



Lusitania Museum/Old Head Signal Tower Heritage CLG

Reg. Office: Ath Trasna, Kerry Road, Tower, Blarney, Co. Cork.



Sunday, 24 May 2020

Dear Mrs Bemis, Dave, Evalyn, Ted, Jennifer, Stephanie and the extended Bemis family,

I am writing to let you know how much we at the Old Head appreciate what a remarkable man Gregg, Husband, Father, Grandfather and Great-grandfather was even though this is something you already know well.

I became aware that there was a diving expedition underway on the Lusitania in 2011 and I made contact with a person I was hoping would provide me with a way of contacting Gregg directly. I wrote my first introductory email to him on the 17th Sept. 2011 where I had the audacity to ask him up front would he consider donating some Lusitania artefacts to a non-existent entity to be built at the highest point of the Old Head peninsula! We had begun the Old Head Signal Tower project just the previous November in 2010 and without literally any resources our progress was snail-pace slow.

In true Gregg fashion, as I was to become fully aware over time, much to my surprise, he answered me the following day. Most of my subsequent emails were answered within ten minutes! Another characteristic evident immediately was his total disdain for the age factor – it was only at that stage that I realised he was in his early eighties. Being a grandfather myself, that was something I understood as I had got involved in the Old Head project as a form of occupational therapy post retirement. I was further gob-smacked when he told me he was still playing soccer (as we call it here) and appeared to be captaining that team as well! That interest in sport also resonated with me as I am also a fan of many sports especially the specific Gaelic ones of Hurling and Football but I also know a little about Baseball, American Football and Ice Hockey among many others.

In that first email response he also very shrewdly opined that he hoped that what I was saying was not all ‘Blarney’! Now I had outlined our exact position and explained that we were just at the very beginning of a very ambitious project with no resources worth talking about. Naturally he was wondering how we planned to do it and sensibly was hedging his bets on a nag that might not even be running!

I had explained to him that we were targeting the Lusitania centenary, falling on May 7th 2015, as a suitable date for the official opening of the first phase of our project and expressed a wish that he might join us for that very special occasion if we were successful. Through the four subsequent years of hope (despair at times too) we just managed to be ready – I collected four magnificent Lusitania artefacts from Eoin McGarry in Dungarvan on the evening of the sixth and we prepared them for display for the following day while the builder tidied the place and removed the last pieces of debris off-site. At that point Gregg had decided that he would like to accompany Eoin out to the Lusitania on the 7th May where they placed a

memorial plaque on the bridge at 2.10pm to commemorate the tragedy and especially all those who lost their lives so brutally in that 18 minute of chaos. Many Lusitania relatives were also present with us for this very special event. Eoin and Gregg came to visit us on the 8th May and I think he began to realise that maybe there was more than ‘Blarney’ to these new friends of his on the Old Head. I think he also greatly appreciated that there was at least one Irish group who shared his vision of the potential of the Lusitania and was heartened by that realisation as his previous experiences, especially with officialdom, had a strong negative impact (to put it at its mildest).

We had identified the Lusitania story as a key part of our vision for everything we planned for the Old Head Signal Tower site. While there is a beautiful Lusitania memorial in Cobh we felt that the names of everyone on board Lusitania, passengers and crew, should all be listed at a place and in a manner that would do justice to their sacrifice. We embarked on the design and building of the Lusitania Memorial Garden in the lovely sheltered, sunken area south of the Signal Tower where the iconic curved 20-metre wave sculpture now stands listing all the names and telling the story of the Lusitania. Gregg was unable to be present on the day but subsequently visited the LMG.

In 2018, things took an extraordinary turn. Gregg had brought to our attention the existence of a large Lusitania lifeboat davit, standing unmarked in a public park in Annalong in County Down, Northern Ireland. Through some deft diplomacy on the ground, with especial help from Gerry Doyle and his family, whom Gregg visited, and also Gerry Browne and Peter McCamley, we now have this wonderful artefact standing in the LMG with its arm pointing directly out to sea to the resting place of Lusitania. We had the great good fortune to have Gregg, accompanied by David, do the official unveiling of the davit in late August.

Things took an even more dramatic turn in 2019. Gregg had been thinking out loud about the future of the Lusitania in some of his emails and asking would we consider becoming involved in some form of Trust to secure its future and his vision for remembering its story, some parts yet untold. Then, really out of the blue as far as we were concerned, he suggested that he would consider gifting the Lusitania to our group on the Old Head if we were willing to accept. To say we were overwhelmed would be an understatement – we never anticipated such a development in any scenario. In retrospect, we suspect that some of you family members may have been influential in that decision – if that is so, we thank you most sincerely and recognise this act as a most gracious and generous gift by Gregg in circumstances where he might have had some legitimate misgivings. On May 7th 2019, Gregg, accompanied this time by Ted, in the presence of his solicitor and friend Richard Martin, signed the Donation Agreement and JJ and myself countersigned on behalf of Lusitania Museum/Old Head Signal Tower Heritage CLG. It was a historic moment – one that will be long remembered on the Old Head. It would be fair to say that matters Lusitania had taken an extraordinary direction from that fateful first email in 2011. His decision to travel over for the event and Ted’s decision to accompany him were in themselves wonderfully generous acts as we could see that he was frail but still as feisty as ever.

We were really hoping that Gregg would still be to the good to officially open the Lusitania Museum to which both he and we at Old Head are totally and passionately committed.

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Unfortunately that is not to be but that dream of Gregg's mentioned by Evalyn must come to pass. We are hoping that as many of the Bemis clan as can travel will make the trip to Ireland for that historic opening when it happens as it surely will. The design is underway but it is going to take some time to get that first sod turned.

We plan to remember Gregg in various ways in the new Museum – we have yet to decide exactly how but assuredly he will be get due recognition.

We are also hoping that we can persuade the Irish Government to formally honour Gregg in some appropriate way for his lifetime commitment and passion for the Lusitania and his keen appreciation of its place in World history, since we are now the custodians of his wonderful legacy. We have some ideas on that score and will let you know in due course if they come to fruition.

You may know that Gregg has been given honourable mention in the Irish media over the past week. You might check both the Irish Examiner and the Irish Times on-line for the articles.

We are immensely proud to have been associated so closely with Gregg's work and as a family we know that you are also immensely proud of his single-minded contribution on a sometimes lonely and sometimes frustrating journey. His dedication and persistence were something to behold and admire. There is an old Irish saying: Ni bheidh a Leitheid ann aris! Which translates as ' His likes will not be seen again'.

Finally I would like to say thanks to Ted for that lovely four-generation family group – one to treasure. I have my own favourite where Gregg is emerging from the conning tower of the undersea Rov after visiting Lusitania when he was 76! I had the pleasure of his good company to myself on a few occasions such as the time I collected him at Cork Airport and brought him to the Old Head as well as having dinner with him a number of times – I might have been trying to direct him to personal reminiscences but he was determined to find out when and how we were going to get that Museum built! May I also say he was a brilliant public speaker who was eloquent in explaining his mission to rescue the Lusitania from historic oblivion.

We are with you all in spirit during these difficult days while also remembering that you lost a beloved sister, Tamsin, in 2005.

Con Hayes

On my own behalf and on behalf of all the many people involved with us in the Lusitania/Old Head project.