

SHIPBUILDERS TO THE WORLD

Introduction

The following is extracted and slightly edited from the book '*Shipbuilders to the World: 125 years of Harland and Wolff, Belfast 1861-1986*' by Michael Moss and John R. Hume published in 1986. The book was intended as a celebratory appraisal of the firm and as such focused mostly on the development of the shipyard. Although it was Edward Harland that began the firm, my interests are more familial than commercial and so the extracts below highlight the roles played by my great, great uncle Wolff and his uncle Gustav Schwabe.

Moss and Hume write:

During his apprenticeship Edward Harland had become friendly through his uncle, Dr. Thomas Harland, with Gustav Christian Schwabe. Thomas Harland had graduated in medicine from the University in Edinburgh in 1822 and had subsequently practiced in Salford. In 1842 he had married Mary Dugdale, niece of John Dugdale of Dovecot, a powerful Liverpool and Manchester merchant. Some years later Gustav Schwabe had married John Dugdale's daughter, Helen (right). Gustav had been born in Hamburg in 1813, the son of Philipp Benjamin Schwabe, a wealthy Jewish merchant. During June 1819, along with the rest of his family, Gustav was baptised into the Lutheran church (source Staats Archiv Hamburg). In the 1820s many members of the Jewish community in Hamburg established businesses in Britain where trading conditions were more liberal than in Germany. The Schwabe family participated in this trend. Salis Schwabe, Gustav's uncle, set up a calico printing business in Manchester and cousins M. M. and H. L Schwabe opened a merchant house with a branch in Glasgow. [NOTE: This statement is **not** supported by the facts. Salis Schwabe and Gustav are NOT related, nor is Gustav related to M. M. and H. L. Schwabe. [Above Helen Dugdale, G.C Schwabe's wife. NOTE: Salis Schwabe was **NOT** Gustav's uncle. The latter's family originated in Dessau while the former from Oldenburg outside Hamburg]]



During 1832 Gustav Schwabe's elder sister, Fanny Maria Schwabe, married another Hamburg Jewish merchant, Moritz Wolff. Like his father-in-law, Moritz Wolff was a respectable member of the Jewish community in Hamburg, friendly with the Jaffe,

Ellerman and Ballin families. Fanny and Moritz had two sons Gustav Willhelm, born in 1834, and George M. Otto born in 1840. [They in fact had 3 sons]

It is not known when Gustav Christian Schwabe went to Liverpool, in 1838 he was in partnership with Edward Little in a firm of commission agents. When Little died the following year, Schwabe seems to have acquired his house and business interests. Later on he became involved with the East Indies shipping firm of J. S. deWolf and Company, investing in their ships and learning the business of ship management in the Far Eastern and Australian trade. By the 1840's he had established the merchant house of Sykes Schwabe and Co. in partnership with Adam Sykes, Benjamin Rutter, and his father-in law John Dugdale of Dovecot (source:). In 1844 the firm was reported to be doing a very respectable business with Manila and Singapore and by 1849 its capital had reached 50,000 pounds. It seems to have been involved in the merchandising of calico goods, produced by Schwabe's uncle (Salis) [not so] and other Lancashire firms, and in importing raw cotton and silk. In 1856 the company sent out a silk-buyer to China. This import/export business had naturally led G.C. Schwabe to maintain and extend his shipping investments. During the 1840's he had become the junior partner in John Bibby and Sons, the Liverpool shipping concern established in 1805. The Bibby family quickly became friendly with Schwabe's Dugdale and Harland relatives.



During 1850 John Bibby [Left] and Sons began to switch from sailing ships to iron screw steamers. Edward Harland, through Gustav Schwabe, advised the company on the acquisition of the first screw steam vessel in which they held shares, *the Rattler*, built at Cork 1846. [...] G.C. Schwabe, knowing Edward Harland's interest in marine engineering and shipbuilding, arranged for him to be employed as a journeyman at the shipyard of J.G Thomson at Govan on the Upper Clyde. Some years later he left Thomson's and joined Hickson's shipyard in Belfast, no doubt encouraged by his friend, Gustav Schwabe.

During 1857, Edward Harland engaged Gustav Schwabe's nephew, Gustav Wilhelm Wolff, as a personal assistant. Wolff had left Hamburg in 1849, at the age of fourteen, for his uncle's home to attend Liverpool College. He had then been apprenticed for five years to the well-known Manchester engineering firm of Joseph Whitworth and Company. He had represented the company at the Paris Exhibition of 1855, before joining B. Goodfellow Limited of Hyde on the outskirts of Manchester as a draughtsman (source Herbert Jefferson). When he arrived in Belfast he was welcomed by a friend of his family from Hamburg Daniel Joseph Jaffe, who had come to Belfast to establish a linen mill.



[...] By this time Harland was anxious to open his own business. He was now an experienced shipbuilder and, through his family connections, could almost certainly draw on sufficient capital and orders to start a viable concern. Accordingly, late in 1857 Edward Harland, no doubt encouraged by Schwabe, applied to Liverpool Council for ground to open a yard at Garstang, but this application was rejected. Thwarted in these ambitions Harland encouraged Wolff to leave Belfast to gain further marine experience at sea, probably on board one of his uncle's steamers (Source Smiles).

In September 1858 Hickson offered his yard for sale to Harland which he accepted. Wolff was at once recalled from sea to take charge of the drawing office (source H and W archives). Harland's decision to accept the offer to buy Robert Hickson's shipyard was almost certainly taken on Schwabe's advice and promise of financial support, for immediately John Bibby and Sons placed an order for three, 1,500-gross-ton iron steamers. In 1859, their first full year in business, Harland and Wolff completed the *Bebington* and also the *Venetian*, the first of the Bibby boats.

On 11 April 1861 Edward Harland and Gustav Wilhelm Wolff entered into partnership for eight years. The deed of agreement of partnership contained twenty-one clauses including provisions for all eventualities:

Second - That the said Edward Harland and Gustav Wilhelm Wolff do now become and continue partners until January first 1869 in trade or business of building and repairing Ironships and Engines and doing all the work connected with said trade or otherwise which the partners may from time to time undertake.

Third - The business of the Partnership shall carry on as heretofore under the name of Edward James Harland until the said Gustav Wolff shall desire to have his name added when the style of partnership shall be changed to 'Harland and Wolff'.



Ninth - That the said Edward Harland shall be at liberty to draw out of the partnership funds in each year the sum of seven hundred pounds sterling and the said Gustav Wilhelm Wolff the sum of five hundred pounds sterling for their private use respectively and in addition to the annual sum of five hundred pounds the said Gustav Wilhelm Wolff may in the event of his being married or of his requiring a house draw out of the

partnership funds the sum of eight hundred pounds.

Thirteenth - That each partner shall devote his entire time to the business of the partnership and neither of the partners shall without the consent of the other being obtained in writing act as trustee, executor, assignee or agent for any person or become the security or guarantee for any person or persons for any purpose whatsoever.



Despite its details, the agreement gave no indication of how Edward Harland and Gustav Wolff planned to share the workload of the business. From later evidence it is almost certain that Harland was to be the practical shipbuilder and spokesman for the firm, whereas Wolff was to provide engineering skill and manage the yard with the help of William Houston, in his partner's absences on visits to owners. In addition

he was to place at the disposal of the firm the financial expertise and resources of his wealthy family. The capital of the partnership was to be 2,416 pounds of which Harland was to subscribe 1,916 and Wolff 500. This was a tiny Capital for a new concern with such large commitments. So as to cover the balance of the purchase price of two yards owned by Hickson and the cost of the new plant, the partners has been generously lent money by Gustav Schwabe and his sister Fanny [Schwabe], Wolff's mother. It is likely that these loans amounted to 12,000. They were to be repaid with interest out of the profits of the new firm. However, neither G.C. Schwabe nor Fanny Wolff was entitled to a share in the net profit or loss of the business. [Pictured above and below Broughton Hall home of G. C. Schwabe. This claim needs to be confirmed]

James Bibby and James Dugdale, a relation of the family into which the Harlands and Schwabes had married, were appointed as arbiters in the event of any dispute between the partners. In 1867 the firm became known as Harland and Wolff. In 1868 work on a ship order placed by the British Admiralty resulted in a loss of almost 5,000 which, when added to other losses, came to almost 16,000 by years end. The result may have been worse had not G.C. Schwabe again come to the rescue by securing a purchaser for ship no 44



which the partners had completed at their own expense. During the year a young Liverpool shipowner Thomas Henry Ismay acquired with Schwabe's help, the bankrupt White Star line. Ismay need new tonnage and Schwabe arranged for him to take ship no 44 which was named Broughton (after Schwabe's Liverpool home, Broughton Hall) on the understanding that, through Harland and Wolff, Schwabe would provide a quarter of the finance. [Picture below is of Fanny Wolff. G. C. Schwabe's sister]

Early in 1869 the partners again found themselves with a vessel on their hands, ship no 60, Lady Cairns, which had been built at a cost of almost 17,000 pounds. Unable to find a buyer, they decided to own and operate this sailing vessel themselves. This was an isolated set back. In the spring succour came again from Schwabe with an order for three 400-foot vessels from John Bibby and Sons. The first of these ships, the Bavarian, was completed before the end of the year,



bringing a return of 8,553 pounds on a price of 51,663. This more than covered the loss of the Lady Cairns and lifted the business strongly back to profitability in the second half of the year. By the time the accounts had been made up, the partners had concluded a momentous agreement, with Schwabe's help. During the autumn he had put an ambitious proposal to them for the formation of a new shipping line to compete with the Cunard and Inman lines on the North Atlantic. After the American Civil War there was a rapid development of the Atlantic trade routes, based on expanding commerce and on massive emigration from Europe. Tradition has it that the project for the new line originated over an after-dinner game of billiards at Schwabe's home. He is reported to have suggested to his opponent, Thomas Ismay, that if H and W built the ships for the new concern he would mobilise the finances. Ismay, a director of the Liverpool-based National Line since its formation in 1864, was no stranger to North Atlantic shipping and quickly agreed to relinquish his Australian business. Accordingly in 1869 the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company was registered to acquire the White Star line with the public intention of improving its Australian service. The new line was to be managed by Thomas Ismay, and his partner, through their firm Ismay and Imray (source Oldham *'The Ismay Line'* Journal of Commerce of Liverpool 1961).

During the summer of 1874 it was decided to reconstruct the partnership to embrace Walter H. Wilson, the yard manager and William J. Pirrie. In the absence of evidence it is only possible to guess at the motive of H and W. Undoubtedly the largest consideration in their minds was the disposal in 1863 of the Bibby fleet to one of its partners, Frederick Leyland, and Schwabe's withdrawal from the business. Although Leyland had become a close friend of both Harland and Wolff since 1858, his commitments to his commercial supporters would prevent him from ordering any new vessels for some time. This uncertainty coincided with a desire by both Harland and Wolff to pursue other interests which would take them away from the yard. Wolff, for instance, was becoming increasingly more interested in the affairs of the ropeworks (the largest in the world at the time). ...



The success of the firm was due in large measure to the confidence of Gustav Christian Schwabe and his partners, John S. Bibby and Thomas Ismay, in the ability of Harland and Wolff to design and construct new, technically advanced tonnage, which would prove commercially viable. H and W had more than justified this faith. They had shown themselves to be remarkably effective partners. Their talents and personalities were complementary. Wolff's good humour and wit were an excellent foil to Harland's fastidiousness. They had both become enthusiastic Ulstermen and admirers of Belfast. Wolff lived at Strandton, calling his house 'The Den', and despite his German accent, he felt sufficiently at home to pen:

*You may talk of your Edinburgh and the beauties of Perth,
And all the large cities famed on earth,
But give me my house, though it may be a garret,
In the pleasant surroundings of Ballymacarrett.*

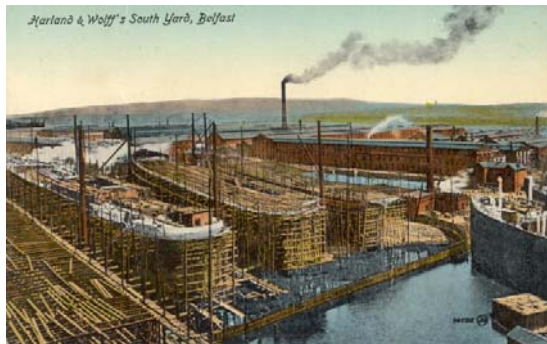
POSTSCRIPT Additional material from the N. Ireland Public Records Office.

Gustav Wolff, who founded the shipyard with Edward Harland in 1861, and was also Chairman of the Belfast Ropework Co, gave substantial donations to the poor of East Belfast. This was extracted from the book 'Viscount Pirrie' by Jefferson (see also separate longer extract)

He lived at the other end of Palmerston Road from Smiles, at *The Den*, at the junction with Station Road. He never lost his German accent, but became exceptionally fond of East Belfast.

Gustav Wolff was born 1834 in Hamburg, son of Moritz Wolff and Fanny Schwabe. Came to England to learn the trade. He was made Harland's partner in 1862 (p.54). In 1892 became Conservative Member of Parliament for East Belfast - was unopposed at 5 subsequent elections (p.55). Retired from Parliament in 1910 (p.56). He was given the Freedom of the City of Belfast as result of his interest in its welfare "and his noble benefactions to her charitable institutions" (p.56), 1911.

Wolff liked East Belfast, and lived at The Den, Station Road, Belfast (p.59). Laconic and good humoured. When asked to make a speech on board a trial trip for a steamer, he said: "Sir Edward Harland builds the ships for our firm; Mr. Pirrie makes the speeches, and as for me I smoke cigars for the firm" - and promptly sat down (p.59). Kind-hearted, charitable, a good friend - also an able financier and fully qualified engineer (p.60).



Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) ref: D3437/B/3B

The East Belfast electors held a meeting (perhaps 1892) to select a new MP. The meeting was held at Onnswater (i.e probably the Ropeworks factory), and consisted of many Ropeworks' employees.

The Chairman of the meeting, James McNaught, said "that the meeting was convened for the purpose of testing the feelings of the working men on the question of the future representation of East Belfast. They knew

that Mr. Wolff and his partner, Sir Edward Harland, had been the making of that district. 36 years ago Ballymacarrett was a wilderness; now it was a large and populous district of the city, inhabited by industrious, loyal and contented people, and this great change had been brought about by the enterprise of Mr. Wolff and his partner".

Wolff was a charitable man who, six years earlier, had given a substantial donation to a fund for the relief of the poor and distressed in the district.

An additional speaker said that Wolff was a friend of the working man, benevolent and charitable, and "no place hunter".

Obituary in Belfast News Letter (probably 18 April 1913)

Had died at London residence: 42 Park Street. He had been suffering from a serious internal complaint for some time. Characterised by perseverance and determination. Left Germany at age of 14 to study engineering at Liverpool College. First apprenticed to Joseph Whitworth & Co, Manchester (tools and machinery) - selected to represent them at the Paris Exhibition, 1855. Then employed as draughtsman at Goodfellow & Co in Hyde (Manchester). Then came to Belfast, becoming assistant to Harland at Hickson's yard:

"Mr. Wolff's practical experience and shrewd common sense were an immense asset to the firm (of H&W), and in the promotion of its interests he never spared himself".

Also founded Belfast Ropework Co in mid-1870s. Member of Belfast Harbour Board from 1887 to 1893. Very modest, but upright and kind. Made a Freeman of Belfast on 20 April 1911. Main hobbies were shooting and fishing. Buried at Brompton Cemetery in London.
