

John Meade Falkner's Colleagues (1) Sir Philip Watts

Kenneth Warren's chapter – 'Secretary and Director' – in his biography of Meade Falkner rightly argues that to view the latter as *a man of culture who somehow drifted into the alien world of work...does less than justice to him*. (1) Falkner may not have been a businessman of the first rank but, as one of his obituary writers commented, *he rose to his high position...not by favouritism, but on his merits, and as a direct result of their recognition by the creator of the firm and his ablest successor*.

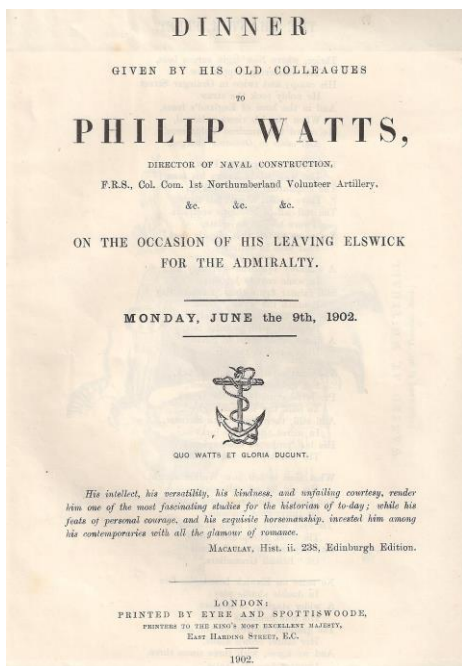
Falkner was not only chosen on occasions to conduct, often delicate, business negotiations but he was also a shrewd judge of other members of the firm. His dispassionate assessments proved invaluable when the Board was considering appointments and promotions. When the Admiralty requested that Philip Watts, head of Armstrong's naval shipbuilding, be transferred to become their Director of Naval Construction, Falkner was more sanguine than other colleagues. *We should all be sorry to lose him from personal motives*, he wrote, *he has foibles like everyone else, but is at heart the kindest and most genial of men*. Watts had been with Armstrong's since 1885 and was a popular colleague, even thought of as a possible replacement for Andrew Noble, the Chairman.

One would have to suspect Falkner of Machiavellian cunning to suggest anything other than concern for Watts' career, as the latter's departure had a direct effect on his own standing at Armstrong's. In the autumn of 1901 the Board, once it had agreed to Watts' move to the Admiralty, elected Falkner to the vacant spot this created in its membership. Falkner was to become one of the most important of the 'executive' directors, with Elswick as his main base, and a vital channel of communication with the 'absentee' directors, particularly Stuart Rendel.

Watts was born on 30th May, 1846 at Deptford in Kent, the son of a master shipwright, as had been both his grandfather

and great-grandfather (the latter being involved in the construction of *H.M.S. Victory*). He was educated at the Dockyard School in Portsmouth and was apprenticed in 1860 as a shipwright in the royal dockyard. By 1866 he was sent by the Admiralty to the Royal School of Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering at South Kensington, London. Leaving, with the title of Fellow, in April 1870, he returned to work at the Admiralty. He remained there, building up a reputation as a fine designer of ships, until his appointment to Armstrong's at Elswick as naval designer and general manager.

Watts' ships soon gained a reputation for their speed in relation to their displacement and for their extensive firepower. The Japanese battleships *Yashima* and **Hatsuse**, and the cruisers *Iwate*, *Idzumo*, *Tokiwa* and *Asama*, and the Italian cruiser *Piemonte*, were designed by his team. In the steadily deterioration of international relations of the turn of the century, it was no real surprise when the Admiralty asked him to return.



On Monday, 9th June 1902 Watts' friends and colleagues at Elswick gave him a royal sending off.

The Dinner was held at the Station Hotel in Newcastle and was a nine course affair.

Blanchaille au Citron was followed by *Selle d'Agneau à la Broche*, then *Bombe Créole*, *Laitances de Harang* and *Dessert*.

More interestingly, the huge Dinner Menu included this poem. It reads remarkably as if it was penned by Falkner, although it could have been by Cochrane, another gifted versifier.

THE PHANTOM FLEET.

Thrice, where Newbiggin surges beat,
The wondering tripper saw
His camp; and twice in Grainger Street
He nobly took the straw.
And in the hour of England's fears,
When war his views enlarged,
He raised two hundred Volunteers,
And costs to *Ordnance* charged.

From Buenos Ayres to Peru,
The wide world knows his fame;
The sulphurous echoes of Yalu
Have noised abroad his name.
The roll-call of his ships complete
'Twere tedious to relate,
Yet more to tell that ghostly fleet
That sails in estimate.

A shadowy squadron still they lag,
In some remote lagoon;
Still fainter floats their phantom flag
Beneath the waning moon.
The fleet the swarthy Spaniard
Proposed, with promise fair,
A dozen battle-ships to guard
His castles in the air.

The craft mysterious agents seek,
For unknown clients' need;
Protected cruisers for the Greek,
To balk the Russian's greed.
And still, their number to increase,
In secret anchorage lurks
His last projected masterpiece:
The warship for the Turks.

What need to tell how Walker sought
His aid for oil galleons;
For princely tankers, petrol fraught,
Or thirty-knot caissons?
'Tis over now; no more at noon
The clerk enraptured hears,
On telephonic wires, the tune
Of "British Grenadiers."

No more on Elswick boards *his* feet
In double shuffle play;
A wider staging, as is meet,
His rôle demands to-day.
The grateful mistress of the sea
Her laurel crown allots,
And we agree, with three times three,
Director Colonel Watts.



Also included in the splendid Menu was this (*Punch*-like?) line drawing of the noble Watts being dragged away by Britannia, prodded by Neptune.

Watts was soon to make his mark at the Admiralty; appointed director of naval construction at the time the *King Edward VII* class of battleships were in the making, he argued that they were not sufficiently powerful enough. Supported by the newly appointed First Sea Lord, Sir John Fisher, Watts proposed a new series of 'dreadnoughts', powered by steam turbines and boasting ten 12" guns. Sea trials on the first *Dreadnought* were held in 1906.



**Philip Watts, K.C.B.
Vanity Fair, 1910
Drawn by Spy**



Sir Philip Watts

Watts' designs for battle cruisers were equally important and, by the beginning of the Great War, nearly all those in service with the Royal Navy were from his design. In 1907 *Indomitable*, *Inflexible* and *Invincible* were launched, followed by the *Indefatigable* class in 1909. Watts also made major improvements to the designs of destroyers and light cruisers. At the Battle of Jutland in May 1916, 29 of the 34 British battleships and battle cruisers were of his design.

By 1914, Watts was a well-respected naval designer, who had become a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1900 and had been awarded the KCB in 1905. In 1912 he had taken a directorship at his old firm of Armstrong's. As early as August 1910, Falkner was writing to Stuart Rendel, *what would be your view as to Sir P. Watts being one of our nominees (on the Board at Beardsmore's, another shipbuilding enterprise) when (or if) he leaves the Admiralty. He would be a very useful man to look after our interests at the Dalmuir shipyard. But perhaps he is too good a man, and it might be dangerous to bring him into connection with them.*

Nothing happened on that occasion, but by September 1911, other directors (Stuart Rendel and his son-in-law Henry Gladstone), desperate for 'new blood' (2), were hoping to persuade Watts onto the main Board at Elswick as 'an able man' to support their attempts to improve an ailing company. By October it was agreed by the Board, including Falkner, that Watts should be established in Armstrong's London office.

When Falkner became Chairman of Armstrong's in November 1915, after Sir Andrew Noble's death the month before (Rendel had died in 1913), he was to lean heavily on the 'new men' who had been appointed in 1912. Watts' career experience and his recent links with the Admiralty were to prove invaluable throughout the Great War. Adjusting to peacetime circumstances was always going to be difficult and the Board were actively planning for them as early as 1916. Watts was reporting on negotiations to build liners, but the Armstrong Whitworth shipyards were to see their workforce plummet from 9,001 in November to 3,865 by May 1924.

Watts stayed on as a Director until his death from pneumonia on 15th March, 1926 at his home in Chelsea. By then Falkner – reduced to ‘a noble wreck of a once powerful man’ - had long since resigned as Chairman (in 1920). Falkner himself had coped with a variety of illnesses (real and imagined) and was enduring another bout of ill health in early 1926. As one of ‘two decrepit old fogies’ (the other was John Noble) he was recuperating in Bath when he heard of Watts’ death. Just over two months’ later he tendered his resignation as a Director of Armstrong’s.

Ethel Cochrane had ‘the real theory’ about Elswick, according to her husband Alfred in a letter to Falkner in 1926: *It was founded and developed by the great men of the past, with the single, though then unknown, destiny before it of saving the country in the Great War – as it undoubtedly did. All since then has been peddling and piffling – a desperate kicking against hopeless pricks.* The ailing Falkner and the recently-dead Watts may well have concurred.

- (1). Kenneth Warren – *John Meade Falkner 1858-1932: A Paradoxical Life* (The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995)
- (2). See Kenneth Warren’s excellent chapters on the Succession and Salaries crises in his *Armstrong’s of Elswick* (Macmillan, 1989) pp. 159-182