

100 Years Ago (1)

Ray Ion

Over one hundred years have now passed since there were two short paragraphs in a side column of a local newspaper. The first paragraph stated that *'Mr. J.M. Falkner has been appointed vice-chairman of the firm of Sir. W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co., Ltd., in place of Sir Percy Girouard, whose retirement was announced through the Newcastle Journal yesterday'*. The second paragraph continued: *'Mr. Falkner, M.A. who is the eldest surviving son of the Rev. Thomas A. Falkner, of North Newton [sic], Wilts, was born in 1858, and in 1889 [sic] married the daughter of Sir John Miller Adye. He received his education at Marlborough and Oxford, and, in addition to being a director of the firm of Sir W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co., serves in the same capacity in a number of other companies'*.

The local newspaper – the *Newcastle Daily Journal* – was dated 23rd April 1915 and, one week short of 8 months later, on 17th December 1915, the same newspaper had a one paragraph article informing the people of the North East that Mr. John Meade Falkner M.A. was now the new chairman of Messrs. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co.; 'a brilliant university career' and 'a successful literary career' were the only additions to the 23rd April article.

With the John Meade Falkner Society holding their sixth biennial meeting in the Newcastle upon Tyne area in July 2015, this makes it an appropriate time for an article to mark this centenary. Through a series of newspaper articles, we can go on a journey – business or otherwise – firstly, from the time in April 1915 when he was appointed vice chairman, forward to 'another appointment' in December 1915, and then all the way through to his resignation in December 1920. On some occasions Falkner was required to do plenty of talking; unfortunately only a fraction of what he said can be included in this article. In print, we encountered 'Mr. John Meade Falkner', 'Mr. J. Meade Falkner', 'Mr. John M. Falkner', 'Mr. J.M. Falkner' and, it goes without saying, the reporters' old favourite, 'Mr. J.M. Faulkner'. Apart from the picture showing JMF rubbing shoulders with the King and Queen at the Walker shipbuilding yard of Armstrong, Whitworth & Company, in short, if it wasn't in the local papers, it won't be here!

The local newspapers used for this research were the *Illustrated Chronicle* and the *Newcastle Daily Journal*.



JMF (left) alongside the Prime Minister on the platform at Newcastle Central Station, shortly after Mr. Asquith's arrival



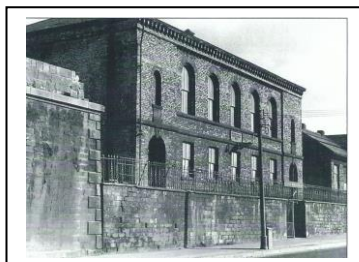
The Prime Minister (right) at the Elswick works – with JMF looking on ('I.C.' photo)

Actually, JMF's final act, prior to being appointed vice chairman, was to be present, along with the Lord Mayor of Newcastle, and other Elswick personnel, at Newcastle Central Station to welcome the Prime Minister, Mr. Herbert Asquith, and to accompany him, his wife and their two daughters, to a sell-out meeting of munition workers at the Palace Theatre, in the city centre. This meeting (which was the main purpose of the two day visit) took place on 20th April, 1915 and, '*prominently to the front*' was how the *Newcastle Daily Journal*, on the following day, described the location of the platform that '*Mr. J.M. Falkner*' was seated at. (JMF possibly remained seated – or so it seems – as he received no further mention in the report. The next day's newspaper reported that '*The Prime Minister paid a visit to the Elswick works yesterday morning for the purpose of seeing the actual manufacturing process in the making of munitions of war*', again, without giving JMF any sort of mention. From these two days, though, the *Illustrated Chronicle* published photographs showing JMF alongside Asquith, shortly after arrival at Newcastle Central Station, and followed up the next day with another at Elswick, again in the company of the Premier. Mr. Asquith was bid farewell and his party then left for London by the 12.43 express.

A week or so later, on 29th April, some details from the 20th Annual Report were published in the press, but all that is of interest to us were a handful of words to confirm that '*Mr. J.M. Falkner has been appointed vice*

chairman'. Because of '*war conditions*' and '*the complexity of the business*', there were restrictions on the publication of information about the company's operations. With Sir Andrew Noble unable to attend the 21st Annual General Meeting of the company at the Elswick Mechanics' Institute, it meant that the 8th May saw, for the first time in print, the words '*Mr. John M. Falkner (vice-chairman) presiding*'. This was the AGM of a shipbuilding and armaments manufacturer nine months into a war so, as one can imagine, there was much to get through.

The Elswick Mechanics' Institute & Library, built in 1863 and pictured shortly before demolition in the late 1970s. The library listed among its 1916 catalogue, *The Lost Stradivarius* (no.20), *Moonfleet* (No.26) and *The Nebuly Coat* (No.32). The library index showed the author of these books as J.M. Faulkner. (1)



The new vice chairman (referred to several times as chairman in the report) opened the proceedings and expressed disappointment at the absence of Sir Andrew Noble, saying '*We regret that Sir Andrew Noble is unable to preside at the annual meeting today...he has not failed to take the chair at a general meeting since a serious accident kept him away in 1901*'.

The main items of concern were:

The Accounts: Falkner apologised for the 'delay in the making up of the accounts and laid the blame at the '*extension and complexity of orders in hand*' which have '*put a severe strain on our accounts staff*'.

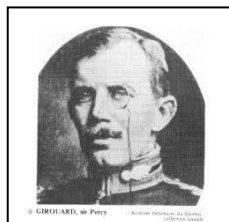
Demands on the Firm: Comments from Falkner included '*the outbreak of the war, as is only natural, has affected the usual policy and operations of this firm...we have been obliged to suspend all foreign work, and have become a British arsenal on an enormous scale...a grave crisis like the present shows the capital importance of great armament firms. In the past they have often been criticised: but, now that a life and death struggle is forced upon us, it is difficult to imagine what the position of the Empire would have been without them...the circumstances of the time preclude our publishing information as to the orders which we have in hand or as to our output, but both are unprecedented*' and, on various labour problems,...'*these conditions are very different from those which were*

expected to prevail when the war began. Instead of the anticipated want of employment and consequent distress, we find the demand for labour is such as has certainly never been known in the district'...before finishing with...'there is a continuous pressure upon the working classes which involves a physical strain, if regular hours are kept, and large earnings are possible, which carry with them their own temptations'.

Question of Lost Time: The Chairman, despite by his own admission of not wanting to enter the controversy over lost time, still felt obliged to comment that *'there is no doubt that much time is lost, but unless the bulk of our workmen had shown themselves patriotic in their endeavours, nothing like the present results could be obtained'*; to be followed in quick succession by *'a large number of men are now employed who would not have been accepted under ordinary circumstances and they are earning higher wages than they know how to handle...laxities have to be tolerated...the highly skilled society men, and especially those who have been many years in our service, are working long hours and giving, we believe, an honest output'*. (applause) *'Let us hope that a greater realisation of the country's danger is forcing itself upon everybody's mind. In the meantime criticism of the Government, or of classes, or even of individuals ought to be reduced to its lowest limit. Unity is the most important factor of the situation'*.

More Workmen Wanted: Falkner began... *'our difficulties, owing to the shortage of skilled labour have been for a long time the subject of public discussion. Since last August we have engaged many thousands of new hands, and we need many thousands more'*.

In praising the recently departed **Sir Percy Girouard**, who had been called to the War Office, Falkner then found time to say: *'he has been with us three years, and rendered invaluable services...nobody could have shown greater energy in helping direct our affairs... we shall miss his remarkable powers of organisation, but hope that he may be of real help to the country'*.



The praise continued with...*'I now add that no praise is too great for the spirit shown by all our staff of managers, clerks, draughtsmen, and foremen. [Their] unflinching ardour, loyalty, and perseverance in the vitally important work entrusted to the company'* was also commented on. The Board, he said, were *'anxious that shareholders should understand all this'*. Reluctant to single out anyone, he did give *'a special commendation to the*

foremen as a class. They must always be the backbone of industrial organisations'.

Financial Problems: Falkner explained that the directors had '*adopted a well-considered and judicious policy*' for the dividend distribution for last year's working, but, although '*the volume of work passing through the shops at present is enormous and future prospects would be considered very favourable*', could he foresee problems? His next few words – '*the increases in the cost of labour and materials are apt to upset calculations*' – suggests that he could. The financial side concluded with comments on '*the severe strain upon our financial resources...working capital required to cope with business in hand*', and being '*able to meet the demands upon us without having recourse to the issue of the authorised £1,000,000 of second preference shares*'.

Ottoman Docks Company: Various reassurances were given to shareholders who had purchased bonds with this company, with whom Armstrong Whitworth had an interest. Despite the case, in Falkner's words, '*bristling with difficulties, legal and international*', he trusted '*that those who bought shares would forgive the delay*'. A solution was put forward, which Mr. Saxton Noble seconded. This was agreed to without question or discussion. This was the final (main) topic on the agenda.

The chairman moved, and a resolution was put forward (which was seconded and agreed to) regarding the share dividend for the past year. There was then the re-election of directors and the re-appointment of auditors before Mr. W. Maxwell proposed a vote of thanks to the chairman, saying '*they felt certain that in the vice-chairman they had a valuable asset*'. The chairman, in replying, said '*he hoped they would all meet again next year, and that Sir Andrew Noble would be present, and that the prospects, which seemed good, would be realised*'.

The *Newcastle Daily Journal*, on the same day (8th May) again mentioned Falkner, when munitions and liquor and the problem of lost time were further discussed. The reporter was of the opinion that Mr. J.M. Falkner had dealt with these 'vexed questions' in a 'tactful manner'.

Possibly a new experience for Falkner was reported on, on Thursday 20th May, when His Majesty the King made a two-day visit to Tyneside. After arriving at Newcastle Central Station, the King and his party were transported variously by Royal train, motor car and the Tyne

Commissioner's yacht as they visited engineering and shipbuilding yards in and around Wallsend. At 12.05 the King and his party left Wallsend and made their way the short distance to the 'new yard' at Walker of Messrs. Armstrong, Whitworth and Company. *'There was much to engage the attention of the party'* and *'Mr. J.M. Falkner (vice chairman of the company) was present to receive the King'*. The following day, 21st May, the newspapers had many column inches telling of day two of the Royal visit, which began with an early morning inspection of the Elswick works and continued on to Scotswood where, on arrival, *'the party was met by Mr. Falkner, Mr. Saxton Noble and other directors'*. Earlier in the same article, *'Mr. Falkner, vice chairman of the Elswick Company'* was mentioned alongside Vice Admiral Sir Colin Keppel and staff, the Lord Lieutenant of the county, the Duke of Northumberland, the Lord Lieutenant of Durham County, the Earl of Durham, the Lord Mayor of Newcastle and many others. Falkner, it appears, spent most of the morning with the King and Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War who had accompanied the royal party. The rest of the day for the two VIPs was spent first on the Newcastle Town Moor with *'a great review of troops'*, then later *'visiting hospitals in the city where the wounded are being nursed'*.

The hoped-for attendance of Sir Andrew Noble at the company's 1916 AGM did not materialise. His death occurred in October 1915; Falkner was mentioned once in the obituary. The obituary article of 23rd October told of the time when Sir Andrew had occasion, in 1901, to *'save his own life'* and, *'the story was succinctly told by the then secretary of the company, Mr. J. Meade Falkner M.A. at a meeting of the Elswick Institute at which Sir Andrew had hoped to preside. Mr. Falkner explained that Sir Andrew had had a severe fall when out cycling and severed the main artery of his leg. With the use of a pocket handkerchief and the spanner of his bicycle he was enabled to make an improvised tourniquet and stopped the flow of blood'*.

North Country Notes column (*Newcastle Daily Journal*), 17th December 1915, included a few snippets about the new chairman of Messrs. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co. Another snippet in the same column, for 20th December, read *'A correspondent draws attention to the rather curious fact that both the new chairman of the Elswick firm, Mr. J.M. Falkner, and the secretary, Mr. A.H.J. Cochrane, have achieved some distinction with the pen. Mr Falkner, when he is not thinking of battleships,*

guns and shells, writes charming novels. Mr. Cochrane, similarly, turns out very neat, delightfully imaginative verse. Strange combinations, surely!

The 22nd December 1915 was an important day for Falkner. It was now the turn of the Minister of Munitions to visit Newcastle and with it the first official outing (that we know of) for the new chairman. This was a whistle-stop visit and there was only time in the late afternoon and evening for the minister to air his views and to *'urge upon local trade unions the imperative and immediate necessity for the dilution of labour to a far greater extent than is at present the case on Tyneside'*. The *Newcastle Daily Journal* reported that *'Mr. Lloyd George arrived a few minutes before four o'clock in the afternoon and was met on the platform by the Lord Mayor (Mr. George Lunn), Mr. J.M. Falkner, (chairman of Messrs. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co.)*. Together with local politicians (and other Government personnel) the party *'left immediately for the Elswick works'*. The report in the newspaper on 23rd December was a fairly short one as, despite Lloyd George holding a conference in Rutherford College that evening (with 900 in attendance) there is no mention of Falkner – but no mention of anyone else either, as *'the representatives of the press were not admitted'*. Mr. Lloyd George stayed overnight at the Mansion House as the guest of the Lord Mayor and travelled next day to Glasgow to confer with the Clyde workers.

It was almost seven weeks into the new year (16th February 1916) before Falkner's name occurs again in the press. The previous day the Newcastle and Gateshead Gas Company had held their AGM in the Board Room of their Grainger Street West offices. The attendance was described as 'large'; there was no involvement from Falkner during the meeting until towards



The offices of the Newcastle and Gateshead Gas Company c.1910 (right side, left picture) (2); pictured right are the offices of the Newcastle and Gateshead Water Company in 1898 (3).

the close when, in reply to a proposal from the chair regarding the payment of dividends, 'Mr. J.M. Falkner seconded, and it was agreed to'. Falkner, Alderman L.T. Penman and Colonel W.H. Ritson were then re-elected as directors.

Was Falkner becoming a 'utilities man'? On 22nd February 1916 the newspaper carried an account of the Seventy-First Annual Report of the Newcastle and Gateshead Water Company. The second last paragraph read as follows: '*Since the last annual meeting the directors have had to deplore the death of their late chairman, Sir Andrew Noble, Bart., who was director for 32 years, and who enjoyed the confidence and esteem of his colleagues and proprietors. Pursuant to the Act of Parliament, the directors have appointed Mr. John Meade Falkner, chairman of directors of Sir W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co., Ltd. to fill the vacancy thus created*'.



Northumberland War Hospital (4)



Banqueting Hall, Jesmond Dene (5)

'The theatre of the Northumberland War Hospital on Saturday night was crowded with wounded soldiers' (Newcastle Daily Journal, Monday, 13th March 1916). Strange as it might seem, they might have been pleased to be there, as they were soon to be the beneficiaries of gifts of X-ray apparatus and other items that were needed on the wards of the hospital. These gifts were funded by the Elswick Workmens' Relief fund and were '*handed over by Mr. J.M. Falkner, (chairman of the directors of Messrs. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co.) and were accepted on behalf of the hospital by Colonel Adams (officer in command)*'. More gifts followed, with the newspaper reporting that '*thanks to the generosity of Mr. Falkner, the soldiers were liberally supplied with tobacco and cigarettes, while each man also received a packet of chocolate*'. Falkner then gave a two-part speech: the first part telling of the origins and workings of other beneficiaries of the fund, and the second part on his current thoughts and feelings on the '*ennobling effects of the war*'. Colonel Adams' speech

included thank you's to the '*generosity of the Elswick workers*' and to the committee for '*all they had done*'. The speeches ended when '*a hearty vote of thanks was accorded to Mr. Falkner*'. (The John Meade Falkner Society Newsletter No. 44 covered this same story – with the second part of JMF's speech quoted in full.)

Eleven months and three weeks after Falkner had escorted Lord Kitchener around the Elswick and Scotswood works, he was now having to make his way through the doors of Newcastle Cathedral to join a large congregation for the latter's memorial service. The report in the newspaper for 14th June 1916 began with 'There have been many notable services held within the sacred precincts of Newcastle Cathedral, but few, if any, can be said to have surpassed that of yesterday from the point of view of impressiveness, or in regard to representative character'. In amongst a huge list of names of the great and the good was 'Mr. J.M. Falkner (chairman Armstrong, Whitworth and Co.)'.

The newspapers of 13th July 1916 reported on a visit to Newcastle of representatives of the Parliaments of the British Dominions of Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and Newfoundland. Shortly before 10 o'clock '*the visitors proceeded in motor cars to the Scotswood Works, where they were received by Mr. J. M. Falkner, chairman of Sir W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co. and other directors*'. The Colonials were then shown the Elswick Works and from there boarded the Tyne Commissioners' steamer to travel down the river for luncheon at the Armstrong Naval Yard, to be followed by an inspection of the new Walker shipyard. Other (rival) shipbuilding yards were visited on the south side of the Tyne before evening festivities commenced in the Banqueting Hall, Jesmond Dene. This time, according to the report, Falkner was in attendance and he heard an endless amount of speeches and toasts. After a short speech by Mr. Alfred John Hampson, MP (Australia), Falkner and Mr. C. Mure Ritchie responded.

The **North Country Notes** column reported that, on 4th August 1916, '*Mr. J.M. Falkner (chairman of the directors) presided yesterday at the ordinary general meeting of Armstrong, Whitworth and Co., Ltd*'. Elsewhere in the newspaper it stated that proceedings only lasted a few minutes before the meeting, which was only arranged to satisfy the Companies Act, was adjourned. Falkner's opening comments were '*that the meeting stand*

adjourned until such time that the accounts for the past year were ready for presentation' and that he 'did not think he need add anything to the motion'. He also felt that 'the shareholders would understand how it came about (as the firm) had a mass of intricate problems to deal with to satisfy two public authorities' (the Minister of Munitions and the Inland Revenue). Both of these required separate accounts and this was why 'the balance sheet was not ready for presentation'. Mr. John H.B. Noble seconded, and the resolution was agreed to.



JMF pictured front row, second right



JMF on the far right ("I.C." photo)

Pavilions for the Wounded was the headline to an article in one local newspaper on Monday, 25th September 1916. The 1st Northern General Hospital (Armstrong College) had, on Saturday, received the gift of two outdoor pavilions. One was the gift of James Knott in memory of his son, Major Leadbitter Knott, who had recently been killed in action. (In memory of two of his three sons who lost their lives in the war, the Sir James Knott Trust Fund was set up. It still exists today and currently makes annual payments of around £1 million to registered charities.) The other was the gift of the committee of the Elswick and Scotswood Workmen's War Relief Fund, Allies' Hospital Fund, and Soldiers' Comforts Fund. In front of a 'numerous gathering' the two pavilions were opened; the first by the Sheriff of Newcastle on behalf of Mr. Knott, the second by Falkner 'on behalf of the Workmen's Committee'. Tea was provided, Spencer's Steel Works Band was in attendance, and wounded soldiers were there to receive another distribution of cigarettes and tobacco. The above was the first newspaper picture of Falkner since his appointment as chairman.

Details of the twenty-first Report of Sir W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co. were published on 30th November 1916. Comments on large sums of money (balances in hand etc.), 'share dividends', 'excess profits duty', 'munitions levy', an 'increase in the amount to be written off in depreciation of plant and machinery', a 'tribute to all of the good work

done by those in the company's service', all came before some kind words of appreciation for their late chairman, Sir Andrew Noble. The report then followed with the words *'Mr. J.M. Falkner has been appointed chairman of the board'*. Musical chairs involving past, present, and future directors was the penultimate item before the company's auditors *'offered themselves for re-appointment'*; this ended the report.

The 15th December 1916 saw business matters continue with the *Newcastle Daily Journal* carrying the report on the 22nd ordinary general meeting of Armstrong, Whitworth and Company, Ltd, with the venue being the Elswick Mechanics' Institute. Falkner presided and, after dealing with the balance sheet, then made reference to Sir Andrew Noble's death, suggesting that, although they had been *'prepared for the end, it came at last as a shock (before saying) here seemed an irony in the time of his death – that a man who had spent all his life in preparation for war should fail at the beginning of the greatest war the world has ever known – that the man to whom the science of explosives owed more than to anyone else should die when the fate of Europe was to be decided by explosives'*. Other comments were made on various other ironies and coincidences involving the deaths of Lord Armstrong and Sir Andrew, before Falkner tackled a number of important items, which were:

Problems to be Faced: This subject brought comments on finance, manufacture, labour relations with the government, difficulties in completing a balance sheet, and depreciation in value of machinery. On this last point Falkner said *'we shall give constant attention as occasion arises'*.

Reply to Allegations: Falkner stated that *'the balance sheet was the best possible answer to allegations so often made against armament firms of exploiting the country's necessity'* and that *'such charges are easily made... sometimes they are merely ignorant'* and *'it is difficult to find time or opportunity to refute them'*, before finishing with *'our business is to put all energies into war, and to leave controversy till afterwards'*.

Foreign Work Set Aside: On this Falkner told of foreign and commercial work having been set aside to meet the country's requirements, with his most important points being *'our only customers are the British Government, patriotism forbids us to refuse orders except under exceptional circumstances'*.

Increased Output: The *'enormous increase in output...the abandonment of Sunday work...increase in industry...much room for improvement ...deplorable slackness (and)...things are better than they were'*, were a mixture of the chairman's comments, before predicting that *'it may be, also, that there is a growing realisation of the seriousness of the war. If it could be brought home to every individual how vitally this war affects the prospects of existence of every family in the nation, I cannot doubt that a more marked improvement would be shown'*.

Dilution of Labour: In this part of the meeting Falkner told of the gradual introduction of less skilled labour for highly skilled labour and of the *'substitution of woman-labour'* for man labour. He did, though, give *'very high praise indeed'* to the efforts of the women workers and finished by saying that *'we are doing all we can to improve the conditions of labour, both male and female, by the establishment of canteens and clubs. Welfare workers are devoting special attention to the women'*.

Changes to the Board of Directors came next, with confirmation required of several appointments. There followed comments on whether the country's armaments firms were being sufficiently recognised – in fact, the chairman could not help himself by saying *'they are, indeed, seldom noticed except for blame'*, but then, in a better mood, *'I should like to take this opportunity of offering special thanks to the staff. They have grappled with a bewildering expansion. They have worked early and late, Sundays and week-days, with entire self-sacrifice and cheerfulness'*. A vote of thanks to the chairman concluded the meeting.

Notes:

Image 1: Courtesy of the City Library, Newcastle upon Tyne (ref. 15247)

Image 2: Original postcard

Image 3: Courtesy of St. Croix Antiquarian Books, Minnesota, USA

Image 4: Courtesy of the City Library, Newcastle upon Tyne (ref. 063496)

Image 5: Courtesy of the City Library, Newcastle upon Tyne (Local Studies)

I.C. Photos: *Illustrated Chronicle Collection*, City Library, Newcastle upon Tyne

The arrival at Newcastle Central Station (see 21st April, 1915) can be viewed on the British Pathé website, by typing in the search box *'Asquith arrives in Newcastle'*. The tall (hatted) figure of Falkner appears 51 seconds in.

This is the first of a two part article. The second part will appear in the 2016 **Journal**.