

Hamble's Historical Novelist and a Titanic Tale

2nd April 2015 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

Ann Victoria Roberts, who has written a number of books, gave the Society a talk about her work as an historical novelist. She became an author after she found a First World War soldier's diary in her grandmother's attic and this led to her first two bestselling novels. Ann used her latest book "The Master's Tale", which is based on the life of Captain Smith, master of the ill-fated liner Titanic, to show how she approaches her work.

She was inspired to write this novel when her husband Peter, a sea going tanker captain and pilot, discovered entries about Captain Smith in a Southampton Dockmaster's logbook. This led her to writing the story of the Titanic in the Captain's own words.

Old documents such as the logbook often give extra information and cast a different light on the traditional accounts of what happened. This logbook showed Captain Smith had brought the Titanic's sister ship, the Olympic, into Southampton from New York just 11 days before he departed from the same port on Titanic's maiden voyage. In between he went to Belfast to undertake sea trials on the Titanic, before bringing her to Southampton.

Ann said that books can be fictional but based on reality. Facts can provide a skeleton around which fiction can be drawn. A novelist can add thoughts and feelings leading to actions and consequences. What was it like to be there at that time, particularly for the captain? Who was Captain Smith and how did one of the most experienced and highest paid sea captains come to be associated with disaster?

She then described his early years and how his career developed. At this time sea captains were responsible for everything, even the crew when ashore and provisioning the ship. In his later life, Captain Smith lived in Winn Road Southampton and Ann described several events prior to Titanic's maiden voyage which may have had an influence on the final tragedy.

In 1911 the Olympic on her fifth voyage was rammed off the Bramble Bank in the Solent by a naval warship, HMS Hawk. Major damage was sustained but the watertight bulkheads held so there was no major disaster. The owners sued the Royal Navy and lost, but no blame was apportioned to Captain Smith. He had a good reputation and people liked him, including his passengers, officers and crew.

If not for many delays, that last voyage could have been a different story. The Titanic might not have sailed on that fateful date. During the winter Captain Smith had been pushing himself undertaking many important voyages in difficult circumstances, such as bad weather and a shortage of coal. Also Olympic and Titanic, although sister ships, were not identical and operational difficulties were discovered after hitting the iceberg.

"The Master's Tale" tells the story in the voice of Captain Smith, a restless spirit trapped in a place beyond time, constantly repeating his voyage and seeking the moment when it all went wrong. The book opens with him leaving his home to join the new ship.

Ann hoped her book would shed a different light on the man, not the poor one perceived today. A fascinating talk and presentation all facts, no fiction!

For information about Ann's books visit her website

www.annvictoriaroberts.co.uk