

The Western Ocean

In 1835, Isambard Brunel and a group of business men in Bristol formed the Great Western Steamship Company with the intention of introducing steamships to replace the sailing ships on the North Atlantic run to New York. This was the era of steadily increasing emigration and New York was the accepted entry port to the “New World” Almost simultaneously, another group –The British & American Steam Navigation Company –appeared on the scene and in accordance with advice given in an article in an American railroad journal that company elected to run to New York from London.



Brunel’s first ship the oak-hulled “Great Western” was built in Bristol by the firm of William Patterson as an auxiliary with four masts carrying sails and although the sails contributed marginally to the vessel’s “propulsion” their primary purpose was to act as “stabilisers”. The ship was a paddle steamer and in heavy weather the sails helped to keep her on an even keel with both paddles submerged and thus propel her in a more or less straight line. Following her launch in July 1837 the ship sailed from Bristol to London where, to drive the paddles, she was fitted with twin side-lever steam engines producing some 750 t.h.p. The work done, she left London for Bristol in

March 1838 but on passage she sustained an engine room fire in which Brunel sustained serious injuries. News of the fire soon leaked out and many intending “maiden voyage” passengers cancelled their bookings having decided that sail was a safer bet and when she departed Avonmouth for New York on April 8th.1838 she had very few passengers.

The British & American group had laid down a competitor but in an endeavour to make up lost ground they chartered an Irish Sea paddle steamer ferry called “Sirius” which usually traded between Cork and London. This short sea passage meant that she had a very limited coal bunker capacity and for the Western Ocean run this was increased by the simple expedient of stowing coal in the vacant passenger accommodation.

The fire had delayed the scheduled departure of “Great Western” and this allowed “Sirius” to sail some four days before her. Her voracious appetite for coal took its toll and to complete the passage to New York her crew fed her boilers with cabin furniture and anything else that might burn. Her outward speed was just over 8.0 knots but this was beaten by the “Great Western” with a passage speed in excess of 8.5 knots.

Despite misgivings about the use of paddle propulsion in trans-Atlantic ships these proved to be misplaced and “Great Western” continued to trade profitably taking some 16 days on the outward passage and 13.5 days homeward although, on some crossings, she reduced the passage time by several hours.

New tonnage was needed and in 1845 the single screw steamer “Great Britain” started trading in tandem with “Great Western” but the new ship ran aground a few months later and the company ceased trading. “Great Western” was sold to the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company in 1847 and some years later she carried troops to the Crimean War before going to the breakers in 1856.

From the outset SPEED was considered to be an essential feature of Western Ocean travel and although the “Blue Riband” had not yet been “officially” introduced owners boasted about the average speed of their latest acquisition (and claimed to have “won” the mythical Riband and fly a blue pennant at the masthead).

Presumably, intending passengers were suitably impressed and the competing companies spent large sums of money on faster and faster ships but with little regard to economy.

For many years Cunard held the title but then White Star took it (with a brief interruption from Inman Lines). Invariably, the record was held by a British owned or a British flag ship so nobody really minded but then – in 1897 –the German flag “Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse” entered the arena and immediately took the title that Britain had held for some 60 years. This NDV vessel was not only the fastest ship on the Western Ocean trade – she was also

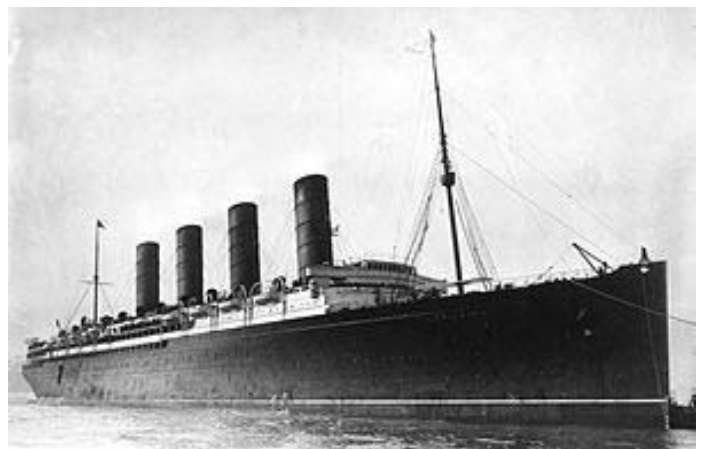


the biggest ship afloat and as she carried fewer passengers she claimed to be the most luxurious. This German domination persisted for almost five years with the Germans building faster and faster ships and – to add insult to injury – many of the finest British ships ceased to be British when the American ship-owner, J.P.Morgan, bought the White Star Line.

Now the British Government demonstrated its pragmatism. These fast German ships could, in time of war, wrack havoc with the ships of their enemies. They were faster than the vast majority of the warships operating at the time. The sale of White Star meant that many ships were now unavailable for wartime duties as they could not be requisitioned. By now, J.P.Morgan had his eye on Cunard and quick action was needed if their ships were not to fall under his control. In mid 1903 the Cunard Chairman, Lord Inverclyde, approached the Government with a request for assistance (despite an embargo on direct Government financial support) and he made it clear that two big, fast and luxurious ships were needed urgently if the German threat was to be countered. The Government saw the logic and agreed to lend Cunard a huge sum (for those days) at a special rate of interest to run for some 20 years. In turn, Cunard agreed that the Government would have use of these ships in the event of hostilities and that the ships would be built under Admiralty supervision to ensure their speedy transition for military use. The new ships would be capable of 25 knots and they would maintain a weekly mail service from Liverpool to New York. In all respects the ships must be “British” and the Master, Officers and about 80% of the crew members had to be British citizens.

Soon work on the most revolutionary ships in the world got under way – “Lusitania” in the Clydebank yard of John Brown and “Mauritania” in the Newcastle yard of Swan, Hunter and Wigham Richardson.

Laid down in mid 1904, “Lusitania” had 190 furnaces to heat her 27 boilers making her the largest steam turbine vessel ever built. With a tonnage of 31,550 she carried some 2,100 passengers and within a month of entering service in 1907 she had regained the Blue Ribband for Britain and held it until the entry into service of “Mauretania” in 1909.



RMS Lusitania

Shortly after the launch of “Lusitania” the Chairman of the Belfast firm of shipbuilders Harland & Wolff, Lord Pirrie, had a social get-together with his friend J.Bruce Ismay, the Chairman of The White Star Line. For many years all the White Star ships had been Belfast built and they were not a little concerned about the threat posed by the new Cunarders. Although the American owned White Star vessels flew the British flag the British Government did not really see them as British ships so Ismay could expect no help from that quarter.

During pre-dinner drinks Ismay enthused on his desire to build the biggest and fastest ships afloat but Pirrie was lukewarm and repeatedly warned him of the economic penalties that would result from this. To achieve a higher speed the steam turbines would have to be immense, the ships would need more boiler rooms and furnaces and the impact of this on the cargo and passenger carrying capacity would be massively punitive. After dinner, over brandy and cigars, Pirrie played his trump card and – very quietly – said “Why not revert to what you have always prized – comfort and elegance?” Ismay thought for a moment and then he said “You are right”.

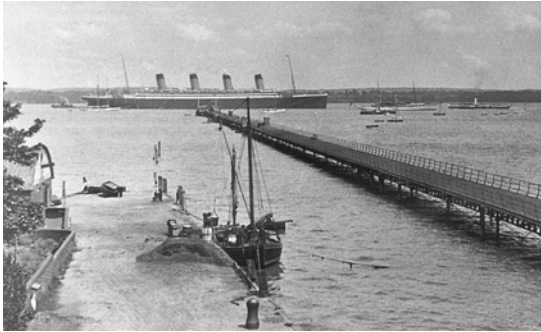
The two men then started to sketch the outline of a mighty four-funnelled ship and soon the floor was littered with outline drawings which Pirrie would later give to his draughtsmen in Belfast.

Later reports said that the two men talked late into the night –as their wives sat downstairs talking of domestic matters – and the rough sketches drawn by the two men are, reputedly, still preserved in Belfast today. Ismay said they would need two ships but Pirrie said that to ensure a schedule and allow for regular maintenance three ships were needed and eventually Ismay agreed,

There was just one snag; the ships outlined by Ismay were much too big for the slipways in Belfast but after some cast-iron guarantees from Ismay, Pirrie started a massive redevelopment of his Queen’s Island yard, bought new cranes and gantries and soon he was ready to start building the new “Olympic” class ships. Even with the massive reconstruction the ships were too huge to allow the simultaneous construction of all three and so the construction of two was started – with the third to be built at the earliest opportunity. Fortuitously, through the foresight of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners the port already boasted the largest dry-dock in existence.

The first ship “Olympic” was launched on October 20th. 1910 but the second ship “Titanic” still had some way to go. The first ship was to take some seven months “fitting out” but on May 31st. 1911 the “Titanic” was launched in a spectacular ceremony attended by the great and the good and watched by almost the entire population of Belfast.

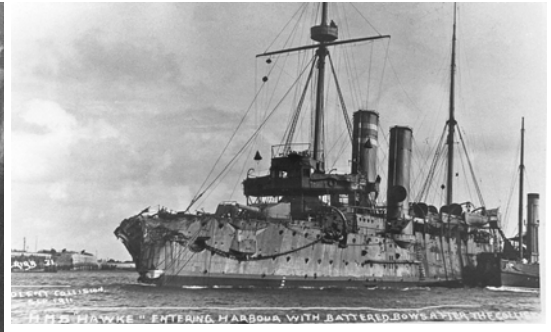
“Olympic “ entered service from Southampton in June 1911, under the command of Captain Smith, and, almost immediately, she was engaged in controversy. On entering New York the interaction between the huge ship and others moored alongside the wharves caused great concern and at least one ship struck the new arrival. Worse was to follow and in September 1911 the “Olympic” had a collision in the Solent with the cruiser HMS Hawke and both vessels sustained severe damage.



Olympic passing Hythe



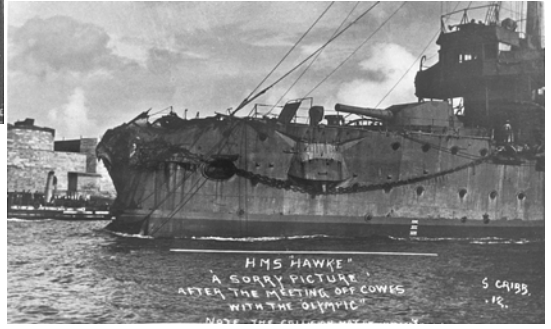
The hole in the Olympic



HMS Hawke entering Portsmouth



Port quarter of the Olympic



Damaged bow with collision mat

Pictures of the Olympic - HMS Hawke incident

The ship returned to Belfast for repair, berthing close to her sister-ship, now nearing completion and then re-entered commercial service - but her ill fortune continued to dog her and, in February 1912 she shed a blade from her port propeller after striking an underwater object in deep water. There was but one place to go and she arrived in Belfast on March 1st. to find the dry-dock occupied by the “Titanic”. After much juggling she entered the dry-dock and a new blade fitted to the propeller BUT ...as she left the she took the ground in the narrow approach channel and had to re-enter the dock for inspection. Those building “Titanic” waited with growing anxiety for the next incident but finally the dry-dock was clear and she re-entered to prepare for sea trials.

Finally, all was in readiness and almost the final act of completion was the fitting of the lifeboats.

The boats – all built by her builders – had a total capacity of approx. 1200 (a greater number than that demanded by the existing Board of Trade regulations).

Early drawings for the ship indicated that she was intended to have many more lifeboats but the decision was taken, at Board level, that this number would reduce the appeal of the Boat Deck as a Promenade Deck and so the number was drastically reduced. and, in the end, only one person in three of those aboard could expect a place in a lifeboat.

“Titanic”, under the command of Captain Smith who had transferred from ”Olympic”, left Belfast on the evening of April 2nd.1912 but her scheduled publicity call at Liverpool was cancelled and she made for Southampton..

When the sun rose on April 10th. she was “in all respects ready for sea” and at noon she departed for Cherbourg where she embarked more passengers and after a short time resumed [passage to Queenstown in Ireland where she arrived at mid-day on Saturday, April 11th. She embarked a few more passengers – and a large quantity of mail and by the early afternoon the mighty ship headed out into the Atlantic – and the rest is history.

“Olympic” later made happier history by being the only merchant ship to ram and sink a U-Boat during WWI. but, understandably, the third triumvir, “Gigantic”, was never built.