

## Titanic, in commission 1911

It is well known that the maiden voyage of the *Titanic* was delayed for three weeks because of the collision between the *Olympic* and the *Hawke*. However, few realize that there was a much larger delay, actually 30 weeks, and that *Titanic's* maiden voyage was originally scheduled for the early autumn of 1911.

From its earliest publications about the new *Olympic* Class Liners, the White Star Line made it clear that the important, groundbreaking ship would be the *Olympic*. *Titanic*, as the second ship in the class, was very much in her shadow and rarely received top billing. The news reel crew that visited the shipyard regularly never saw a reason to film *Titanic*, as she was merely a copy of the main attraction. The photographer from Harland & Wolff only took pictures of *Titanic* when changes were made from the design of *Olympic*, or if he realized he had not taken a photo of a particular stage of the construction previously on *Olympic*.

With *Olympic* already rising towards the sky, it took the Harland & Wolff three months and one week to lay *Titanic's* keel. Logistically it made perfect sense to build the ships with a slight time delay. This enabled the workforce to iron out the teething troubles on the first ship, so making the construction of the second much more efficient.

The two leviathans took shape side by side until *Olympic's* big day arrived on October 20, 1910 and she left her slipway. For both Harland & Wolff and the White Star Line this was a huge event. The eyes of the world were upon them when, after about eight years of planning, (compare [www.titanicfiles.org](http://www.titanicfiles.org)) they launched the biggest ship afloat. The White Star Line presented their invited guests with a 28-page booklet as a souvenir of this special day. The reader learned that only a few years before, such a ship would have been the stuff of fantasy, a real 'Alice in Wonderland' creation. The booklet gives details about the building of the *Olympic* and finally mentions her sister ship, *Titanic*, on page 17. She also appears in the descriptions of some of the many photographs.

But how was the building of *Titanic* progressing when the *Olympic* was launched? The table below shows that the day before the *Olympic* was launched the *Titanic* had all her plates in position. But it is also obvious that at this stage, *Titanic* was no longer just 14 weeks behind *Olympic*, but a full 27 weeks behind.

	<i>Olympic</i> , duration of work in weeks (Date completed)	<i>Titanic</i> , duration of work in weeks (Date completed)	Delay between ships (weeks)
Keel laid	0 (16 Dec 1908)	0 (22 Mar 1909)	14*
Double Bottom	12 (10 Mar 1909)	8 (15 May 1909)	9
Framed	48 (20 Nov 1909)	54 (6 Apr 1910)	20
Plated	69 (15 Apr 1910)	82 (19 Oct 1910)	27
Launched	96 (20 Oct 1910)	114 (31 May 1911)	32
Handover	128 (31 May 1911)	158 (2 April 1912)	44

\* All figures are rounded to weeks.

These figures seem to indicate that the work force was concentrated on the *Olympic* because she was the object of prestige and the subject of much press attention. The beautiful booklet for *Olympic's* launch gives no indication of when the two new ships were expected to enter service. The reason seems to be that it was planned for some time, but when the print deadline for the text came close, no one wanted to take a gamble and risk an estimate. However, on launch day the White Star Line published a press release for the American media not in attendance. After listing all the technical superlatives and comparisons of size it mentioned:

*"The 'Olympic' will join the White Star Line's mail service between New York, Plymouth, Cherbourg and Southampton next summer, followed by the 'Titanic' in early fall."*

This clearly indicates that both the White Star Line and Harland & Wolff still believed that they could make up the additional 13 weeks delay of the *Titanic*. At this stage it was still intended that she would enter service three months after *Olympic's* maiden voyage in June 1911, sometime in September 1911. It is not clear what gave rise to this optimism. The easiest explanation would probably be that they assumed that once *Olympic* had left the yard in May 1911 double the workers would be available to complete the *Titanic*.

12 days later, on November 1, 1910 the New York office of the White Star Line published a poster, listing both the *Olympic* and *Titanic* as "in commission 1911". The optimism had dried up within 10 weeks, when the White Star Line published the sailing schedule for 1911 on January 11, 1911. The pamphlet waxed lyrical about *"The Superb New Triple-Screw Sea-Giant Olympic, followed in due course by her sister-vessel 'Titanic,' now building at Belfast."* The maiden voyage of the *Olympic* was announced for June 14, 1911. The schedule listed nine round trips of the *Olympic* till the end of the year. There was not a word about the *Titanic* entering service in September or at any other time in 1911.

Research has shown that the order books of Harland & Wolff were steady at the time and that there was not much more work going on while *Titanic* was being completed than before. Climate was not a problem, so technically the launch of the *Titanic* would have been possible in the winter. As this was not the reason for launching *Titanic* in the spring, what else caused the delay?

The table shows that, with the exception of the double bottom, all the major building steps on *Titanic* took longer than on the *Olympic*. This does not seem logical as each step should have been based on experience gained from *Olympic* and therefore faster. This leads us to the theory that both Harland & Wolff and the White Star Line were far too optimistic with the building schedules. To save face, they had subsequently focused on *Olympic* to ensure that at least one of the ships was ready. Even after *Olympic* was handed over, the work on the *Titanic* consumed more time than the *Olympic* had. This would have still been the case even without the visit of the *Olympic* to Belfast, for repairs following her collision with the *Hawke*, which took almost seven weeks. Even allowing for this seven week period, and work on *Titanic* being completely interrupted while *Olympic* was back in town, the backlog still managed to gain another five weeks, delaying *Titanic* by a further 12 weeks in total.

The decision to concentrate on the *Olympic* was made in November or December 1910. As the White Star Line had previously seemed so optimistic, one suspects that Harland & Wolff may have been economical with the truth and hidden the real progress on *Titanic* from its customer until after *Olympic*'s launch. But this still does not explain why the *Titanic*'s construction did not accelerate after *Olympic* left Belfast. Surely building something that is basically a carbon copy of another should be a faster process?

While definitive answers may come to light one day, for the meantime we can only theorize. To give readers some food for thought, perhaps one of the following scenarios, or other possibilities should be considered:

- By the end of 1910 the White Star Line was in a very uncomfortable situation with rough times ahead. They had only half of the budget for building the *Olympic* and *Titanic* in the bank. The amount of £1.198.583 was still to be raised. The whole amount had been achieved by mortgaging their entire fleet and the project was nowhere near completion. Even after their long partnership, Harland & Wolff may have lost faith in both the White Star Line and the I.M.M. They may have been aware of their precarious finances and, knowing that this was a very high risk deal, perhaps decided to concentrate on other projects where payment was guaranteed.
- By reducing the number of ships from four to three on the Southampton-New York route in August 1911 the White Star Line had made significant cost savings. However, introducing *Titanic* on the route, with her requirements for more crew, more coal etc would have wiped out those savings. Perhaps it was cheaper to 'mothball' her for a winter in Belfast rather than pay the larger operational costs.
- The rivalry on the North Atlantic and bad business figures since 1908 forced all major companies to work closer together. Urgent decisions needed to be made at the Atlantic Conference in 1911. In the first half of that year the number of emigrants was down over 140,000 against 1910 figures. In particular, the number of continental passengers shrunk. This resulted in compensation payments from the British to the continental companies of £55.140. The British companies urgently needed an adjustment to the

existing contracts. Until then, with a penalty to be paid for each additional emigrant in excess of their quota, *Titanic*'s extra capacity would have been a liability.

- The *Olympic* Class was the White Star Line's first innovation on the North Atlantic since being acquired by its new American owners. As they were newcomers in the shipping business, their lack of experience may have meant that they took time to be convinced that a delay of the *Titanic* might make sense for operational and financial reasons. Their British counterparts at White Star no doubt pointed out that with its legendary winter storms, the North Atlantic would have attracted only very few travelers.
- Both White Star Line and Harland & Wolff could have realized that finishing the *Olympic* in a hurry may have led to corner cutting and compromise. Perhaps they deliberately slowed the construction of *Titanic* down to avoid the same pitfalls.
- Harland & Wolff used a majority of available manpower to build the *Olympic* Class ships. As a company who traditionally took care of its employees, perhaps they did not want to lay off thousands of workers after the ships were completed, knowing as they did that, other than the *Britannic*, there were no big orders in the books. Maybe they gradually reduced the number of workman, delaying the *Titanic*, in order to proceed without a break with the *Britannic* as soon as the *Titanic* left the shipyard.

The decision to delay *Titanic* entering service rises several "What if..." questions. How, and indeed if, this decision changed the destiny of *Titanic* is purely hypothetical. But with conspiracy theorists eager to use the delays to back up their ideas, the whole scenario is well worth some serious study. This is a subject which could run and run. Stay tuned.

(Thanks to Kay Linnecker for his input and Mandy Le Boutillier for taking care of my English)

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