

The Hospital Ship *Maine* -South Africa, China and a Peterborough Connection – By Simon Wilson

Sometimes research takes on a life of its own. That is exactly what happened when I started researching a medallion commemorating the Boer War Hospital Ship *Maine*. First, I made some notes relating to the ship. Later, searching newspapers for something else, I found an article in the *Peterborough and Hunts Standard* of 29 December 1900 – *A Peterborough Man Aboard a Hospital Ship* -,detailing the experiences of the Purser of the Hospital Ship *Maine* – W G Whyman, the son of J B Whyman of Tyne House, St Paul's Rd, New England. This gave me extra detail for my *Maine* research and provided a Peterborough link.



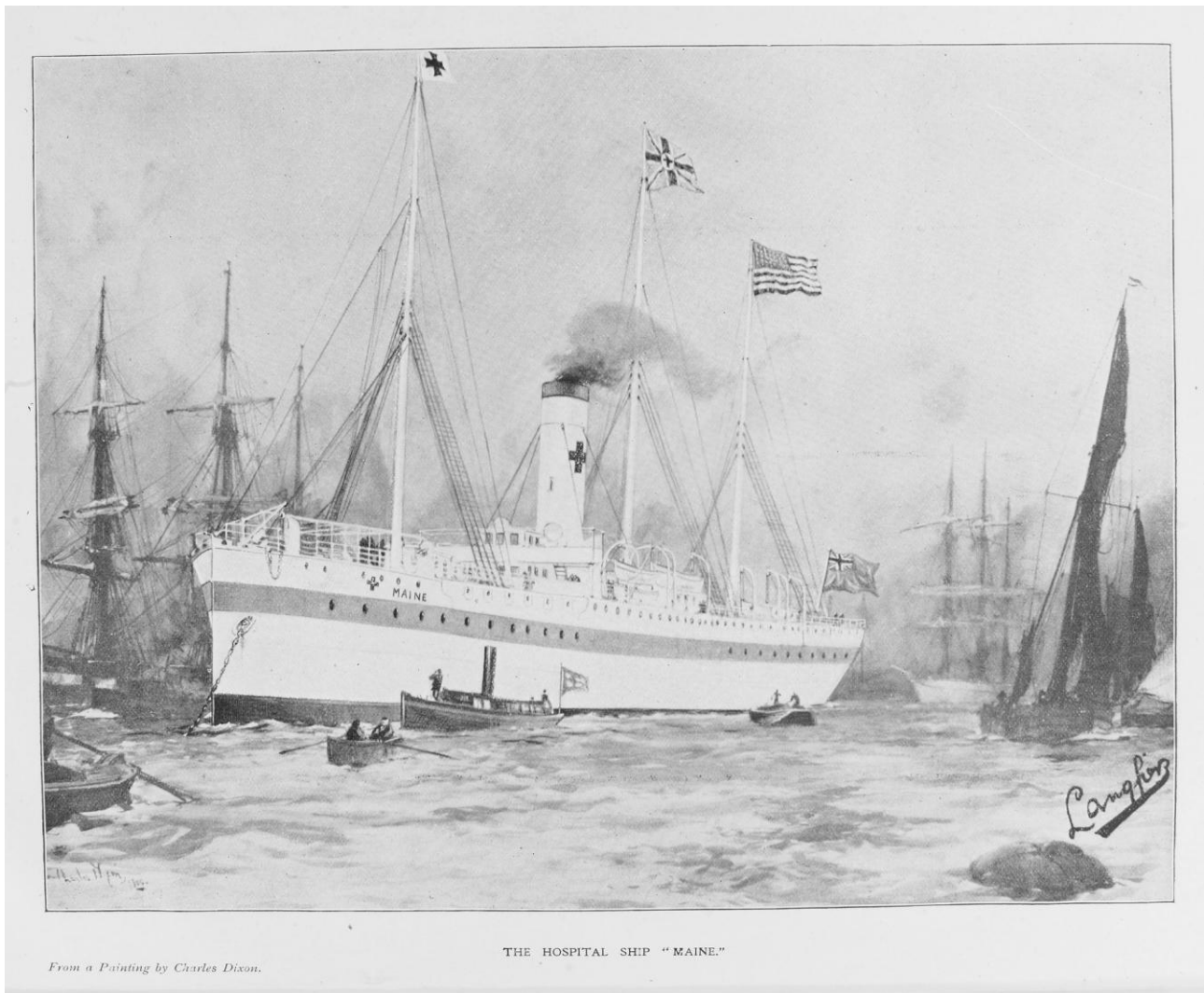
Medallion commemorating the Boer War Hospital Ship *Maine*

When the Boer War broke out in October 1899, an American woman living in London, Mrs Jennie Blow, conceived the idea of providing a hospital ship for the use of wounded troops. She and two other Americans living in Britain, Jennie Churchill (more formally known as Lady Randolph Churchill) and Fanny Ronalds, formed the American Ladies Hospital Ship Fund and set about finding a ship and raising the funds to convert it for medical use.

Bernard N Baker, Baltimore based owner of the Atlantic Transport Line, had meanwhile offered to lend a ship to the British Government, who were glad to let the American ladies run it. The *SS Maine* was a mixed passenger and cattle transport ship, with open decks suitable for conversion to hospital wards. The committee accepted gifts of goods from British companies, but refused financial gifts, looking to Americans to raise the money to convert the ship. They were an interesting group of women, and their lives would make a good story on its own. That, however, is a project for another time.

At that time there was quite a community of American women in the UK, some with their American husbands and a number who came over, like Jennie Churchill, to marry a British title, and the group seems to have been very effective at raising funds. On completion, the ship was worked by a British crew, paid for by the Atlantic Transport Line, and staffed with American medical personnel.

The Duke of Connaught, the third son of Queen Victoria, made a speech as the *Maine* set off for South Africa on 23 December 1899. The Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes were hoisted together on a ship for the first time in history as the band of the Scots Guards played the respective national anthems and the Red Cross flag was raised on the third mast. It was symbolic, at the time, of the rebuilding of good relations between Britain and the USA which had been poor in the years after the Civil War, as the British had favoured the Confederacy.



The Hospital Ship *Maine*

The welcome, when they called at Las Palmas, was rather cool, as the Spanish authorities did not want them to land. Memories of the Spanish-American War of 1898 were still fresh in Spanish minds. The majority of the voyage passed pleasantly, with concerts in the evenings and services on Sundays. Cape Town was reached on 21 January and the ship had several visitors, including Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener. They sailed for Durban on 25 January and ran into a cyclone where, the purser writes, they were "nearly drowned by the rain, then blown to a standstill by the wind, and finally bombarded by hailstones". The whole storm lasted about 15 minutes and did little damage. Total losses were a few awnings, some ventilators and 10 feet of rail.

They arrived in Durban on 29 January 1900 and on 30 January Jennie Churchill was visited by her son Winston, fresh from his famous escape from Boer captivity. After preparing the ship, they held an open day, with hundreds of visitors and the first intake of 150 patients was on 5^t February, with 25 men and 10 officers sent later. One of the later admissions was Jack Churchill, Winston's younger brother, which must have been upsetting for his mother. He was serving in the South African Light Horse when he was shot in the leg on 12 February during the Battle of Tugela Heights, trying to lift the siege of Ladysmith. They left Durban on 17 March with 170 patients and, after finding Cape Town harbour to be busy, watered at St Helena, where they were able to visit the grave of Napoleon.

One of the RAMC men died while they were visiting Madiera and was buried with full military honours.



The rest of the trip was uneventful. On arrival they swiftly disembarked the patients and refilled with stores for a second voyage. They had no passengers on that voyage, which only went as far as Cape Town, where they embarked more patients and immediately returned to the UK.

There, they were ordered for China to offer medical care to troops wounded in the Boxer Rebellion— not a popular move, as it involved being away much longer. They sailed on 12th June and proceeded via Port Said, the Suez Canal, Ceylon and Hong Kong.

They embarked sick and wounded British and American troops from the Taku Forts and conveyed them to Japan. Around 700 men were treated aboard *Maine*, of which only five died, a matter of some satisfaction, as the doctors always asked for the worst cases. There was a crew of 70 and the medical staff consisted of ten doctors (four Americans and six from the RAMC) ten American nurses and orderlies and fourteen members of the St John Ambulance Brigade, including several Northamptonshire men.

Lady Randolph Churchill and her wounded son Jack

At the end of war *Maine* was donated to the British Government and entered Royal Navy service on 29 June 1901, as hospital ship to the Mediterranean Fleet. Passing to the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) on its formation in 1905, *Maine* took part in the Fleet Review for the Coronation of 1911 before being lost in fog in the early hours of 17 June 1914, when she ran aground on the Isle of Mull. A survey showed that, given the age of the ship, it was unlikely to be economic to recover and repair her so she was sold for scrap.

Two more hospital ships would bear the name *Maine*. One was not a success, being sold after a couple of years. The third served in WW1 as the *Panama*, then was renamed *Maine*, serving through WW2 as the oldest hospital ship in the war. There is a Peterborough link to the third ship too – Mr John Swallow of Orton Longueville served in the RFA from 1938, being torpedoed on the *Empress of Britain* and serving, amongst other postings, on the *Maine*. (*Peterborough Standard* 22 January 1954).



Wounded officers on board *Maine* in Durban Harbour