

Meeting Report 15th July 2025

What follows from Andy W is the sad story of the **SS City of Benares** and other ships sunk by U-boats during WW2. Andy's mother Marion had signed up to be a nurse in the CORB scheme, and was prepared to sail to North America with evacuee children. What a disaster. The SS Athenia was attacked by U-60, just a few hours into the declaration of war, on 3rd September 1939. The deaths were 98 civilian passengers, 19 crew including 28 U.S. citizens. The Knute Nelson, a Norwegian tanker, was one of the ships that came to the rescue, and saved 450 souls. The worst loss of life from a civilian ship in WW2 was the SS City of Benares, on 17th September 1939, two weeks later. U-48 sunk the ship which was en route to Montreal, Quebec and New York city, with 406 people aboard. 98 out of 123 children (aged 5 – 15 years old) died. The departure should have been on 12th September, but was delayed by minesweeping. One survivor was Patricia Allen, who had also survived the sinking of the SS Athenia. Andy's mother? She was fortunate enough to still be ashore, training. Then, because the U-boat threat was so serious, the CORB scheme was abandoned, permanently.

Later, the SS Volendam succumbed to U-boat attack on 31st August 1940. She was carrying 879 people, including 320 children, 90 of whom were evacuees. All were rescued, the stricken ship was towed and beached on the Isle of Bute. Repaired on the Clyde, she was back in action in July 1941, and saw out the war mainly as a troop ship. So, Andy's mother Marion didn't go to sea, and by happenstance found herself remaining in Britain for the duration, an essential part of the war effort, she then married and settled down in Knutsford, bringing Andy into the world so that he could record this and other personal stories for posterity.

Tricia P recounted the story of **Felix and Lucy** – fuller report coming soon

Roger B followed this with '**It's Complicated**', a corkscrew hazel of a family tree in 19th century Wetherby. Difficult to summarise, the messy family situation was brought about by the death of my 26 year-old great grandfather, when his ship the 'Leo' and its cargo of coal, bound for Barcelona, his 23 shipmates and the captain, all went down in a Force 10 off Cornwall that famously sank the 'City of London' with 400 drowned. That event was six months before my grandmother was born. Within a month of her birth, grandmother's grandfather – under whose roof she lived – died and removed all security for her and her mother. So, my grandmother was handed over to a safe pair of hands, belonging to 'Aunt Woolford'. An angel, she took in Polly (Granny Brown-to-be) and raised her to her wedding day, and then took in her new husband Jack, and then two of their children over the next couple of years. Not only that, but Polly's grandmother Mary Greaves had meanwhile married a man called King, in Hull, had three children, then died of cancer of the womb, aged 42. Aunt Woolford to the rescue. She took in all three of Mary's children, and raised them alongside Polly. That house must have had elastic walls. Years later, one of the three taken in emigrated to Jamestown N.Y., by then married with five children, two of whom enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1917, when the USA joined the Great War. In 1924, the émigré James William King visited England (not just England – Starbeck!) with his wife and met up with Polly and family. Reunited, having been brought up by Aunt Woolford, who deserves a place of honour in the family tree. Not only that, but the American couple returned in 1933, knowing that James' sister Emily (one of Aunt Woolford's charges) had a terminal illness. By then James was 77. As told in the life story of Granny 'Polly' Brown, Emily was the first to be interred in the family grave, followed by my grandfather Jack in 1937, then Polly herself in 1944. R.I.P.