

Archibald Bisset Smith VC

Archibald Bisset Smith was born at Cosie Brae in Cults on 19th December 1878, the second youngest in a family of three sons and two daughters. His father William Smith was an accountant and later a wholesale tea and dry goods merchant who could trace his ancestry back to Bold Peter Smith, a Jacobite killed at Culloden. His mother was Annie Nicol, both parents being born in Rhynie. Archie Smith spent a year at Robert Gordon's College from 1893 to 1895 before joining the Merchant Navy. He gained his Master's ticket in 1903 while serving with the New Zealand Shipping Company and went on to serve aboard the steamers *Waikato*, *Rakaia*, *Waimate* and *Turakina* before the First World War.

In about 1914 Archie Smith married Edith Clulee (née Powell), possibly aboard a ship sailing to England. He had met her in Port Chalmers, New Zealand where her family had emigrated from Wales. She had been married before and had a son Alfred (born 1900) who later took his stepfather's surname.

During the war, Archie served as captain on the *Rakaia*, *Hurunui* and *Otaki*. In March 1917 Captain Smith was in command of the SS *Otaki*, a refrigerated cargo ship built in 1907-8 by Denny's of Dumbarton. With a crew of 71 he was sailing from London to New York, when his ship was attacked by the German raider *Moewe*. Although armed with only a small 4.7 inch gun, the *Otaki* returned fire and fought bravely. But when the *Otaki* was badly damaged and four of his men had been killed, the Captain gave the order to abandon ship. He himself stayed on board as his ship sank. His stepson Alfred was a cadet on board and was among the crew members picked up by the "*Moewe*" when the ship went down. He spent the rest of the war as a prisoner in Germany.



The Sinking of the Otaki, by K. T. Rousell

After the war, Archibald Bisset Smith was initially Mentioned in Despatches in November 1917 for “good services whilst on Transport Duties.” However, this was not felt to be enough to reflect his gallantry. Rules had to be changed so that Merchant Navy officers could be made eligible for bravery awards. It was decided to give Smith a pre-dated commission in the Royal Navy Reserve. Therefore it was as Lieutenant Archibald Bisset Smith RNR that the master of the *Otaki* was awarded the Victoria Cross on 24th May 1919.

On 7th June 1919, Smith’s widow Edith, accompanied by her son Alfred, went to Buckingham Palace where they received the posthumous VC from King George V. On the death of his mother in 1951, Alfred sold the VC and his stepfather’s other medals at auction. They were bought by the New Zealand Shipping Company, later taken over by P & O. However, a replica of the VC is on display in the Auld Hoose.

Archibald Bisset Smith’s most lasting legacy is the Otaki Shield. In 1937 his family presented the Shield (designed by Head of Art Robert Murray) as a memorial to be awarded every year to the senior boy who is judged "pre-eminent in character, in leadership and in athletics". In effect each School Captain has visited New Zealand as the Otaki Scholar (except during the World War 2 years). The New Zealand Shipping Company, later P & O, offered a free passage on one of their ships and the New Zealand government arranged transport and accommodation during the visit. The Otaki scholar no longer receives a free sea trip, but still enjoys 6 weeks in New Zealand during the summer holiday, touring various schools as an ambassador for the College.