

"OLYMPIC" - One of "TITANIC'S" two sisters.

Scarcely a month passes without the Southampton paper announcing the arrival of “the largest ship to visit the port” and, despite the economic downturn, all the indications are that “gigantism” is on the increase and the dictates of “economy of scale” will mean bigger ships carrying more containers or more passengers.

At the beginning of the last century the accent was on speed and on the prestigious North Atlantic passenger run the competition to establish a new “record” was fierce.

Eventually, the management of the White Star Line concluded that this was a financially unrewarding policy and they decided to build three luxurious ships, each of about 45,000 tons – undoubtedly the largest ships in the world at that time but not the fastest.



The White Star naval architects decided on a relatively simple hull design with the accent on hull strength, operational economy and passenger comfort and they approached their traditional builders – the Belfast shipbuilders Harland & Wolff – and sought their opinions.

The builders agreed with, and contributed to, the design but their existing yard could not build ships of that size and weight – so, after some discussion and assurances they agreed to virtually rebuild the yard to allow construction to begin. Three building berths were demolished and replaced by two bigger ones equipped with overhead gantries and cranes and, by 1908, they told White Star that they were ready to build the world’s largest ships.

The keel of the “Olympic” was laid in December of that year and almost two years later – on October 20th. 1910, she was launched. Her overall length was 883 feet and she was 92 feet 6 inches wide with a load draft of some 35 feet. The builders said that they used 3 million rivets weighing 1200 tons in her construction and boasted that she was the strongest, most luxurious and safest ship sailing the world’s oceans.

If her design was revolutionary then her machinery was equally so and the company agreed to install coal burning propulsion machinery originally designed by Harland & Wolff for the White Star "Laurentic" - and which had proved to be economical and efficient. The system incorporated reciprocating engines and a turbine, driving three screws. The two outside shafts were driven by 4-cylinder triple-expansion engines and the centre one by a low-pressure turbine. There were six separate boiler rooms within individual watertight bulkheads and they housed 24 double-ended boilers. Overall, the machinery and boilers took up 520 feet of the ship’s length. Her immense passenger complement comprised 730 First Class, 674 Second Class and 1026 Third Class and she had a crew of some 865. Throughout, the passenger accommodation and facilities were the last word in luxury.

The “Olympic” ran acceptance trials towards the end of May 1911 attaining a speed of almost 22.0 knots and, on May 31st. she left the builder’s yard – and on the day she did so her sister-ship “Titanic” slid down the slipway in Belfast. After a call at Liverpool, the ship proceeded to Southampton - her home port - and entered the North Atlantic trade together with three smaller White Star ships. She left Southampton on May 14th with bands playing and a star-studded list of First Class Passengers and despite inclement weather she averaged 21.17 knots for the passage to the Ambrose Light Vessel.

The ship fully lived up to her owner’s expectations and she soon became a firm favourite with discerning travellers, but then, disaster struck and on September 20th. 1911 she collided with, and sank, the cruiser HMS Hawke in the Spithead Channel off Portsmouth. The ensuing investigation found the Olympic “wholly to blame” but the verdict was unsuccessfully appealed for several years. It was suggested that the immense amount of water displaced by the huge liner had contributed to the warship’s inability to avoid collision but this “theory” was firmly rejected. Today, the concept of “interaction” is widely accepted. With a huge hole in her side Olympic returned to her builders yard for repairs before re-entering service.

In February 1912 she lost a propeller blade and again had to return to the big drydock in Belfast to have it replaced and, on her return to service, she was joined by her new sistership “Titanic”. In almost every respect the ships were identical but the new ship’s forward promenade deck was glassed-in whereas the Olympic’s was open.

The Titanic departed Southampton on April 10th. 1912 and on April 15th. at 11.40pm she struck an iceberg and sank with the loss of 825 passengers and 673 crew - and the rest of the story is history.

Now the huge Olympic fell under the safety spotlight as indeed did every operational aspect of passenger shipping and many changes were hastily introduced. under the auspices of The Convention for The Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS).

The disaster that befell the Titanic undermined passenger confidence in travel by sea and the ripples of this were felt throughout the entire UK shipping industry.

The Olympic made a few more voyages and then White Star deemed it wise to send her back to Belfast for a highly-publicised upgrade of many of the components contributing to safety. The job took more than six months and she did not rejoin the service until the Spring of 1913 when she was joined by the third newbuilding –the "Britannic". This ship’s construction period coincided with the loss of Titanic and her owners ensured that many of the safety recommendations resulting from the

period coincided with the loss of Titanic and her owners ensured that many of the safety recommendations resulting from the enquiry were incorporated in the new ship.

Olympic was now regarded as one of the safest ships afloat and she soon regained her earlier popularity with the travelling public. Her First Class complement had been reduced, lifeboat capacity almost doubled and watertight integrity improved and soon the memories of the Titanic disaster started to fade from the minds of trans-Atlantic passengers.

The outbreak of the Great War saw her on a commercial voyage to New York and she continued the voyage almost normally but on her return to the United Kingdom she was diverted to the Clyde which now became her "home" port. In October 1914 she diverted to assist the battleship HMS Audacious which had struck a mine and although Olympic earned many plaudits for her rescue (in very adverse weather) there were many who thought it unwise for a huge merchant ship with a full passenger complement to venture into a minefield.

In September 1915 she was taken over by the Admiralty as a troop transport and, in February 1916, on two occasions she narrowly avoided being torpedoed. Her sister-ship Britannic - the third of the triumvirate - had been converted to a hospital ship but, in November 1916, she struck a mine in the Aegean Sea and sank: Olympic was now the sole survivor of the three great ships.

In May 1918 she was carrying American troops when she came under attack in the Atlantic by U.103 and as she manoeuvred to avoid the torpedoes the huge ship ran down, and sank, her attacker. At the end of the war it was estimated that she had steamed some 184,000 miles carrying 200,000 souls without loss or damage and the end of hostilities saw her return to Belfast for a massive refit (and conversion to oil fuel) - and on July 21st 1920 she departed Southampton on the resumption of her peacetime role.

In 1927 The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company acquired the White Star Line (although the name was unchanged) and Olympic fell under their operational control and, once again, she returned to Belfast for a further refit and a reduction in her total passenger complement.

1930 saw the North Atlantic served by six large British flag passenger vessels together with ships from France, Germany and elsewhere and when America and Europe were hit by The Great Depression and the trade rapidly fell away the White Star Line and the competing Cunard Steamship Company engaged in merger discussions. Eventually, in April 1934, Cunard-White Star came into being and thereafter Olympic flew the Cunard houseflag under her White Star one at the masthead

The great ship was now some 24 years old but had, in the intervening years, been extensively refitted and modified and her popularity on the trade seemed to be virtually guaranteed but - on May 16th. 1934 -scarcely a month after resuming service- disaster struck again. Approaching New York in dense fog she ran down and sank the manned Nantucket Light Vessel and seven of the light vessel's crew were lost. There could only be one outcome to the enquiry and her owners were forced to pay massive compensation to the U.S Government.

Early 1935 saw the "rationalisation" that invariably follows mergers and Olympic, together with many of the other ships trading with her, was sold for breaking. She left Southampton on October 11th. 1935 for demolition in Jarrow - work that was completed in Inverkeithing two years later.

Over the years there have been many stories about this great ship and quite recently one of these suggested that because divers had found her "name and number" on some of the equipment salvaged from the sunken wreck of her sistership "Titanic" she actually WAS the original Titanic and that the ships and names had been "swopped" when she went back to Belfast for repairs following the collision with HMS Hawke.

To say that this is unlikely is a massive understatement!

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