

A QUIET SEA  
RMS TITANIC



SECOND OFFICER LIGHTOLLER

## TITANIC'S SECOND OFFICER



Charles Herbert Lightoller  
Credit: Wikipedia

Charles H. Lightoller was born in Lancashire, England, in 1874 to a family that operated cotton mills. Lightoller never knew his mother; she died from scarlet fever when he was born. His father emigrated to New Zealand when Lightoller was 10, leaving him in the care of relatives.

### SEAFARING CAREER

When Lightoller turned 14, he signed aboard the big, three skysail yarder Primrose Hill. Like other young apprentices, he was given the highest and lightest sails to set and furl. His first trip introduced him to the difficulties of handling a big square rigger. He later wrote, "Fourteen years of age found me beating down the channel in the teeth of a Westerly gale. My first voyage, horribly seasick—and sick of the sea. That seemingly objectless and eternal beat from side to side of the Channel, driving along with every stitch she would stand, trying to make to the westward." He also wrote of colliding with the "father of all icebergs" while rounding Cape Horn. Primrose Hill sprang some hull plates and took on water, but the crew kept ahead of it, and the ship reached her destination.



Bark Primrose Hill  
Credit: State Library South Australia

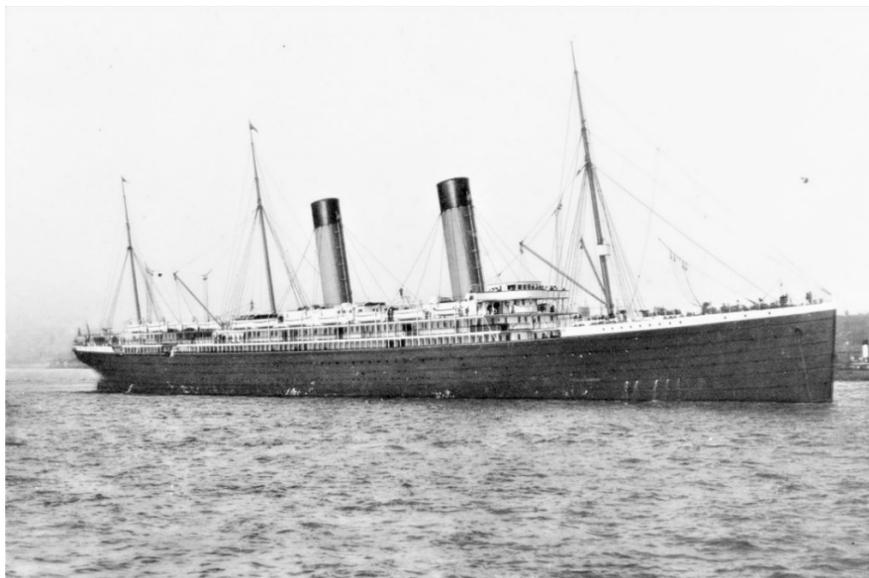
At 16, Lightoller signed on the bark Holt Hill. After nearly capsizing, enduring an outbreak of smallpox, and losing men overboard, Holt Hill was shipwrecked in the Indian Ocean. Some of the crew managed to swim ashore and were rescued and taken to Australia. Lightoller's next ship, Knight of St. Michael, caught fire, but the crew fought the blaze and the ship survived.



Bark Knight of St. Michael  
Credit: Scottish Built ships

By age 21, accustomed to the life, he was reluctant to leave windjammers and had a degree of contempt for powered vessels. He went into steam anyway, writing, "...in place of the monotonous clank and bang of machinery, I sadly missed the feel of something living under my feet." However, he appreciated the creature comforts and other advantages of being a "steamboat sailor."

Dogged by misfortune, or adventure, Lightoller nearly died from malaria in West Africa and gave up life at sea. He mined gold in the Yukon, became a wrangler in Canada and did odd jobs to survive. Penniless, he hoboed east, finally returning home on a cattle ship. He resumed seafaring, however, earning his Master's certificate in 1899 and joining White Star Line in 1900. It was on RMS Majestic where he met Captain Edward. J. Smith, who later commanded Titanic. Promotions led to positions as Third Mate on RMS Oceanic, flagship of White Star, and First Mate on Majestic. He then rejoined Oceanic, earning his Extra Master's certificate in 1901. At about this time, he became a Christian Scientist, trusting that divine principle would eliminate fear and ensure survival under any circumstances.



RMS Oceanic  
Credit: Wikipedia

## TITANIC'S MAIDEN VOYAGE

Lightoller received orders in early 1912 to report to RMS Titanic by the third week in March as First Officer. He was much taken with his new ship. He tested the watertight doors and was responsible for navigation instruments and firearms. During her last days in Belfast, the crew prepared Titanic for a series of tests and inspections by the Board of Trade. Lifeboats, lifebelts, watertight closures, equipment inventory and a vital test to determine the ship's stability—all these and more were part of the seaworthiness certification process. Once all was ready, Titanic left for sea trials on April 2, then proceeded to Southampton to begin her maiden voyage. Captain Smith reorganized the officers and installed Henry Wilde as Chief Officer, demoting William Murdoch from Chief to First and Lightoller from First to Second; the acting Second Officer, David Blair, left the ship. Titanic departed Southampton for New York on April 10.



Lightoller (L) and First Officer Murdoch (R) at Queenstown, Ireland  
Credit: Pinterest

Lightoller had the 6-10pm watch on the evening of April 14. Conditions since departing Belfast had been ideal and on this evening were especially calm. He gave his watch mates orders to keep a sharp eye out for low-lying ice floes, monitor the temperature and check that the ship's fresh water supply didn't freeze. About 9pm, Lightoller had a lengthy conversation with Captain Smith regarding the unusually calm conditions and the difficulty seeing icebergs in such a flat sea. As testified by Lightoller, Smith left his night orders, "If it becomes at all doubtful let me know at once; I will be just inside." Relieved by Murdoch at 10pm, the two men reviewed watch items before Lightoller departed to do his rounds of the ship and retire to his cabin. While nodding off to sleep, he felt Titanic give a slight shudder. Going on deck, he saw Captain Smith and Murdoch peering into the night. He suspected something was wrong but was off watch so returned to his cabin, where he could be found if needed. When Fourth Officer Boxhall entered Lightoller's cabin, informing him of the collision, Lightoller dressed.

With Titanic stopped, the full head of steam had to be vented up the steam pipes. The deafening roar made it difficult for Lightoller and his men to communicate, but the order was, women and children only. When the evacuation began, there were few women and children willing to go, and Lightoller lowered the boats partially loaded. Despite the lifeboats being load tested and passed, he erroneously believed that fully loaded boats would buckle, or that davits would collapse.

Thinking Titanic in no danger, he sent six men down to open a gangway door in the ship's side; he thought it would be safer to load passengers with the boats afloat. The door was opened, but the men never returned.

It is doubtful that this would have been approved by the ship's designer, Thomas Andrews, who was closing any openings he could find. Once the sea reached the open gangway door, the rate of sinking accelerated. Passengers asked if the situation was serious, but even at this stage, Lightoller replied no. Chief Officer Wilde began handing out revolvers to maintain order in case men rushed the boats. Lightoller brandished his unloaded pistol to get a number of men out of a lifeboat. Ordered by the Chief Officer to man a boat, Lightoller refused. As the sea approached the boat deck, he and others attempted to slide one of the boats, stowed on the deckhouse roof, to the boat deck. The oars collapsed, and the boat landed upside down on the deck.

Although nearly all the boats were launched, Lightoller was taken aback by the number of people remaining on board. With the ship rapidly sinking, he jumped into the sea. The below-freezing water felt like "a thousand knives driven into one's body." He jettisoned his heavy revolver, as it dragged him down. Lightoller saw the lookout station on the foremast, now level with the water, and blindly swam toward it as a place of safety. Snapping out of this delusion, he tried to swim clear of the ship but was drawn back into a ventilator. Pinned against the grating as the water poured in, he was blown clear by a blast of hot air from far below. Gasping for breath, he came up alongside the overturned boat he and others had earlier tried to launch. As he clung to the lifeboat, Titanic's forward funnel collapsed into the sea, washing the lifeboat clear. He watched as the Titanic sank, the lights remaining bright, then flashing out as the ship plunged and began her descent. Lightoller found himself on the overturned lifeboat with a number of other men. Precariously balanced, he had them stand in two rows and shift their weight to keep the boat level. Some slipped away into the sea, but 23 were rescued when two other lifeboats came alongside. Eventually making their way to the rescue ship Carpathia, Lightoller was said to be the last survivor taken on board.



Collapsible B  
Credit: Signature Theater

As the senior surviving officer, Lightoller's testimony at the British and American hearings was given a great deal of weight. He and the surviving crew hoped to return to England immediately after their arrival in New York, not only to go home but to avoid the American Senate's inquiry. Instead, they were sent to Washington and given rooms in a poor boarding house. Appalled by the Senate's lack of maritime knowledge, Lightoller had a contentious relationship with the presiding officer, Senator William Smith (R-MI). Lightoller considered the inquiry a farce and an

insult to himself and his men. Returning home as a hero, he did much better at the British inquiry. Lightoller blamed the unusually calm conditions and the lack of surf around icebergs, making them difficult to see in time to avoid collision. He defended White Star, Managing Director Bruce Ismay and the British Board of Trade. Although defending his employer, he was stung by the lack of thanks from White Star and felt like a martyr. However, his recommendations for lifeboat drills were incorporated into the Board of Trade's new safety rules.

Lightoller returned to duty with White Star aboard RMS Oceanic. He and the ship were pressed into service in World War I until Oceanic ran aground just after the outbreak of war. He was the last to leave the ship.



Oceanic aground and lost (painting)  
Credit: Scottish Shipwrecks

He continued his Naval service as captain of a torpedo boat and engaged in battle with a German zeppelin. He was assigned as captain of HMS Falcon, a destroyer on patrol to intercept German warships. Falcon was sunk in collision while escorting a convoy, but Lightoller was exonerated and commended for staying on board to evacuate his crew.



HMS Falcon  
Credit: Wikipedia

With his next command, HMS Garry, he engaged and sank the UB-110, a submarine pursuing the convoy. Lightoller was accused of killing German survivors in the water and allegedly ceasing fire only when other ships in the convoy approached. He was reported by the German captain to

German legal authorities. The accusations never went anywhere, as it was British practice not to try military personnel for alleged war crimes.



HMS Garry  
Credit: World Naval

Discharged from naval service, Lightoller hoped to return to the White Star Line. However, like other officers who survived Titanic, he was marked by the disaster and passed over for promotion. He resigned from White Star in 1920 and became an innkeeper, chicken farmer and land speculator. He wrote, "Titanic and Other Ships," which was successful until the Marconi company threatened to sue because of criticism of the wireless operators, and the book was withdrawn. He purchased a small yacht, Sundowner, and, while evading German bombers, evacuated 127 British soldiers from Dunkirk in 1940.



Sundowner (preserved)  
Credit: National Historic Ships UK

After the war, Lightoller managed a boat shop. In 1952, he was contacted by an American company making a film of the Titanic. In declining health, and afraid to fly, he turned down the offer. He died later that year and was cremated, his ashes scattered in the Garden of Remembrance in southwest London. At the end of his life, Lightoller credited his survival to his Christian Science faith.

Sources: British and American Wreck Inquiries; A Night to Remember by Walter Lord; Crew of the Titanic by Gunter Babler; Titanic Officers; Titanic and Other Ships by Charles Lightoller; Christian Science Sentinel, October 1912.