



***Founding Father  
Captain The Honourable Sir Robert Burton-Chadwick  
MP, RNR, Master Mariner  
Biography***

Sir Robert Burton-Chadwick was born at Oxtan, Cheshire, on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1869, the eldest son of Joseph Chadwick, ship owner, and Norah Irene Gibbs. He was baptised with the name of Robert Chadwick.

His first voyage was in one of his father's sailing ships for convalescent purposes but he liked the life, remained as an apprentice and later serving in tramp ships and P&O liners. He qualified for his Extra Master's (Square Rigged) Certificate and gained the rank of Honorary Captain RNR in the RN's hospital service. He was awarded a Royal Humane Society certificate for saving life.

He swallowed the anchor in 1897 to join his father's shipping company, Gillison & Chadwick, becoming a partner in 1903. A very successful businessman he became head of the shipping firm of Chadwick and Askew (London and Liverpool) and a director of Chadwick, Weir & Company (London, Montevideo, Buenos Aires and Rosario). The latter is still in business today.

He fought in the Boer War between 1900 and 1901, with the Duke of Lancaster's Yeomanry.

In World War I he worked in the Ministry of Munitions as Director of Overseas Transport. In 1915, calling on his experiences in RN hospital ships, he founded and was honorary treasurer of the Liverpool Merchants' Mobile Field Hospital.

He then embarked upon a political career as a Conservative becoming Member of Parliament (MP) for the shipbuilding town of Barrow-in-Furness between 1918 and 1922. Between 1922 and 1931 he was MP for Wallasey where his constituency spread along the River Mersey and the Wirral peninsular. He held the office of Parliamentary Secretary for the Board of Trade in Stanley Baldwin's government between 1924 and 1928. However, his new career and the many diversions of his parliamentary duties did not wean him from his first love, the Sea.

*"During the impressionable years of my youth," he once wrote, "I imbibed a profound admiration for the British Merchant Service, and particularly, for the British Officer. I have always had a kind of haunting consciousness that the Master Mariner has never held that status in the national life to which he is entitled. There are many reasons to account for it. His was a commercial service, and he was ground between the millstones of commercial interests. The diversified nature of his calling has always made collective action difficult. There was none of the fostering care of an august Board of Admiralty, none of the social advantage that comes to him who wears a sword and epaulettes, but notwithstanding all these drawbacks he gave a loyal single-minded service to his ship that has always inspired one with the greatest respect."*

It was during these years in politics that he became the driving force in the creation of the Honourable Company of Master Mariners; the challenge which became,

*"the biggest thing in my life".*

He was created 1st Baronet Chadwick, of Bidston, co. Palatine, Cheshire on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1935 and on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1936 his name by Deed Poll to Robert Burton-Chadwick.

He was Counselor to the British Embassy between 1940 and 1947 at Buenos Aires, Argentina.

He died on 21 May 1951 at age 81.

## *The Man*

Forming a picture of the character behind the accomplishments is difficult even though he was firmly in the public eye for so much of his life. There are no biographies, media interviews, personal papers, speeches, letters or memoirs, and few quotes. In short there is virtually nothing of a personal nature so we must glean what we can from a few newspaper reports of his years in public service, his correspondence in the archives of the Honourable Company and the very few anecdotes that survive from those who knew him. He was not born to a privileged life. His title and honours were earned. His parents were working people, his father the owner of a few ships so he came from what we would now consider to be an upper middle class background. No stately homes, no liveried servants, just an ordinary life in the Birkenhead suburb of Oxtown, close to the River Mersey. Whatever basic education he had, by the age of 14 or so he was at sea. He did not attend a good school or university and so accumulate a wealth of contacts with whom he would progress through life, his circle was attracted by his character. He must have been a personable and likeable man because he was able to draw around him a huge number of contacts and associate whom he motivated, cajoled and encouraged to help him achieve his goals.

His gaze out from his photo, paternal, studious, and philosophical. It hints at a gentle, thoughtful nature and a kindly disposition. We might expect such a man to think deeply, to take a sincere interest in his fellow man and to care about the world around him. His lips hint at smile. Here is man to whom others would be drawn and inspired. His stance and dress do not imply a man of outdoor action despite the rigors of his years before the mast. They speak of a man of learning, a schoolteacher or professor, perhaps a local dignitary. We might therefore expect an able administrator, an organiser, one who can think things through and make sound decisions. Today we might call him “a safe pair of hands”. He appears a comfortable man, who has worn his life well. He bears no scars, his brow is clear, his face unlined; content with his lot, life has been kind to him.

This image though is somewhat at odds with his years as a sailor. Life at sea under sail in the 1880s and 90s was not for the faint hearted. It was tough, difficult and demanding requiring physical, mental and emotional strength. Only those with a steady heart, a firm nerve, absolute resolve and a ready hand could survive. It demanded constant courage and fortitude against the ever-present danger of injury or death by falling from aloft or being washed overboard. At all times officers had in their hands the lives of their crew and passengers and the safety of their ship. In the frequent periods of danger officers often led by force of character alone. The life demanded a constant attention to detail, a great deal of learning and dedication to one’s calling. There was also the untold value of the camaraderie of the sea; the commitment to one’s crew, ship and other seafarers. It tells us much that he excelled in this world gaining the ultimate accolade of an Extra Master’s Certificate. The young man who came ashore to his father’s shipping business would have learned much of men, the world and the nature of things.

He was evidently a man of courage as demonstrated by his voluntary service in the Boer War and a Royal Humane Society award for bravery in the saving of human life. He must also have been compassionate as his founding of the first army mobile military hospital for use in World War I demonstrates.<sup>1</sup>

He was an accomplished businessman succeeding in the highly treacherous waters of the shipping industry with its ruthless self-made men and fierce competitiveness. It is a testament to his judgment and foresight that whereas almost all contemporary family shipping companies have sunk with out trace, his company thrives to this day. That he also went on to a successful career in politics tells us much of his ability to communicate with constituents and the electorate. To have risen to a senior cabinet post within six years of becoming an MP speaks of many capabilities, especially in planning, organisation and execution. He was obviously a driven man who worked incredibly hard, witness the fact that even while Secretary of State for The Board of Trade he would spend his weekends working on other interests like the Honourable Company.

Above all he was deep thinker, consummate planner and able administrator. He could set visionary goals and see them through to a successful conclusion. The conception and realisation of the first mobile field hospital was his. By sheer force of will he achieved “*the biggest thing in my life*”, the Honourable Company of Master Mariners

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<sup>1</sup> The British Journal of Nursing, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1915, page 170