

## The dinner at Lord Pirrie's in summer 1907 – just a legend?

In 1998 I published in my book *Reise auf der Titanic* for the first time in public my doubts about the legend that the first plans for the *Titanic* were made in 1907. For an article in the Swiss Titanic Society's official newsletter *Titanic Post* in 2000 I deepened these theses. Practically all non-fictional *Titanic* books mention the following story that I condensed as follows:

*On a mild summer evening in 1907 Bruce Ismay, president of the International Mercantile Marine, visited William James Pirrie, chairman of Harland & Wolff at his "Downshire House" in London. After dinner the two men made initial sketches of a new generation of super liners. The idea for Olympic and Titanic was born.*

This is the well known story. But talking about such a gigantic and ambitious project and especially at such an important incident as the sinking of the *Titanic*, one should start to think when this project really began. To me, the year 1907 seems impossible. But being unable to track down the real date, my "evidence" are at the end just little more then "circumstantial evidence".

### **Indication 1: The great gantry at Harland & Wolff**

The great gantry, that was needed to build the *Olympic* and *Titanic* was erected in 1907, especially for this new generation of liners. To build the new slips 2 and 3, the former slips 2, 3 and 4 had to be torn down. But they had to wait for the launch of the *Adriatic* on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1906. So to speak this was the beginning of building the *Olympic* and the *Titanic*, in 1906. If not, why should they build two 1000 foot slips without planning ships that big? [2, 4, 7]

### **Indication 2: The Thompson drydock at Belfast**

For each ship that is being built one needs the possibility to take it into a drydock, to carry out repairs and maintenance under the waterline. The bigger a ship, the bigger its drydock. But it makes no sense to construct a drydock in a size one does not plan to build a ship. It took seven years to build the gigantic Thompson dock at Belfast. Work started in early 1904, not including several months for planning. With closed doors in the outer position, the dock had a length of 887 feet, just a few inches longer then the *Olympic* and *Titanic*. Again the question: Why should one start to think about a new type of ships only in 1907, when already in 1903 a drydock had been sketched to a size that was much bigger than any ship in the world? [2, 3]

### **Indication 3: The order book at Harland & Wolff**

Since Harland & Wolff began to build ships in 1859, they gave every ship its own number. The number is in direct connection with the date the order was placed at the yard. The numbers 400 and 401 were given to the *Olympic* and the *Titanic*. At Harland & Wolff the order was registered in the books on April 30, 1907. Of course at this stage the yard had to know the size of the ship, to embed the order into the logistics accordingly. In other words, the type of vessel and its measurements had to be known when taking the order. But even the date of order in spring 1907 makes it impossible that first thoughts about these vessels were made in summer 1907. [1, 2]

### **Indication 4: The uneven twins *Laurentic* and *Megantic***

In early 1909 Harland & Wolff delivered the sister ships *Laurentic* and *Megantic* to the White Star Line, at least from outside they looked about the same. But inside there was quite a

difference: The unused steam of *Laurentic's* low pressure cylinders was not condensed but used again for a turbine that drove a third screw. The degree of effectiveness was therefore considerably more than the one of *Megantic*. That's why the decision was made to use for the *Olympic* and *Titanic* the new, combined "*Laurentic-system*". This means that the designers had to wait with their decision of the machinery until 1909. But it also means that it took a while to design the machinery for the *Laurentic*. In 1907 it was decided to do the test with the uneven twins, most probably already having problems with designing the machinery for *Olympic* and *Titanic*. [2, 4]

#### **Indication 5: Chief designer Thomas Andrews**

In 1904 Thomas Andrews became assistant chief designer at Harland & Wolff. The year after he was promoted as chief. But checking the order books of the yard one discovers that there was no need for a chief designer. Except the *Adriatic* (her design was nearly finished at the time) there was no big challenge at Harland & Wolff that would have requested a chief designer. But what is a chief designer for? Usually he transfers visions of his employer into concrete plans and checks if the visions are practicable. The quiet time around 1905 would have been perfect to make preparations for a mammoth project. [2, 6]

#### **Indication 6: John Pierpont Morgan**

Morgan was in fact the owner of the White Star Line. He and nobody else decided to build the *Olympic* and *Titanic*. Since 1902 the White Star Line was under his control. The year after, the British government subventioned – in fact actually presented – the rival Cunard Line the two liners *Lusitania* and *Mauretania*. This was quite a recoil for Morgan's aim to dominate the North Atlantic routes. He knew that he needed equal vessels to retain his position. And he knew that it would take years from planning a ship till it entered service. It sounds impossible that a clever mind like Morgan waited for years until Bruce Ismay and Lord Pirrie had the ingenious idea to build a new ship. [5]

#### **Indication 7: *Lusitania* and *Mauretania***

The very generous subvention for the Cunarder *Lusitania* and *Mauretania* brought the men of the White Star Line out their reserve. The only possibility to survive in this competition was to invest more money. The *Lusitania* had her maiden voyage in September 1907, the *Mauretania* followed ten weeks later. But does it make sense to start to discuss in summer 1907 a new type of vessel just before the ones from the competitors enter service, after having watching them building for years? If the responsible men from White Star Line have not done anything till now, they could have waited for another few months to be inspired by the competitors.

#### **Indication 8: The dinner-story is missing in the authoritative literature**

The following important sources about building the new vessels and about important people involved do not mention such a story about the early stage of planning:

- Shan F. Bullock, *A Titanic Hero, Thomas Andrews, Shipbuilder*, Belfast, 1912 (Biography of Thomas Andrews)
- Herbert Jefferson, *Viscount Pirrie of Belfast*, Belfast, ca. 1948 (Biography of Lord Pirrie)
- Michael Moss & John R. Hume, *Shipbuilders to the World*, Belfast, 1986 (Company history of Harland & Wolff)
- No author given, *Olympic & Titanic, Shipbuilder*, Newcastle-on-Tyne, 1911 (Special issue for *Olympic's* maiden voyage)

Against all these publications stands just one important book: William J. Oldham's *The Ismay*

*Line*, published in 1961. It seems that all later publications mentioning this legendary dinner are based on this very version by Oldham.

### **The solution?**

In case Oldham was really the first one who mentioned the legendary dinner, we could find a quite simple explanation for this. Greatest help for his book was Julia Florence Ismay, widow of Bruce Ismay (1862-1937). Not long before she died she answered Oldham countless questions and let him look at the family documents. In case Mrs. Ismay – who took part at the alleged dinner in 1907 – just mixed up the year, then we would have a simple explanation. It has been a few decades since the dinner, so one can easily imagine that she recalled the wrong year. We do not have any reason to mistrust Mrs. Ismay. Perhaps the Ismay's were guests at Pirrie's home in 1907, and the men really swarmed about new ships. But might it have been just the first time they told their wives? Just a speculation from my side. [8]

However, we have to think this legend over. Of course for strategic reasons nobody spoke in the early stage about the project. One can easily understand why neither the White Star Line nor their partners Harland & Wolff wanted the competitors and the public knew too early about the new vessels. Of course the Cunard knew that the White Star Line would not watch their progress and success inactively with the *Lusitania* and *Mauretania*. But nobody should know what steps were taken. The fact that the ships would grow bigger and bigger was no secret at the time. The question was just who was going to risk the next step and when. Even before the maiden voyage of the *Olympic* there was talk about much bigger ships than the *Olympic* class. In 1911 an American journalist drew a statement from Lord Pirrie that in the 1920's it would be possible to build ships of 100,000 tons. This indicates that from the idea to a completed vessel of a new generation one calculated about ten years, not just four years as *Titanic* buffs want to believe. The logical consequence after the "Big Four" (*Celtic*, *Cedric*, *Baltic*, *Adriatic*) was to build a trio of steamers but they needed some years of careful planning beforehand. This was long before 1907. I estimate that the first plans for the *Olympic* and *Titanic* were definitely not made later than 1903.

### **Sources:**

- 1 Harland & Wolff Order Book, 1907
- 2 Michael Moss & John R. Hume, *Shipbuilder to the World*, Belfast, 1986
- 3 Engineering, August 2, 1912, London, 1912
- 4 No author, *Olympic & Titanic. Shipbuilder*, Newcastle-on-Tyne, 1911
- 5 Carl Hovey, *The Life Story of J. Pierpont Morgan*, London, 1912  
John K. Winkler, *Morgan. The Magnificent*, New York, 1930
- 6 Shan F. Bullock, *A Titanic Hero. Thomas Andrews, Shipbuilder*, Belfast, 1912
- 7 Michael McCaughan, *Steel Ships & Iron Man*, Belfast, 1989
- 8 William J. Oldham, *The Ismay Line*, London, 1961

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