

The Cobra Trail

George Robson and Kenneth Hillier

Wilfred Cochrane, a private secretary within what by then was known as Vickers-Armstrong Ltd., wrote in his 1932 obituary of John Meade Falkner: *As a letter-writer he was without equal. A master of the English language he could give distinction to the most commonplace matter, and nothing that he wrote, whether letter or speech or lecture, but bore his inimitable stamp. In addition, until he became afflicted with writer's cramp, he had the most beautiful and unusual handwriting, and his letters apart from the contents were a pleasure to the eye.*

The many letters that JMF wrote to Lord Stuart Rendel, currently stored within the archives at the Newcastle Discovery Museum, are available for anyone to peruse and it must be doubted that any of those that do so would argue with Cochrane's assessment of these epistolary talents of JMF.

One letter in particular caught the eye of Society member George Robson because of its eye-catching beauty and, on study of the contents, both George and Kenneth Hillier were intrigued and determined to unravel what lay behind this section of the letter, which is dated November 10th 1901:

The day seems so ridiculously short that before one has begun it is time to go and that which one ought to have done is often performe left undone. To this I have had to add during the last week the writing of an article on Cobra. It's from a private telegram from one of the great monthlies asking for an article on Cobra just as I had finished reading your most excellent letter to Watts - and I felt that I could have no better text, particularly as I knew they would get someone else to write it if I shirked. I have had to read carefully over 5000 questions and answers in verbatim reports of inquest and court-marshal - also much of the evidence is conflicting and difficult to understand. It was to have been finished today, but the questions raised are so serious and exactitude is so necessary that though I have practically finished it I am writing tonight to the magazine to say it must wait a month.

It may misfire a little from being late - but it is better than to send an ill-considered or inexact production. I mention all this for two reasons - first to excuse my own delay in writing to you - secondly to show that your weighty words have not fallen altogether

on barren ground. I was much struck by the cogency of your Cobra reasoning - we are employing our own divers to make explorations but the weather of the last few days has been entirely against us and nothing has yet been done. The difficulty of an examination has been much increased by the ill-considered actions of the captain of 'Hearty' who towed the only part of the wreck that has been found into deep water. It is imperative that we spare no expense in reason to make a proper examination of the part that is found, and to find the other. Please treat what I have said as absolutely confidential - the article will be of course anonymous but will carry some weight from its position.

Seven weeks before this was written a dramatic headline had appeared in *The Newcastle Daily Chronicle*:

DISASTER AT SEA

H.M.S. COBRA SUNK

SERIOUS LOSS OF LIFE
FEARED

LOCAL MEN ABOARD

This headline and the JMF letter are linked and both refer to a dramatic story. H.M.S. *Cobra*, named after the cobra snake, was a steam turbine powered destroyer built speculatively by Armstrong Whitworth and which, following its launching on 28th June 1899, was purchased by the Royal Navy on 8th May 1900 for £70,000. She was 223 feet long, displaced 400 tons and was armed with one twelve-pounder gun, five six-pounder guns and two torpedo tubes. She was fitted with four funnels.



The *Cobra* undergoing trials

A chief engineer by the name of Percey was appointed and it was he who supervised a series of sea trials in the waters outside the mouth of the Tyne. Following the successful completion of these trials, the ship was reported to the Admiralty as ready for service and a navigating-party under Lieutenant Bosworth Smith arrived in Newcastle to take command of *Cobra* and take her round to Portsmouth.

Whilst the Admiralty provided the navigation - party for this maiden voyage, the stokers and engineers were supplied by Messrs C.A. Parsons and Co., the firm that had invented, developed and supplied the steam turbines (known in the engineering shops as 'Parson's hummers') that powered the ship. Also on board was a Mr Sandison who was a manager in Armstrong Whitworth's shipyard. This took the number on board to seventy-nine.

The Commander of *Cobra* received an order from Portsmouth that the ship should commence its voyage on Tuesday September 17th and with this came recommendations on the timings and the route the ship should adhere to. However this advice ended, 'you can go anywhere you like, as long as you do not risk anything, and take any time you like, as much time as you like, and I do not care how long you are coming down'.

The suggestion was for *Cobra* to leave the Tyne at daybreak and later anchor for the night. However, without explanation, *Cobra* delayed its departure and sailed from the Tyne at five o'clock in the evening and continued sailing throughout the night. During this night of 17th/18th there was a freshening breeze which caused some rolling and the engineers supplemented boilers numbers 1 and 2 with numbers 3 and 4. At around 7am on the 18th the watch on board the Outer Dowsing lightship off Cromer sighted *Cobra* about six miles distant. By then the ship had travelled 135 miles of its journey.

The Captain, in consultation with Chief Engineer Percey, wanted to learn of his exact position and to do this ordered the ship to approach the lightship. By ascertaining the identity of the lightship, each of which has distinguishing features, the position of the ship could be calculated. Within minutes of the Chief Engineer leaving the captain on the bridge a shock was felt throughout the

ship and *Cobra* foundered so quickly that none of the five lifeboats were got out. It was only that by chance a small dinghy had floated out that there were to be any survivors at all. Twelve men, which included Chief Engineer Percey, scrambled into the dinghy and managed to keep it afloat for eleven hours until they were picked up in the evening by the P. and O. cargo-boat *Harlington*.

There were these twelve survivors, but drowned were forty-four navy officers and men, twenty-two staff from the contractors and manager Sandison. The day after the disaster the press reported:

MESSAGE FROM THE KING

The Admiralty has received the following telegram, dated Fredensborg, Sept. 18th 11.59p.m. from His Majesty the King:

Have just received your telegram with the terribly sad news of loss of destroyer Cobra. Please express my deepest and most heartfelt sympathy with the relatives of all those on board in the grievous loss they have suffered. Send further details as soon as possible. I trust there may yet be more survivors.

--Edward R.

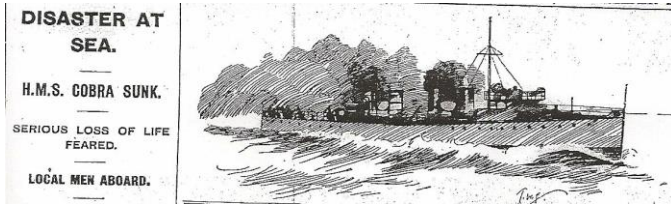
In the North-East, from where most of those on the ship hailed, lists of the lost and of the survivors appeared in the local press on September 20th. Taken at random from the list of the drowned:



William T. Orton of Newcastle, aged 23. He was in the navigation party, having only been taken into the employment of Armstrong's and designated to *Cobra* three days prior to the disaster. A single man, Orton was a Freemason and stalwart of Jesmond Baptist Church.

John W. Webb of Heaton, Newcastle, who leaves a wife of delicate health but no family. Aged 27, he was active within the Bainbridge Memorial Wesleyan Chapel where he was assistant superintendent of the Sunday School.

Also on the 20th a meeting of philanthropists was held in the Victoria Hotel at Heaton, Newcastle, when a committee was set up to oversee a public appeal to alleviate 'privation and suffering' amongst those families whose breadwinners had been lost on *Cobra*.



Newcastle Daily Chronicle, Friday, September 20, 1901

Over the following days other newspaper headlines included:

**THRILLING NARRATIVE BY SURVIVORS
 LOCAL MEN ON BOARD
 A GATESHEAD SURVIVOR'S STORY OF THE WRECK
 BODIES FOUND OFF GRIMSBY
 SCENE OF THE DISASTER
 SEARCH FOR SURVIVORS CONTINUES
 HOPE NOT YET ABANDONED
 COMMANDER DIES AT HIS POST**

This last headline from 'The Newcastle Daily Chronicle' continued with: *Lieutenant Bosworth-Smith, who was in command of the vessel, it is stated, died at his post like a gallant officer and gentleman. Having given the few instructions that were necessary, he stood on the bridge with folded arms and watched with unmoved mien the departure of the only link between himself and the world from which he was soon to be cruelly cut off. Onlookers who saw the last of him as the dinghy drew away declared that he hardly, to judge by his countenance, seemed to realise his fate.*

Little time was taken in holding an inquiry into the disaster. Grimsby Town Hall was the venue where on Friday 20th September the Deputy Coroner for the town opened proceedings. Although the jury indicated they were anxious to hear expert reports as to whether there were any defects in the *Cobra*, the Deputy Coroner persuaded the jury to spend this first day of the inquiry on the matter of identification of the bodies and hearing a report from the master of Yarmouth herring drifter no. 15, Captain John Smith. His had been the first ship to arrive on the scene after the sinking .



Grimsby Town Hall

The Captain's evidence, verified by the keeper of the Dowsing Lighthouse, included the fact that *Cobra* was seen to part in two, then both ends went up in the air, the ship then settled down stern first. It was clear that

the *Cobra*'s back had been broken both fore and aft.

This, and other evidence at the inquiry, was valuable to a court-martial which followed shortly afterwards. It was the custom of the Navy that the survivors of any royal vessel that had been lost are held responsible for that loss until it has been proved that they were not responsible. So in the October of 1901, on board HMS *Galatea* at Grimsby, Engineer Percey and the other survivors were tried by executive naval officers of high rank.

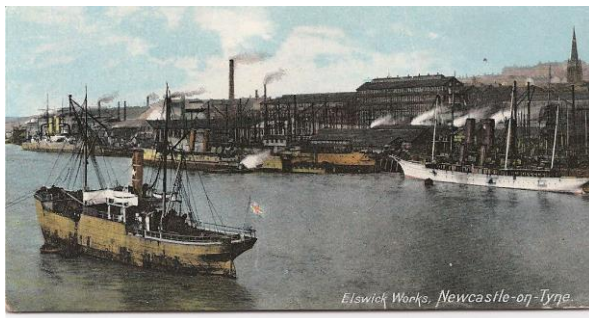
A suspicion was held by many that the loss of *Cobra* was due to structural weakness and not to dangers of the sea, and the court-martial endorsed this view. It found:

That His Majesty's ship 'Cobra' foundered on the morning of the 18th day of September 1901, while on passage from the Tyne to Portsmouth. The Court has come to the conclusion that His Majesty's ship 'Cobra' did not touch the ground, nor meet with any obstruction, nor was her loss attributable to any error of navigation, but was due to structural weakness of the ship. The court also find that the 'Cobra' was weaker than other destroyers, and in view of this fact it is to be regretted she was purchased into His Majesty's service.

The surviving officers were absolved of all blame.

But with blame pointing directly at the constructors of *Cobra*, these were dark days for Armstrong Whitworth. Its reputation was under serious threat. The company contested the court-martial's findings, pointing out that equivalent boats had been navigated to Australia and Japan without incident.

There are a number of references to *Cobra* in the minutes of both Management and Directors' meetings held during 1901. In the January, May and July Directors' meetings references were made to the progress towards completion of the vessel, and by a remarkable twist of fate the Directors met on the very morning of the disaster (September 18th 1901) and this appears in the minutes of that meeting:



Elswick Works from the Tyne

*HMS Cobra was docked on 30th July for final examination. The Admiralty survey of the vessel has since been completed and she leaves Elswick this morning for Portsmouth Dockyard.**

(* whoever reported this was clearly unaware that the sailing was to be delayed until 5 p.m.)

On 16th October the minutes of the Management Committee that met at Elswick state: *Cobra Fund: It was agreed to subscribe £1,000 for this fund. The full Management Committee met at the Openshaw Works on 30th October when It was resolved to inform the Mayor of Portsmouth that the company are contributing further to the funds (men and material) through Newcastle channels.*

And the final reference to *Cobra* is in the minutes of the Management Committee meeting held at Elswick on 13th November :

Cobra - *Mr Watts was authorized by the Committee to carry out diving and searching operations in connection with the wreck - at any expense he might consider reasonable.*

Following the announcement of the court-martial's findings, *'The Monthly Review'* wasted no time in inviting Armstrong Whitworth to submit an article on the whole affair. It fell to John Meade Falkner to take on this task, and it is to this that JMF refers in his November 19th letter.

Thus in a Spring 1902 edition of *'The Monthly Review'* an unattributed article, **The Loss of the *Cobra***, appeared. JMF first outlines the history and development of the torpedo boat - known initially as 'the torpedo-boat-catcher', later as 'the torpedo-gunboat' then finally from 1895 as 'the torpedo-boat-destroyer'. Then JMF traces the invention and development of the turbo-generator from its appearance powering the tiny *Turbinia* (1) to its adaptation for two torpedo naval ships - *HMS Viper* and *HMS Cobra*. He reports how the *Viper* was lost on 3rd August 1901 by hitting rocks off the Channel Islands without loss of life, and then that *Cobra* foundered on her maiden voyage off the Lincolnshire coast.

He exonerates the turbines from blame for the disasters by stating *This was the turbines' misfortune, not its fault; and it may clear the way for further discussion if we state at once that by no possibility could the loss of either vessel be attributed to the novel system of the engines.*

This stands as an example of such implications /suggestions/assertions peppered throughout the article by which JMF aims to exonerate Armstrong's to the unsuspecting reader.

After quoting the court-martial's findings, JMF tracks back to the composition of the court. He starts to sow seeds of doubt by stating that a court composed of high-ranking naval officers is *from the nature of things incompetent to deal with complicated questions of ship-construction* and he points out that the only expert evidence before the court was that of *the constructors of the ship and of the officers of the constructive department of the admiralty who had surveyed and passed the ship into the Service.* JMF cleverly points out that *neither of these two parties could be conceived to be altogether free from bias. Both had already endorsed Cobra's seaworthiness in the most practical way - one by building, the other by buying her.* He goes on to suggest that the atmosphere of courts-martial are *not always favourable to that freedom of speech which*

makes for the truth. The tradition of discipline, if not the fear of the consequences, tend to distort the evidence of lower ranks; and men do not care to jeopardise their chances in the Service by unnecessarily running counter to the opinion of their superior officers. To this is added that it was *in bad taste and offensive* to see the *heroic* member of the court cross-examining the only surviving officer with *more than a suspicion of browbeating*.

This section of JMF's article shows blatant attempts to persuade readers that the body that so condemns Armstrong's has next to no credibility.

After exploring the sea conditions and the state of the weather at the time of the sinking, JMF turns to the matter of shoals and the depth of the sea in the vicinity of the Dowsing Lighthouse. He points out that Admiralty charts show the depth of the waters at the shallowest point of the Outer Dowsing shoal to be eighteen feet, and as the ship met its fate shortly before high tide there would in all likelihood have been twenty-five feet in depth at the time. With the draft of *Cobra* being eight feet no doubt the court-martial felt safe in removing the possibility of the ship striking an obstruction.

But JMF then states *Theoretically it may have been quite safe for Cobra to beat about any shoal in the vicinity, but theory may be pushed to extreme, and the ordinary skipper gives such places as wide a berth as he can.* Next he questions the thoroughness of the methods used after the sinking to survey the sea bed for wrecks and shoals. The court-martial had heard the sea bed had been searched 'exhaustively' but JMF examines the methods used to do this and concludes with *Could any attempt at exhaustiveness be less convincing?*

Then it is the turn of the captain of *HMS Hearty* and an Admiralty diver sent down to survey the wreckage to feel the force of JMF. The captain of *HMS Hearty*, the first Royal Navy ship to appear on the scene, had judged the fore-part of *Cobra*, projecting out of the sea, to be a dangerous obstacle as it lay on a sea fairway. He thus used wire hawsers to drag the wreckage to deeper water. JMF calls this *a lamentable error* in that this fore-part was now at such a depth as to make it impossible for examining divers to remain down longer than twenty minutes. The one diver that had been sent down by the Admiralty had paid four visits to the wreck but on only

one of these occasions had visibility allowed anything to be seen. Having carefully read the diver's evidence, JMF comments *He was a foreigner, and his evidence, which seemed to be naturally vague, was rendered still more obscure by difficulties of interpretation. The evidence is vague and practically useless for any accurate purposes.*

JMF points out that prior to the ill-fated voyage *Cobra* had been taken on twelve separate sea trials off the Tyne, two held during severe weather, and no sign of straining had been reported by Chief Engineer Percey. JMF continues with *there is a strong impression that Cobra has been made a scapegoat, and that Cobra was neither weaker nor stronger than fifty other destroyers in His Majesty's service.*

The article then engages in an even stauncher defence of Armstrong Whitworth. JMF writes *That the judgement and practice of a firm with Armstrong's reputation should have to be unequivocally condemned is certainly regrettable; but that is nothing at all in comparison with the condemnation of Admiralty judgement and practice which the sentence involves. which the sentence involves.* He calls for *a properly qualified tribunal to be appointed which will command respect, and the country will accept nothing less.* The truth would then be uncovered *on better authority than the verdict of a casual Court-martial.*

In his November 10th letter, JMF acknowledges that he could have had *no better text* to guide him in his article than Rendel's *excellent letter to Watts*. So it seems Rendel deserves credit for his part in the 'Monthly Review' article. But alongside this JMF tells us he had himself given a deal of time and care in researching and crafting his article, an article which has cleverly running through it implications that the Court-martial members were protecting their own and which baldly concludes that JMF's firm has been made a scapegoat.

JMF's call for a *properly qualified tribunal* fell on deaf ears and it seems the loss of *Cobra* will for ever be put down to faults in its construction. However, Armstrong Whitworth moved on from the blow to its reputation to become immensely successful over the following decades, using ingenuity and entrepreneurial

problem-solving skills for engineering advancements. Showing faith in its methods of construction, in 1902 the firm built a third torpedo boat destroyer - '673' - for the Chilean navy, and in the same year expanded its manufacturing to cars and trucks. In 1913 an 'aerial department' was created. Then in 1927 the firm gained further strength by joining forces with Vickers Ltd. to become known as Vickers-Armstrong Ltd. As for 'Parsons' hummers', the first passenger-carrying ship driven by turbine engines, the *King Edward*, was launched within weeks of the loss of *Cobra* and the turbine system became commonplace in the years that followed.

With *HMS Serpent* lost in 1890 and both *HMS Viper* and *HMS Cobra* in 1901, the Admiralty scented a possible curse associated with its naming of vessels. It renamed *HMS Python* to *HMS Velox* in 1902 and forbade the naming of any future Royal Navy vessel after a snake. This order holds to this day.

To us in 2008 **COBRA** is recognised as an acronym that appears whenever there are civil emergencies such as floodings or foot and mouth outbreaks. It is a shortened form of Cabinet Office Briefing Room 'A'. To Society members, however, **COBRA** means that little bit more.....

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(1) Charles Algernon Parsons invented the steam turbine in 1884, and having foreseen its potential to power ships he set up the Marine Steam Turbine Company, based at Wallsend on Tyne. Under Parsons' direction, the Company built the small experimental vessel *Turbinia*, constructed of very light steel. As an audacious publicity stunt Parsons took the ship uninvited to the Diamond Jubilee naval review at Spithead in 1897. In front of the Prince and Princess of Wales and other dignitaries the little ship raced between two lines of large ships and easily evaded pursuing patrol boats. Angered but duly impressed, the Admiralty ordered two turbine powered torpedo boats - *HMS Viper* and *HMS Cobra*. Although both these vessels tragically came to grief in 1901, the first turbine powered battleship, *HMS Dreadnought*, was launched in 1906. All Royal Navy vessels were subsequently so powered until the all-gas turbine Type 42 appeared in 1971. The *Turbinia* can still be seen at the Discovery Museum in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the focal point of the £10.7m redevelopment programme of 2000.

NOTE: *Down Elswick Slipways : Armstrong's Ships and People 1884-1918* by Dick Keys and Ken Smith [Newcastle City Libraries, 1996] has an excellent chapter on "Loss of the *Cobra*" pp. 39-41