

Ashville Cenotaph: **ROBERTS C C**

Ashville Memorial Hall: Charles Clifford Roberts, Royal Navy

Charles Clifford Roberts was born on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1897 in Hull, Yorkshire.

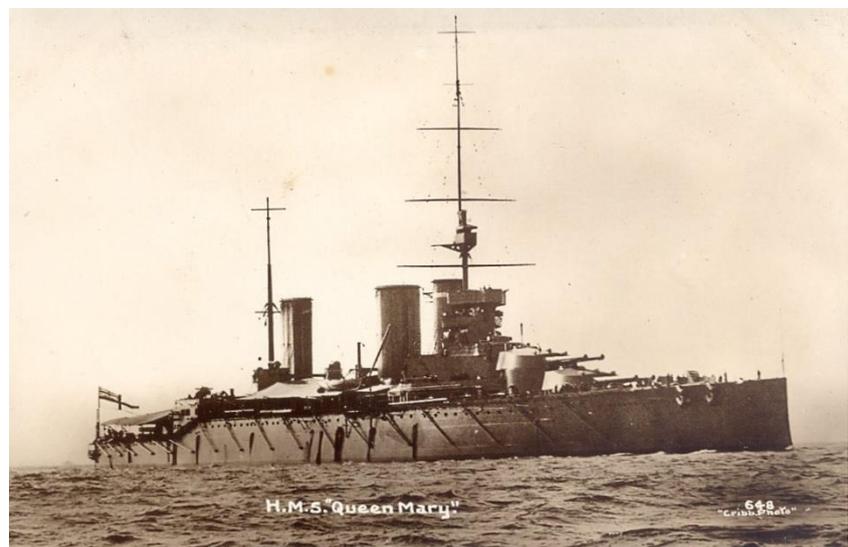
He came from a sea-faring family as census returns show his paternal grandfather was a “Master Mariner” and later a “Retired Sea Captain” and his father, Charles Rickinson Roberts, was also in the Merchant Navy.

The 1911 census shows Charles (13) and his younger sister, Betsy Isobel (5) living with their mother, Frances Ellen Roberts née Blenkarn, at 1 Hawthorn Cottages, Cardigan Road, Bridlington. Their father shows up on the census return for a lodging house in Barry Dock, South Wales, amongst the other boarders are a Scottish sea surgeon, a Norwegian sailor and an Austrian sailor.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1911 census return states Charles is at school and by July 1912 he appears to have joined the Royal Navy. So whenever, he attended Elmsfield College it could not have been for long. No connection with Primitive Methodism for the family is discernible from the available records.

Charles Royal Navy Service Record shows he signed on as a Boy Class II Rating on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1912 when he would have been 15 years and 3 months old. He was based at HMS Ganges, an on-shore training establishment at Shotley, near Ipswich, Suffolk. On 25<sup>th</sup> March 1913 he qualified as a Boy Class I, if he had not come up to the mark he would have been discharged from the Royal Navy. The following day he set sail on HMS Edgar, a cruiser launched in 1890, which was part of the Royal Navy Training Division operating out of Queenstown in Ireland. He served on Edgar for the next 4 months during which his conduct was noted as “Very Good” which in naval terminology of the time meant it was at least “Good”.

On 14<sup>th</sup> July 1914 he was assigned to the Battlecruiser HMS Queen Mary. HMS Queen Mary was launched just over two years before Charles joined her and was not fully commissioned until September 1913. She cost just over £2 million at the time which in today’s money would be about £235 million. She was the last major warship the UK built before the Great War and was the largest cruiser in the fleet in a class of her own. When Charles joined her she would just have returned from a visit to Russian waters.



HMS Queen Mary was involved in the first naval battle of the Great War, known as the Battle of Heligobight, which occurred on the 24<sup>th</sup> August 1914. Frustrated at the none appearance of the main German Fleet the Royal Navy decided to attack German patrols off the north-west coast of Germany. Light cruisers were used as the main attack force and the larger Battlecruisers, including HMS Queen Mary, stood in support ready for the main German Fleet if they decided to come out of harbour. Eventually several German ships were sunk but the main German Fleet never appeared and HMS Queen Mary did not have to act offensively or defensively.

The Queen Mary missed out on the Battle of Dogger Bank, 24<sup>th</sup> January 1915, as she was in port being refitted. On his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, 17<sup>th</sup> April 1915, Charles was made an Ordinary Seaman – as one of those

coming through the Boy Class II/Class I system this would have happened automatically. His height was recorded on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday as 5ft 2½in (average male height at the time was 5ft 5in). One has to wonder if he celebrated his birthday too energetically because, following his birthday, he spent “5 days [in] cells”. During 1915 he has two more sessions in the cells, of 14 and 10 days duration, and on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1915 his conduct was classed as “Fair”, which in the naval terminology of the time really means it was considered to be bad. In spite of a fourth visit to the cells, for 10 days, in February 1916, Charles was still on board when HMS Queen Mary became involved in the Battle of Jutland.

On 31<sup>st</sup> May 1916 the British finally came face to face with the German Fleet at the Battle of Jutland in the North Sea. Afterwards it was considered by the British to be a victory because the main German Fleet were never to leave harbour again. However, during the battle the British were to lose 14 ships, including HMS Queen Mary, against the German 11, so the Germans also claimed it as a victory.

At about 15:50 hours HMS Queen Mary opened fire on SMS Sleydlitz and half an hour later had delivered three direct hits but suffered two in return. Then the SMS Derrflinger, having lost sight of her original target in the smoke, turned her fire on HMS Queen Mary and almost immediately scored several direct hits, one of which detonated one of the forward ammunition magazines. The resulting explosions broke HMS Queen Mary in two and she rapidly sank. Only 20 crew members survived out of a total complement of 1,286. Today the Queen Mary, along with the other Jutland wrecks, has been declared a protected place under the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986 to discourage damage to the resting place of 1,266 officers and men.

By the time of Charles died his mother, Frances Ellen or “Nellie” as she was commonly known, had moved to south Wales and she and her husband were living in the village of Dinas Powys a few miles from Barry Dock. On 29<sup>th</sup> October 1917 Charles senior was Second Engineer on the SS Redesmere carrying coal from Barry Dock to Southampton when she was struck by a torpedo fired by German submarine UB40 just off St Catherine’s Point on the Isle of Wight. All 19 members of the crew were drowned.

Charles junior and senior are commemorated in several places but most poignantly together on the Dinas Powys War Memorial.

Besides the Memorials to be found at Ashville College, Harrogate Charles junior is also commemorated on the Royal Navy Memorial at Portsmouth.

Besides Dinas Powys his father is also commemorated on the Merchant Navy War Memorials at Tower Hill, London and Barry Dock. The latter was created in 1996 to commemorate those who sailed from Barry Dock and were killed in both World Wars.



At some time Nellie and her daughter, Betsy, appear to have moved north and back to Yorkshire. Sadly the premature death of Betsy aged 25 was recorded in the Bridlington district in 1930. I think Nellie may have remarried and still been alive at the time of the September 1939 Register but I am far from certain.