

EVAN ARTHUR LEIGH of Yewbarrow, Grange-over-Sands.

LUSITANIA DISASTER CENTENARY

7TH May 1915 - 7th May 2015

Evan Arthur Leigh was born in Manchester in 1850 and was educated at Mill Hill Public School in north-west London (where he is listed as a distinguished Old Boy). After his education he joined in partnership with his father in the engineering firm of Evan Leigh & Co with premises in Manchester, Liverpool and Boston, Massachusetts.

Evan spent his working life travelling across the Atlantic on a regular basis to oversee the Boston branch of the family firm. In 1883 he married a lady from Birkenhead ten years younger than himself and from then on Margaret accompanied him on his journeys. They purchased a property in Wollaston, a beachfront neighbourhood eight miles outside Boston as their American residence. Evan always travelled with the Cunard Line transatlantic service from Liverpool and always travelled First Class.

The Leighs moved to Grange from Manchester in 1910 purchasing Yewbarrow Hall, which later became known as Yewbarrow Lodge. At that time Grange only had nine residences with a telephone line, and the telephone number at Yewbarrow Hall was Grange 30. The Leighs thoroughly participated in Grange life becoming regular members of St Paul's congregation. They allowed their home and gardens to be used regularly for church functions and fund-raisers. Margaret, in particular, was very fond of flowers and sent flowers from her gardens to decorate St Paul's as well as giving monetary donations. Evan became President of Grange Cricket Club soon after his arrival, however, in 1913 because of lack of support, the club's finances were not successful enough to warrant continuing with a further lease on the ground, so the club was disbanded.

In March 1912 the Leighs took their annual visit to Boston, travelling on the RMS *Lusitania* with Capt. Turner. They arrived in New York on the 15th March and checked in to the Belmont Hotel in New York City before travelling on to Boston.

It was during this time that Margaret Leigh became very seriously ill and Evan had an anxious voyage home with her in a critical condition. Once back in Yewbarrow Hall, Margaret's health did not improve and she remained an invalid, unable to go out or to see anyone beyond her own household.

On the night of 14th April 1912, the White Star Line RMS *Titanic* en-route from Southampton to New York, struck an iceberg and sank with the loss of over 1500 lives.

The publicity regarding the inadequate number of lifeboats aboard the *Titanic*, even though they exceeded the number required by the Board of Trade specifications, resulted in the rules being changed so that every passenger liner was equipped with enough lifeboats to seat every person on board.

Evan Leigh, who had been travelling regularly on passenger liners for most of his life, was instrumental in ensuring that a local branch of the Royal National Lifeboat Institute was established in Grange which it was in 1914 and Evan Arthur Leigh became its first President.

With Margaret in seclusion at Yewbarrow Hall, Evan travelled to the States alone in 1913, aboard the RMS *Campania* and again in 1914 on the *Lusitania* with Capt. Turner. In 1915, during wartime, he crossed in the SS *Tuscania* arriving on the 22nd March 1915 and stayed at the La Plaza Hotel, Boston, as by now the Wollaston property had been sold.

It is not surprising that Evan decided to book his return passage home on the *Lusitania* with his old friend Captain Turner.



The late Mr. Evan A. Leigh.

He reserved a first-class en-suite room, No. B109 on the promenade deck. His ticket was No. 6347 and he was allocated a personal steward, Mr. Thomas Dawes, (who also did not survive the sinking).

It is unlikely that Evan was particularly perturbed by the German Government warning printed in the local newspapers that allied shipping was liable to destruction. He had already made one wartime crossing and it was common knowledge that the speed of the *Lusitania* made it impossible for any U-boat to catch them.

Evan's last moments are unrecorded. The torpedo struck at 2.10 pm after lunch followed by a second explosion. His cabin and the first-class dining room were not in the vicinity of the explosions.

Hopefully, he would not have been among the poor souls trapped in the elevators when the electricity failed. Although there had been enough lifeboats for all passengers, the severe listing of the ship prevented most of them from being launched. The *Lusitania* sunk within eighteen minutes.

Survivors' accounts inform us that Alfred Vanderbilt and other men from First Class were up on deck busy strapping lifejackets on to infants when the ship went down. It is quite possible, even likely, that Evan would have been among those men, helping the weakest in their hour of need regardless of his own personal danger.

In January 1918 Margaret Leigh presented St Paul's with the memorial brass commemorating her late husband. In response, the Rev. Vickars-Gaskell said that Mr Leigh's sad death was a great loss to Grange, and not least to St Paul's, of which he was a staunch and liberal supporter and it was an honour to have this memorial to him in our church. The brass was originally sited by the font but is now situated on the South wall next to the bookshelves. Four months later on the 22nd May 1918 Margaret Leigh passed away quietly aged 57 and was laid to rest in her family vault at Birkenshaw, near Bradford. Evan Arthur Leigh's body was never recovered.



On 7th May 2015 at 12.30 pm a Lusitania Centenary service was held for the 1,195 lives lost in the disaster in Liverpool Parish Church, Church Street, Liverpool. An exhibition about the Lusitania and her sinking was held in Grange Library from the 1st – 20th May 2015.

Frances Limbrey
June 2015.