

BRITANNIC: MYSTERY SHIP OF THE GREAT WAR

Bigger than the Titanic, sistership Britannic was Great Britain's mightiest ocean liner. With the Great War, she was turned into a massive hospital ship but the Germans claimed she was carrying thousands of armed troops. Over a century later, the sinking of this magnificent vessel remains an enigmatic mystery submerged in rumor, misconceptions, and secrecy / BY ROBERT H. GIBBONS

Britannic's story began in 1907 when Lord Pirrie, managing director of the Harland and Wolff Shipyards in Belfast, met with J. Bruce Ismay, chairman of the White Star Line. Over dinner, plans were discussed for three large steamships that would

become the finest and most luxurious in the world.

The first grand vessel was laid down in December 1908 and launched on 20 October 1910. She was given a giant's name — *Olympic*! On 21 March 1909, her sister was laid down in the slipway beside her.

This was the ill-fated *Titanic*, launched on 31 May 1911. With the *Olympic* in service, and *Titanic* in her fitting-out basin, Yard Number 433 was laid down in November 1911 in the

Olympic's slipway. *Olympic* was back at Harland and Wolff for repair of damage sustained in a collision with HMS *Hawke* in the Solent on 20 September 1911. The three sisters were together for only a brief time. In April, *Titanic* set out on her first-and last-voyage.

During the late night hours of the 14th and the early morning hours of the 15th of April, the *Titanic* struck an iceberg and sank in the North Atlantic.

Work was suspended on Yard No. 433 pending the results of the American and British inquiries into the *Titanic* disaster. As a result, major changes were made in the new ship's construction.

The double bottom — evident on the *Titanic* — was extended to 4-ft above the waterline, creating an inner hull. The width was increased to 94-ft from the 92-ft beam of the other two sisters. Sixteen

transverse bulkheads were fitted, five of them extended to 40-ft above the waterline, another direct consequence of the *Titanic* disaster. "She could float with any six compartments flooded," said the publicity material!

As the ship grew, she reflected the clean lines of her earlier sisters. Plans showed four funnels with three providing draft for the 159 furnaces in the 29 boilers installed to furnish steam for the two reciprocating engines and the center turbine. Like the *Titanic*, she had a glass-enclosed screen on the forward part of A Deck; but unlike her predecessors, she had enclosed well decks, a kennel on the Boat Deck, and improved internal arrangements of cabins and public rooms. White Star publicity material described the accommodations to hold over 2500 passengers and 950 crew. According to

White Star brochures, a special emergency electric generating plant was situated 20-ft above the waterline, connected to 500 lamps fitted throughout the passenger, crew, and machinery compartments, and also connected to the wireless apparatus and other crucial equipment.

Another special feature resulting from the lesson of the *Titanic*, was the revolutionary lifeboat arrangement planned for the ship. The *Titanic* had been equipped with Welin Davits, which were designed to lower two or more sets of boats. The White Star Line brochure describes the specially designed motorized gantry davits for No. 433: "The vessel is equipped with the latest and most approved type of electrically-driven boat-lowering gear, by means of which a very large number of boats can, one after the other, be put over the side of the vessel and lowered in much less time than was possible under the old system of davits."

Painting of the *Britannic* captures the power and size of the elite ocean liner.

