

100 Years Ago (2)

Ray Ion

The headline to a column in one of the two newspapers on 10th January, 1917 read: ***Elswick Institute***, to be followed by a secondary heading: ***Mr. J.M. Falkner and its Work***. With this being the first meeting of the committee of the Elswick Mechanics' Institute since the death of Sir Andrew Noble, an invitation was put out to, and accepted by, Falkner to succeed Sir Andrew and 'fill the *presedential* [sic] *chair*'. The article went on to tell of the history and of the work of the institute and the new chairman had many things to say. Unfortunately, though, the suspension of the evening classes was one of the things commented on before: '*The Institute, Mr. Falkner added, "must remain dormant until the war is finished – until we had won". "Victory", he declared, ..."was certain if we persevered and were true to ourselves"*'. Hopes were expressed by Mr. Falkner that the classes could be revived after the war was over...prizes were awarded to students...gifts were given to teachers in recognition of long service (and '*suitably acknowledged*') and an '*excellent programme of music was rendered*'.



This picture shows JMF rubbing shoulders with the King during the Royal visit to Armstrong's Low Walker shipbuilding yard (6)

Royalty visited Tyneside in June 1917, when their Majesties King George V and Queen Mary embarked on a two-day tour of the area. Saturday was the 'industrial' day and the royal party visited engineering works and shipbuilding yards on both banks of the Tyne. Walker was visited in the late morning and lunch was taken there with the directors of the Elswick firm. No newspaper report of the visit found space to mention the chairman of Sir. W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth & Co. Ltd., but on 19th June the following message to the firm was published in the *Newcastle Daily Journal*, the

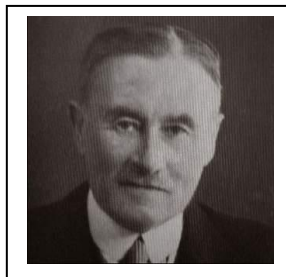
headline to the article reading: **The King Thanks**, and continued with 'In connection with the Royal visit to Messrs. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co's works at Walker, and to their Naval Equipment Yard, the chairman of the company (Mr. J. M. Falkner) has received the following: Royal Train, 16th June, 1917.

Dear Mr. Falkner, -

The King and Queen desire me to thank you and, through you, your colleagues and staff, for all the care and trouble bestowed in perfecting the arrangements for their visit and for so hospitably entertaining their Majesties and suite to luncheon. It is always a pleasing function to the King and Queen to renew their acquaintance with the various organisations and establishments of your well-known firm.

Yours very truly

Clive Wigram.



Clive Wigram (1873-1960)

On 26th February, 1918 the Newcastle and Gateshead Water Company held their annual meeting. On the next day, 27th February, there were a few lines in the report from the meeting in the *Illustrated Chronicle* newspaper, informing us that 'The retiring directors, Messrs. G.E. Henderson, John M. Falkner and Major J.R. Ritson were re-elected.'

During John Meade Falkner's time with the Elswick firm, he was – without knowing whether by choice or design – a great funeral goer. So, it comes as a surprise that this research has not produced one single funeral that had been attended by Falkner. A close shave did happen though when, on reporting on the funeral of Sir William Stephenson at the Elswick Cemetery, the newspaper of 11th May 1918 listed several names who were 'unavoidably absent' with 'Mr. J.M. Falkner' being one of those. (Sir William Stephenson was, at the time of his death, the chairman of the Newcastle and Gateshead Gas Co., with JMF holding a position of director.)

At noon yesterday (15th May 1918) – but as far as we are concerned, 16th May – the barometer outside Newcastle Town Hall showed £9,122 as the amount received towards the ‘Lest We Forget’ effort in aid of the Lord Mayor’s War Relief Fund. The newspaper article reports that the fund had just benefitted to the tune of £1,400 by the sale of tickets for a prize draw by employees of Messrs. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co., but one’s attention is drawn to the last sentence of the middle paragraph, which reads...’



The draw took place at the Elswick Institute, Mr. J.M. Falkner presiding.’ JMF’s fellow director Sir Percy Girouard made the draw, with ticket No. 30,683 being first out of the hat.

Sir Percy Girouard (1867-1932)

The very next day, 17th May, and under the headline **Armstrong, Whitworth and Company’s Gift of £1,000**, the newspaper was reporting that ‘*the Lord Mayor (Sir George Lunn) has received a letter from Mr. J.M. Falkner intimating that at their last Board meeting, Sir W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co. had agreed to make a grant of £1,000 towards the fund.*’ (Each day there was an update as to the progress of the fund for the “Lest We Forget Week” in Newcastle.)

Since this last date in May, a lengthy period passes with no further mention of JMF attending anything locally. He still had connections with various companies in the north east, the war (and Armstrong, Whitworth!) was very much in full swing during the summer before it all came to a climax in the November. With the victory came all manner of means of celebrations, marches, speeches and opportunities galore at this time for the chairman of the world’s largest munitions manufacturer to come out and have his say...it didn’t happen, however – or at least not when it should have done – and for whatever reason (ill health?) we will never know.

With the semi (press) drought of 1918 over, the 19th February 1919 saw Falkner’s name re-appear again in the newspapers. The Newcastle and Gateshead Gas Co. had held their annual meeting the previous day and towards the end of the meeting it was reported that ‘*the retiring directors,*

Mr. John Meade Falkner, Ald. Lancelot Tulip Penman and Lieut. Col. Wm. Henry Ritson, were re-elected.'

The next stop was the Elswick Mechanics' Institute. The building was the venue for a retirement presentation gift of a wallet of notes and an album of photographs to the retiring Hon. Sec. Mr. J.J. Mole. The *Illustrated Chronicle* reported on 8th April 1919 that *'the presentation was made by Mr. J.M. Falkner, chairman of Sir W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth & Co.'*

On 28th May 1919, the same newspaper printed an article on the launch at Walker of an oil tanker steamer. *'Interesting speculations as to the future of armaments...an insight into the manner in which Sir W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth & Co., Ltd, are preparing to carry on in times of peace'* began the article, before it then said *'were features of a speech delivered yesterday by Mr. J.M. Falkner, chairman of directors'*. The chairman went on to say that *'he hoped shipbuilding would take the place of other specialities which seemed to be leaving them...many people thought that war construction was leaving them permanently and that it would never come back again, but [he] thought it was too soon to prophesy'*, before continuing with...*'that peace would remain always undisturbed'*. He then went on to review the part played by the Elswick firm and other armament makers during the war, suggesting that now victory was gained there was *'a tendency to fling them aside like squeezed oranges. These firms had been called profiteers; nothing could be further from the fact.'* Now having to turn their attention to the production of civil material such as locomotives, marine engines, machinery, etc., he describes this as *'not letting the grass grow under our feet'*. The chairman ended his speech with his *'salesman's'* hat on, when saying *'as their war material was second to none in the world, so would they make their peace material second to none in the world'*. (This was, as it turned out, to be the first time that the local press had carried any sort of comment about the war by JMF since the war ended.

The war might have ended seven months previously, but JMF continued to attend presentation ceremonies connected to the Elswick and Scotswood Workers' War Relief Fund. Monday, 16th June came two days after another gift had been presented. The gift on this occasion was a complete cinematograph (value £350) to the Home for Crippled Children, Gosforth, with *'an interesting ceremony'* taking place on the Saturday evening. The

ceremony was preceded by tea for the children before *'the gift was formally handed over by Mr. J.M. Faulkner [sic], chairman of directors of Sir W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth & Co.'* In praising the workmen of Elswick and Scotswood, JMF said *'they had done splendidly in the way of collections for various funds during the war.'*

Short and sweet. Many words made up a newspaper article on 12th September 1919, but only a few of those are relevant here now – with those words being *'in the unavoidable absence of the chairman Mr. J.M. Falkner'*. The launch of the aircraft carrier *H.M.S. Hermes* at the Walker Naval Yard was the occasion when Falkner was an absentee, so Sir Glynn West (whose name appears again 15 months hence) *'presided in the absence of the chairman'*.

All through the Great War Messrs. Armstrong's were very busy building and flying aeroplanes from their factory on the Newcastle Town Moor – which was, incredibly, less than a mile from the city centre. This article continues by telling not of aeroplanes but of the construction of another form of transport: Steam Locomotives.



The front page of the *Illustrated Chronicle*, showing the launch of the steam locomotive at Scotswood. JMF was on the footplate when the engine breasted the tape (bottom centre), along with Sir George Hadcock (bottom left) and Sir Vincent Raven (bottom right). A well wrapped JMF in close-up. ("I.C. photo)

Snow was falling in Scotswood the day before 13th November, when *'the first main line locomotive produced at Scotswood works started upon her first run – a distance of a few yards, when she breasted and snapped a ribbon of red, white and blue amid the cheers of the onlookers.'* The ceremony took place shortly before 3 o'clock in the afternoon and, after *'the visitors had been conveyed by special train from Newcastle Central Station'* they were *'received at the works by Mr. J.M. Falkner chairman of the directors'*. Included among the guests were Sir Vincent Raven, chief mechanical engineer for the North-Eastern Railway Co. and also designer of the engine, and it was he who *'ascended the footplate and started her on her first run'*. The *Illustrated Chronicle* had a full front page showing pictures of the event, one of these being of the chairman who, it is fair to say – judging by this photograph – very much looking his age. A celebration banquet took place that night at the Station Hotel, Newcastle, where *'Mr. J.M. Falkner, Chairman of the Directors, presided'*. The banquet seems to have been quite a jovial affair: *'Bidding the guests welcome, Mr. Falkner said "it was not the first attempt at locomotive building that Messrs. Armstrong, Whitworth & Co. had made" and, reading from notes prepared by Mr. Alfred Cochrane, the firm's secretary, told of a previous attempt in 1848 when, "from an eccentric design, they had built one called, he believed, the Flying Dutchman", which he said, amid laughter, "had not flown very far nor for very long". A second attempt, many years afterwards, he said had "borne a painful resemblance to those of their earliest efforts".'* Falkner talked of having *high ambition* for being successful locomotive builders and received a round of applause when stating that Mr. McColl would be in charge of the railway department. Other speakers spoke, glasses were raised before *'Mr. H.W. Gresley, of the Great Northern Railway Company, thanked the chairman and the directors of Messrs. Armstrong, Whitworth's for their hospitality'*.

Only a few days after the excitement of the launch of the first steam locomotive from Scotswood, the Newcastle works of Messrs. Armstrong, Whitworth & Co., Ltd. played host to the Chilean Mission. The *Illustrated Chronicle* newspaper of 15th November 1919 tells of the visiting party being *'received by Mr. J.M. Falkner, chairman of Messrs. Armstrong, Whitworth and other directors.'* – Elswick and Scotswood in the morning, Walker Naval Yard and the Low Walker Shipyard (7) in the afternoon, were venues for the daytime activities. Then – and without any in-depth details about speeches or whatever this time – the report just said that *'the guests were*

entertained to a banquet at the Central Station Hotel in the evening when Mr. Falkner presided'.

Roseate Outlook for Future of Messrs. Armstrong and Whitworth's, read a secondary title to a newspaper article published on 24th November 1919. The article began with the words *'An optimistic survey of the future was made by Mr. J.M. Falkner, chairman of directors, who presided at the twenty-fifth ordinary general meeting of Messrs. Armstrong, Whitworth and Company, Ltd., held at the Mechanics' Institute, Elswick, on Saturday'*. The Chairman then, though, was soon in an apologetic mood. When he had last spoken to them he had said he *"expected they would be in a position to present a balance sheet within two to three months. With the Armistice, however, came a fresh series of difficulties so far as the Company's accounts and finance was concerned, chiefly connected with the cancelling of orders by the Ministry of Munitions and the Admiralty."* Undeterred, he said *"he should again be compelled to move the adjournment of the meeting until such time as the accounts could be completed and presented"*, and ended this opening session by asking them to understand that *"the position of the company is still abnormal and they must realise that it would be at least some months before it could revert to regular procedure of a public company"*. After this, positivity was now the theme, as, commenting on the share dividend, he was able to announce that *"they saw their way to maintain their present rate of dividend for 1919"*, and gave reasons for hoping that they would be able *"to maintain it for 1920 as well."* The good news continued with more reasons to be cheerful with, in Falkner's words, *"their new departments already delivering material and earning revenue...peace work was in full swing...their great shipyards at Walker were fully employed...many orders had been received for locomotives at adequate prices"* and, with all the new departments in full working order were *"prepared for an output nearly three times as great as their output was before the war."* To finish, *'the chairman then proposed "that the meeting stand adjourned until such time as the accounts for the year 1918 are ready for presentation"*, and, without argument *'it was agreed to'*. An extraordinary general meeting followed, which dealt with the increase in the capital of the Company and the creation of new Ordinary shares. The article ended *'On the proposal of the chairman, seconded by Sir Glynn West, the resolution was adopted.'*

Another 'string to Falkner's bow' was announced in the press on 12th March, 1920. The brief announcement read: *'Mr. J.M. Falkner, chairman of Sir W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co., Ltd., has consented to become president of the Elswick Works Orchestra'*.

The headline to a newspaper article on 3rd May, 1920 read **Quicker Trips to Norway**. The Bergen Steamship Co., would certainly be hoping so after witnessing the launch at Low Walker of the steel-screw passenger steamer, *Leda*, for their service between the Tyne and Norway. The Lady Mayoress of Newcastle christened the vessel and the paper reported that *'Mr. Falkner presided at the after-proceedings, when refreshments were served'*. He then *'proposed success to the Leda and the health of the Lady Mayoress'*, talked of the *'affinities'* between the *'Norwegian nation and ourselves'*, before declaring that *"the gallantry of the Norwegian mercantile marine during the war, and that it, like that of the British mercantile marine, had commanded the admiration of the world"*. The shipyard manager closed proceedings with the presentation of a silver cup to the Lady Mayoress.



A rare photograph. The launch ceremony of *Emerald*. JMF is left of centre, back row. Mrs. Evelyn Falkner is second lady from right in front row. ("I.C." photo)

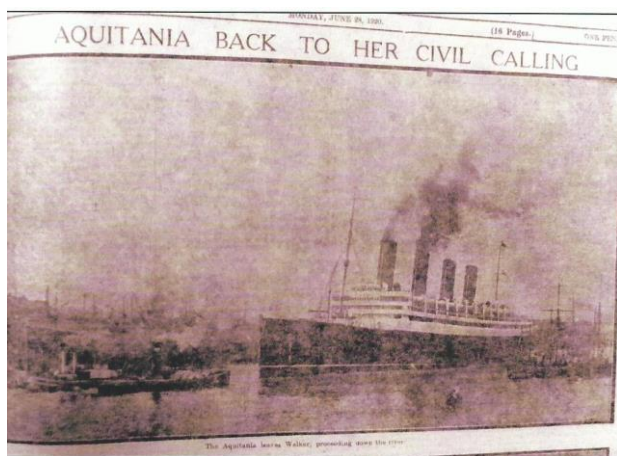
Still on the river, but upstream at the Walker Naval Yard, another launch took place on 20th May. The picture above was taken during the launch ceremony of what the newspaper thought might be the *'Launch of the Last Warship from Private Yard'*. The warship in question was the cruiser, *Emerald*, and she was christened by Lady Craig. A customary religious service was observed before *'light refreshments were afterwards served in*

one of the dining rooms' where 'Mr. Falkner presided' and proposed "success to the Emerald and the health of Lady Craig". He continued by talking of ships and names and other things and concluded by saying that he hoped "the Emerald would take her place among the stately vessels of the British Navy and the silent police of the world". He then 'presented Lady Craig with a diamond pendant as a souvenir of the occasion'. Could this have been the final presentation that John Meade Falkner made on behalf of the Elswick firm in his capacity as chairman? (Having a photograph of Mr. and Mrs. Falkner together is almost unheard of and, with this being the only newspaper one that we know of, it is unfortunate that it has been partly spoilt by the incorrect spelling of their name.)

The date overleaf was the only time that the Falkners were mentioned in the press as being in the company of each other. In the five and a half years that covered this research, Mrs. Falkner's name was to appear in the press on only two other occasions. Three weeks before a flag day (but to be known as Sailors' Day and was *'in aid of the children of naval officers who had lost their lives in the present war'*) was due to be held in the Newcastle district, there was notice in the *Newcastle Daily Journal* on 4th October 1916 stating *'the following ladies have promised their patronage'*. Amongst some fairly highfalutin names (which included the Lady Mayoress) and others (Rowell, Hunter, Mitchell, Dalgleish etc.) from local shipping businesses was *'Mrs. T. Meade Falkner'*. That was the first occasion; and the second was when a war food exhibition took place in the Naval War Depot, Market Place, Durham, on Saturday, 5th May 1917. This was reported on 7th May. The aim of the exhibition was *'to bring home to the public the value of certain substitutes, to supersede as far as possible the staple articles of food which are at present scarce and expensive'*. The same newspaper reported that *'Mrs. Meade Faulkner [sic]'* was one of the *'ladies of the city and district who contributed a variety of dainty and wholesome dishes showing how food may be cooked and handled so as to keep within the rations allowed by Government.'* Mrs. Hensley Henson and Mrs. A.E. Luxmoore were two of a number of other ladies present.

After her war work had finished, the Liverpool-built, Cunard owned *Aquitania* came to the Tyne and spent the next seven months at the High Walker yard of Sir W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth & Co, undergoing an extensive refit, which was to include being converted to oil-fired power, before resuming her place on the Cunard passenger service. She left the

Tyne at noon on Saturday, 26th June and sailed north – her eventual destination being the Gladstone Dock, Liverpool – a journey of some 800 miles. Before noon on Sunday, the Western Isles had been navigated and over half the journey had been completed. By now, the *Aquitania* was ‘*ploughing majestically on her way*’ down the west coast at an average speed of 18 knots; she dropped anchor off the Mersey twenty-four hours before readers of the *Illustrated Chronicle* were able to read the report of this trial trip. The report was published in the Tuesday morning newspaper of 29th June 1920. The Cunard Company had invited ‘*a large number of guests*’. The Lord Mayor of Newcastle and the Mayor of Southampton were the first two guests to be spoken of, followed immediately by ‘*Mr. J.M. Falkner (chairman)*’. Two of JMF’s Elswick colleagues who also made the trip with him were Sir George Murray and Mr. A.H.J. Cochrane. A very enjoyable time must have been had by all as ‘*From the time the Aquitania left the Tyne until she arrived in the Mersey the Cunard officials did all they possibly could to entertain the visitors and make them comfortable.*’ Saturday’s entertainments included sports on the afternoon and a smoking competition in the evening. The following day a swimming competition took place in the large covered-in bath and the evening time was taken up with a prize giving ceremony. For some, the ‘*see breezes*’ were enjoyed (with there being no mention of any scotch mist), as passengers obtained ‘*charming views of the rugged islands.*’



***Aquitania* leaving Walker. JMF was on board as she sailed down the Tyne en route to Liverpool. (“I.C. photo)**

Every luxurious part of the vessel had been renovated, such as the Palladian lounge, the staterooms, the Louis XV restaurant and the drawing room – and the library! It was a successful trial and the *Aquitania* returned to her passenger service duties on 17th July.

Meanwhile, the *Newcastle Daily Journal* on 12th July carried on their financial page a large advertisement giving notice of a new share issue. ‘*Ordinary shares*’, ‘*preference shares*’, ‘*share capital*’, ‘*debenture stock*’ were some of the words that came before a list showing the names of the directors of the company. Heading the list of directors was ‘*John Meade Falkner, Esq., Chairman*’. This would be the final time that this research would see (in print) those successive words.

Part 1 of this article, published in the July 2015 Journal, began with the words ‘*Over one hundred years have now passed...*’. On the 18th December 1920, ninety-five years ago, the *Illustrated Chronicle* announced the retirement of the chairman of the Elswick firm. Under the headline ***Elswick’s New Head***, the first paragraph read: ‘*An important change is announced in the chairmanship of the board of Sir W.G. Armstrong, Whitworth and Co., Ltd., of Newcastle. Sir Glynn Hamilton West succeeding Mr. J.M. Falkner, who, acting on medical advice, is resigning the position.*’ Further paragraphs dealt with the life of the new chairman (considerably more, in fact, than when it told of the new chairman in 1915), until the article closed by returning to Falkner with details of all that one knows about JMF’s life up to that point in 1920. Along with a list of the various honours that were bestowed upon him, it also said, with a lack of appreciation, ‘*Mr. Falkner has a reputation as an author*’.

‘*Mr. Falkner*’ was very much unappreciated in another sense. During all his working life in Newcastle, he either worked for, with, or was surrounded by ‘titled’ colleagues – some of the more well-known being Lord Armstrong, Sir Andrew Noble, Sir Percy Girouard, Sir Philip Watts, Lord Southborough, Sir Glynn Hamilton West, Sir Albert George Adcock, plus various members of the Rendel family. He was also in regular contact with others, such as the Duke of Northumberland, Sir Charles Parsons and Sir William Stephenson. In fact, the list is endless. Moreover, there would be many more who had been awarded ‘nothing more’ than one of the British Empire honours. Whilst researching for this article, one encountered – at various times in the year – the list of honours to be awarded by the King.

The *Illustrated Chronicle*, for example, on 31st March, 1920, published a double-page spread devoted to (and under the headline) '**Northerners honoured by the King for Services rendered during War Years**'. The two pages were made up with thumbnail pictures and details of the award to the fifty one 'northerners' who had been newly honoured. It is very strange that the chairman of one of the biggest manufacturing companies in the world during the war – and one that played a major part in winning the war on the ground, in the air and on the sea – should be overlooked in favour of other locals who had nothing like the responsibilities or pressures (or worries?) that JMF had. So what might the reason be and were there any clues in any of Falkner's speeches? JMF had hinted halfway into the war (see 15th December 1916) that the country's munitions and armament firms were not being appreciated in the way they should be, and there was also the 'allegations charge' that they had constantly to contend with. On another, later occasion, when reviewing the part played in the war by armament makers and the attitude towards them afterwards, he again expressed a feeling of lack of appreciation, when he likened the situation to being flung aside like squeezed oranges. This was in his speech after a launch at Walker (28th May, 1919). There might well be other reasons, there might not be – or, did he say all of the wrong things to the King and Queen over lunch at the Low Walker shipyard in June 1917?

Notes:

Image 6: Courtesy of Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums (TWCMS: E5778)

Note 7: During Meade Falkner's term as chairman of Messrs. Armstrong, Whitworth & Co., there were two shipbuilding yards under his command with 'Walker' in their title. The 'Low Walker' yard was purchased in 1882 from Charles Mitchell and merged with the Armstrong Company to become Sir William Armstrong, Mitchell & co., Ltd., and built non-naval ships. The Walker Naval Yard (sometimes referred to in articles as the 'New Yard at Walker' or the 'High Walker Shipyard') was opened in 1916, and built approximately 72 ships under the Armstrong Whitworth banner. There is less than a mile between the two shipyards on the Tyne, with Low Walker being downstream from the Naval Yard.

On the British Pathé website is the visit to the Walker shipbuilding yards by the King and Queen (see 19th June, 1917). The search words are 'King George & Queen Mary visit Tyneside'. 1min 10secs – 1min 16secs are all that it shows of JMF.

Content for the article was sourced from the *Newcastle Daily Journal* and from the *Illustrated Chronicle* (Local Studies, City Library, Newcastle upon Tyne).