

HERITAGE STATEMENT/TITANIC PLAQUE  
Georgian House Hotel,  
8-11 Church Street  
Whitehaven  
CA28 7AY

## Background to application

The application to Cumberland Council for Listed Building consent is in relation to the Georgian House Hotel, a local business which has been in operation for 22 years under the ownership and management of Stephanie Skelly.

Ms Skelly submitted the application following an approach to her by Whitehaven Heritage Action Group (established in 1991), who wished to install a blue plaque to the front of the building to commemorate Titanic engineer Jonathan Shepherd, who had once lived there.

## Impact on the building

It is anticipated that any structural impact on the building would be minimal as it involves affixing a 400mm cast aluminium plaque to the exterior wall to the right of the front door of the hotel (previously 9 Church Street). The manufacturer of the plaque, Croft Cast Signs of Whitby will supply fixings (2 screws which will have cover caps, matching the blue powder coating). The cost is £500.

There would be a positive impact on the building, and the street, providing a focus of historic interest in relation to the premises which as a hotel and restaurant welcomes numerous visitors who may notice and appreciate the historic connection with a brave son of Whitehaven. Making the most of the town's heritage is the main priority of the Heritage Group, which has a long history of successfully achieving projects that improve and enhance Whitehaven's heritage offer, which benefit residents and visitors, and the local economy. All members are volunteers and without core funding, raise money from donations and grant givers to support their work.

## History of the building

The hotel at Nos 8-11 Church Street comprises four properties, including number 9 which is the main entrance to the hotel and was where Jonathan Shepherd had lived with his family. All four properties were built in the mid 18th Century.

To facilitate the keeping of estate records for the Lowther and their stewards each tenancy in Whitehaven as given a number called a Lons number and from these the first and subsequent tenants can be identified in the estate rent books. However Lons numbers bear no relation to modern street numbers. In 1710 a Rate Book, listing all houses and their inhabitants was drawn up and in 1762 a local Census was compiled.

From these records we can learn that nos 8, 9 and 10 Church Street were Listed as Lons 11 and 12 Church Street and that **No 8** had a 20yard frontage, 12 yards back, and that the tenancy was granted in January 1664/65 to Henry Brownrigg of Corkickle and that in the 18th century (1742 rent book) it was owned by the Benn family (the precise history of the house is uncertain as it cannot be separately identified from No 7 Church St in 18th century documents.)

**No 9**, a three storey building with attic and cellar was double depth and in the 1762 Census was listed as owned, and occupied, by Henry Benn, a ship's carpenter. Four years later, however, in December, 1766, Benn was declared bankrupt when the premises were described as 'house with dwelling cellar under and washhouse behind adjoining house.'

**No 10** is described as a smaller version of No 9 with corner fireplace and panelled overmantel in rear room; kitchen fireplace in front cellar. It is three storeys, single-width, double depth, built in the second quarter of the 18th century. It was sold as 'messuage or tenement' in March 1747/48 to John Thompson, a mariner and his wife Elizabeth.

*\*Source: Whitehaven 1660-1800, Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England*

It would be over 130 years later before young Jonathan Shepherd and his family took up residence at No 9...

## Jonathan Shepherd's story

Jonathan Shepherd had been born in the town in 1880 and lived at 9 Church Street with his parents James and Johanna Shepherd, and his siblings. He was the fourth eldest of seven children.

He was aged just 32 and one of 24 engineers aboard the RMS Titanic who died when their ship went down after it hit an iceberg on its maiden voyage from Southampton to New York on 15 April, 1912. Whitehaven Heritage Action Group wishes to mark Shepherd's bravery and connection with the town by placing a plaque on the front of the Georgian House Hotel on Church St where he had previously lived.

No 9 is now incorporated into the hotel; its doorway serves as a main entrance to the hotel and restaurant.

The idea for a plaque was sparked following an exhibition held at the Beacon Museum in the town held over three months in 2023 entitled *Honour & Glory* in which local connections to the Titanic were highlighted.

It is all part of the heritage group's ongoing proposals to restore existing blue plaques in the town centre and install some new ones. It is hoped to arrange an unveiling ceremony with invited guests later in the summer.

Jonathan's father James Shepherd was an architect and his mother Johanna hailed from Limerick. Jonathan and his family appear at 9 Church St in the 1891 Census. By 1901 he was aged 21 and boarding with the Hopkins family in Accrington, Lancs and working as a machine fitter. The family subsequently left Whitehaven for Blackburn where Jonathan would serve his apprenticeship at Davenport's Canal Works

With a desire to go to sea, he later secured a berth on a steamer belonging to W S Kennaugh & Sons, Liverpool, trading to South America. He came home, secured his second-class certificate and joined the *Lowther Castle* of the same firm, trading between New York and China and Japan, during the time of the Russo-Japanese War.

After securing his chief's certificate he joined White Star Line and served on the *Adriatic*, *Teutonic*, *Olympic* and *Titanic*. His ambition was to be chief engineer of a White Star liner. Jonathan's father recalled how his son had acted coolly and courageously while serving on his previous ship, the *Olympic*, when it had been in collision with HM cruiser *Hawke* in the Solent. The grief-stricken father said of the *Titanic* sinking: "My lad would remain on duty, sink or swim. He would stick to his post to the last."

Jonathan was said to be six feet tall, a man of good nature, jovial disposition and well liked. His mother died in 1911, a year before her son was to be lost in the tragedy. His paternal grandparents were Jonathan and Frances Shepherd. Grandfather Shepherd was a cabinet maker employing about 30 men and boys and lived at Scotch Street, and at 79 Lowther Street in Whitehaven.

There is a large granite memorial in Southampton to all the engineers lost in the disaster. Not one survived so although there is no verbal evidence of the role they played, it was clear that the ship stayed afloat longer than it would have done had they not sacrificed their lives for the good of others.

