

The following account of Gustav Wolff is given by H. Jefferson in his book: '*Viscount Pirrie of Belfast*' published by Mullan in 1948.



Gustav Wilhelm Wolff was born on 10th November 1834, in the prosperous city of Hamburg, the third largest city in Germany and most important commercial port in Europe, son of Moritz Wolff, Merchant, and Fanny Schwabe. As was to be expected his native city had considerable magnetism for the boy to interest himself in shipping or marine engineering. He decided, with his father's advice, to be an engineer, and like many of the well-to-do German youths, in those days especially, he crossed to England at 14 years of age to acquire training in his career. Most of his school days had been at home, but he spent one year, 1849 till 1850, or more, in the Middle school of Liverpool College, Liverpool. a first class school founded in 1840.

On leaving school in 1850 he was apprenticed to Joseph Whitworth & Company, a Manchester firm of wide and favourable reputation, engaged in making tools and machinery. While he was just 21 he was selected by the firm to represent it in the year 1855 at an Exhibition in Paris. Later he joined the staff of Goodfellow & Company of Hyde as a draughtsman. His next move brought him to Belfast to occupy a similar position with Robert Hickson & Company at their Queen's Island Shipbuilding Yard. Sir Edward Harland made Wolff his partner in the year 1862. He had considerable ability as an Engineer in addition to which he imported capital to the young firm; he was a diligent worker. fully occupying his time, and his keenness for success was of the highest value in the firm's early day's, when competition was so strenuous. In the commencing years Harland & Wolff might just as possibly have been a failure instead of a colossal success.

It was through Wolff's uncle, G. C. Schwabe, that Harland initially became interested in him, and that relationship was the means of introducing a most valuable customer to the firm, for the uncle was a partner in the shipowning company of Mr. J. J. Bibby, Liverpool. It was a stroke of good fortune that the firm remained in Belfast, for the City Council (the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board was not then in charge) of Liverpool was not agreeable to afford land on the Mersey side to the young men; youth and inexperience being assigned as one of the main refusal reasons. In that effort they had the support and encouragement of Mr. J.T. Bibby, and so Belfast benefited.

When Wolff was 58 years of age - many would applaud him in giving younger men a chance not a general attitude - he decided he would ease off from his close devotion to work in the Yard. He accordingly felt that the most attractive, easy, and sedentary manner of utilising his time, would be to become a member of Parliament in London. So he at once entered the field as a Conservative Candidate for the vacant seat in East

Belfast, a side of the city where the tens of thousands of his workmen mainly resided. His opponent was Sir William Charley, member of an old Belfast family. Mr. Wolff turned out to be the more popular candidate politically for, on the day of the polling, 9th March, 1892, he secured a substantial majority of 2136, the figures being, Wolff 4743, Charley 2607. He was unopposed upon five subsequent general elections. He retired from parliament in the year 1910, having served the constituency faithfully and usefully for 18 years.

The Belfast Corporation conferred the Freedom of the city of Belfast on Wolff to mark the city's gratitude for his great services to its prosperity in shipbuilding spheres, and in recognition of his devoted interest in Parliamentary affairs. The Freedom was the highest honour the city could give one who, at 20 years of age, had adopted it as his future home.



A luncheon was associated with the ceremony and the Council's resolution of 1st February, 1911, as follows, was read:

Resolved: "That Gustav Wilhelm Wolff of 'The Den,' Belfast, and 42 Park Lane, London W.2., be and is hereby elected and admitted an honorary Burgess of the city of Belfast in recognition of his services to the city, to the phenomenal growth of which the great shipbuilding and engine works of Harland & Wolff, established by Mr. Wolff and the late Sir Edward Harland, Bart., in the year 1860, have so largely contributed. In recognition also of the fact that he represented the material interests of the city in the Imperial Parliament from 1892 till 1910, inclusive, having been four times re-elected as member of Parliament for the East Belfast Division without opposition. In recognition also of the deep interest he had in the welfare of the city, and of his noble benefactions to her charitable institutions, and that he now retires from public life in the enjoyment of the affectionate regard of all those who have the honour of knowing him."

This certificate was in a silver casket. The casket, which had corner pilasters and bold acanthus foliage, is divided by repousse scrolls springing from Tudor roses and the base is a very bold adaptation of a classic gadroon. There are six ornamental feet and the lid sweeps upward in graceful curves to the summit. On which the Arms of the city are placed with heraldic enamel colouring. A sprig of shamrock occupies each of the four corners of the upper part of the lid, and repousse work, entwined with shamrocks, contains emblems of navigation, such as anchor, trident, sail, rope, boat hook, rudders, lifebelts, etc. On a round medallion in the middle of the center of the obverse of the lid is a raised monogram in different colour enamels with the initials G.W.W. surrounded by a raised laurel wreath. Supporting the casket on each side are silver figures –none representing the city of Belfast presenting the address, and the other Britannia holding a trident and the Union Shield. Opposite these figures, on the four ends of the casket are medallions in repousse with marine emblems. On the front of the casket are shown beautiful enamelled views of the Houses of Parliament, London, from the river, and a fine enameled view of the City Hall, Belfast. The reverse has a very interesting view of a

launch from Queens Island Works, while the other panel shows the mechanical workshops of the Island with boilers, etc. The silver shield in the center of the obverse takes almost the outline of section of a ship, and bears the full inscription: --

“This casket contains the certificate of election and admission of Gustav Wilhelm Wolff, Esquire as an honorary Burgess of the City of Belfast. 1st February 1911.”

At the conclusion of the ceremony, Mr. R. J. McMordie, Lord Mayor, said that Mr. Wolff in addition to his shipbuilding interests was one of the founders of the world famous Belfast Ropework Company Limited, Belfast, which had years ago been erected on low lying land, a morass, in fact, which, linking such a condition with the mud foundation of Harland & Wolff's, would suggest that the promoters of both immense organisations had the energy of the Dutch and the enterprise of the Venetians, for was not Venice built on mud, and became masters of the world's commerce, Wolff's reply:

“I generally talk in a happy-go-lucky way and say what is in my mind at the moment, I had no idea when I came to Belfast in 1858 I would be a permanent citizen. I have no regrets that I stayed. It is my home. I would remind you that “Punch” alluded to a speech I once made. I had made some poetry:

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

When I came over to Belfast single I wondered why no young lady had picked me up, as I was then a better looking man. My nephew will be proud of the gift I have received, the casket. As a free Burgess I presume I am entitled to all things free, as far as the Corporation is concerned: pay no gas, or electric accounts at ‘The Den.’ I will send back to the Lord Mayor a large bill for rates. I am a free Burgess, and there is no reason why I should pay any rates. I imagine I can ride about all day in trams, and pay no fares. Maybe the Lord Mayor will please explain to me what the Freedom of the City means. I feel the people of Belfast will appreciate it. So far, I have to put any letters to my name. No J.P. No D.L. Almost every man in Belfast is a J.P. or a D.L. or something or other after his name. I have nothing at all – never even made a magistrate. I do not know if the Lord Chancellor felt I would be more at home in the dock than on the Bench. I went into Parliament as plain G. W. Wolff. So I emerge as plain as I went in." [Below is the Belfast Ropeworks in 1873]



Wolff was, at the same time, made the recipient, from the unionists of East Belfast, of an illuminated address. It took the form of an album, beautifully bound in leather, stamped with his crest. As a frontispiece are Wolff's own photo and an admirable drawing in colours of his home 'The Den,' Station Road, Belfast. The address contains drawings, grouped on one page of the Houses of Parliament, London; the City Hall, Belfast; a bird's eye view of the Shipyard of Harland & Wolff; the Belfast Rope Work Company Limited, and a photo of the Executive Committee of the East Belfast Unionist Association. The style of ornament adopted is Celtic.

He was evidently a man with a considerable share of humour another example was the occasion of a trial trip in a steamer his firm had built. Speeches were being made after the lunch aboard. He was called upon; slowly rising from his seat with a long cigar in his hand he said: "Mr. Chairman: Sir Edward Harland builds the ships for our firm; Mr. Pirrie makes the speeches, and as for me I smoke the cigars for the firm." And he modestly sat down. During his few words he punctuated them with puffs of the cigar. This was his style. It was displayed in the House of Commons. He held strong, unshakeable political convictions: he acted without care of consequence if he felt he was in the right. While he might have advertised himself, as is so generally done, through the medium of the press by being on his feet often to speak - a man of his mental breadth could have easily so qualified - he contented himself by sitting on the back benches rather than court the cheap notoriety of the linotype's daily issues. He may have decided, as others do, that as many are so aggressively loquacious in publicly revealing real mental bankruptcy, it is preferable to occupy the more dignified attitude of remaining unobtrusive and relatively quiescent and, Think. Philanthropy, generous munificence, charities and institutions benefited: a master of industry, incomparable organiser, a generous employer, a model citizen-one of a group of men that made Belfast renowned throughout the world as a great shipbuilding and shipping centre, Mr. Wolff retired from Harland & Wolff's in 1908. He died on 17th April 1913. He was a member of three clubs in London-Carlton, Junior Carlton and the Garrick. His recreations were shooting and fishing.

Captain William Harland, a nephew of Sir Edward's, said: "Wolff was one of the most kind-hearted and generous friends anyone could have; not only was he an able financier, but also a fully qualified engineer,"



Above Wolff's grave at the Brompton Cemetery, Fulham, London. His sister Clara Mathilda May is also buried here

Wolff's birthplace, Hamburg, owes its foundation to the Emperor Charlemagne, part of whose great Empire included a large part of Germany. He built a citadel and a Church on its heights between the rivers Elbe and Alster as a bulwark against neighbouring pagans, It grew in size and importance in the 12th century. Of less ancient interest is the fact Hamburg was made an important centre for the Irish who fled to it from the difficult days in their own country in the late 1790's : one repercussion in Ireland of the French Revolution. In the year 1797 a Branch of the Society of united Irishmen was formed there, The Hamburg press speak of the group who were branch members as a Citizens. Club of Ireland, and one of the meetings had twenty present. The Chairman was Alexander Lowry of Katesbridge, County Down, engaged, when at home in the linen business. In due time he returned to the Emerald Isle, with his Norwegian wife.

Portaferry County Down, furnished another important Irishman for Hamburg: John Hastings, a carpenter, on arrival at the Elbe city in 1798, allied himself to the timber business; he remained; he apparently was en route for the American States, because he ,was registered on the ocean vessel as a passenger. Very wisely Hastings did not devote all his time to politics, because when he died on 17th March, 1834 less than eight months before Wolff , was born-he had "much house property " according to his Estate administration. Hamburg had most interesting associations with Ireland in different spheres.

