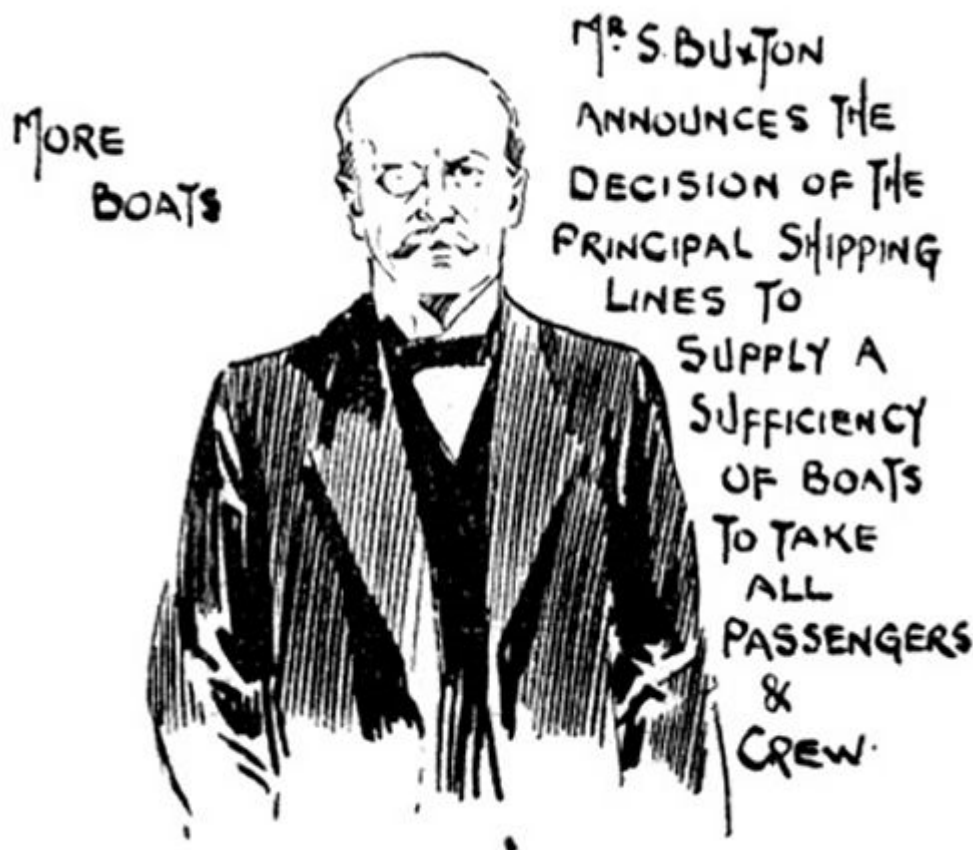
On April 25, 1910, a surveyor sent plans for the new ship to Principal Surveyor Archer, who noted that the collision bulkhead did not go up to D Deck, but terminated at E deck. In addition, a forward bulkhead was too near the stem, at only 33ft behind.

Archer wrote in a memo: "I advised the Board of Trade on 30th April that (it) should inform the builders that the collision bulkhead must be carried to D Deck, and that no part of it should be nearer the stem than 1/20 the vessel's length."

But Archer in fact had to write another memo on the same lines before his suggestions were made to White Star, who replied that the recommendations would be “very difficult” to now carry out. Thus, nothing was done.

The toothlessness (or pliability) of the Board of Trade thereby became apparent to the powerful interests of the shipping lobby, if not the public. It all culminated in the *Titanic* sinking that much quicker - and with fewer lifeboats on her topmost decks.

How did Buxton, the great survivor, escape culpability for ANY of this? It scarcely seems credible, but get away with it he did. It is possible that he offered his resignation to Asquith in private, only for the Prime Minister to refuse it, having made up his mind from the earliest moment to ride out any political repercussions.



(Daily Graphic, April 24, 1912)

Indeed, Sydney Buxton may have been saved by the deeply ironic, and prompt action, of the main steamship companies to *voluntarily* commit to provide boats for all within two days of the tragedy. His tormentors might just have cast him a lifeline. And who can blame him if he held on grimly?

The official British Inquiry, towards its end, summoned Archer, the internal critic of Board of Trade policy. He gave as his view that the *Titanic* had not complied with bulkhead requirements under Rule 12 that provided for lifeboat exemptions. The ship was not ‘its own lifeboat’ – even in theory!

But by then the sting had gone out of the threatened political apocalypse. Recommendations would be duly made by the Inquiry, yet more recommendations... An international conference on the safety of life at sea (SOLAS) in time would help to shore up the impression that it had all indeed “baffled foresight.” It did at least serve as political window dressing.



Sydney Buxton was elevated a Viscount and made Governor General of South Africa. Seen here arriving at the Cape (Left: *The Graphic*, Right: *Daily Mirror*)

In February 1914 however, Sydney Buxton was promoted – being appointed Governor General of South Africa and shipped off to the Cape. He was elevated to the peerage as a Viscount two months later. In 1920 he retired, and on his return to the United Kingdom was created an Earl.

Sydney Buxton, *Titanic* survivor par excellence, died in 1934 at the age of 81.

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