

The Titanic Disaster.

Historical Background.

In the early 1900, there were no passenger planes. If you wanted to cross a vast ocean, you had to go by sea. Two rival companies running fleets of ships were the Cunard Line and the White Star Line. Both carried mail and passengers between America and Europe. When Cunard introduced two fast new ships, White Star was determined not to be outdone.

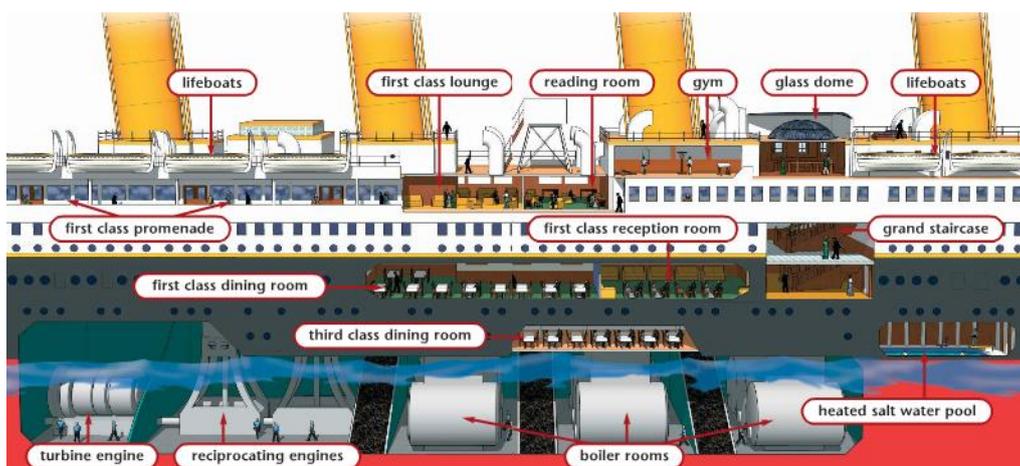
Bruce Ismay, the White Star boss, commissioned three huge liners with names to reflect their size - Olympic, Titanic and Gigantic. He believed this would ensure victory over Cunard in the race for Atlantic passengers.

White Star employed the shipbuilders Harland and Wolff for the job. They owned an enormous shipyard in Belfast, Ireland. In March 1909 they began work. No expense was spared and gradually the Titanic began to tower over the other ships. Little did they know she would become infamous as the ship which sank, drowning more than 1,400 people.

A lesson for the future

The Titanic disaster forced the world to realise that no ship, however powerful and well-designed, was unsinkable. New laws were passed to make sure such a disaster could never happen again. Ice patrols were introduced, all new ships were ordered to carry lifeboats to seat all their passengers, and a radio operator had to be on duty in each ship 24 hours a day.

Luxury Ship-building.



For safety reasons, the ship's steel hulls were divided into 16 separate compartments. She would stay afloat even if a massive hole was gouged in the side and two of the compartments were flooded. According to The Shipbuilder magazine, the Titanic was practically unsinkable.

The accommodation was designed for three classes of passengers: luxurious suites for first-class, comfortable rooms for second-class and basic cabins with bunk-beds for third-class.

On April 10th 1912 the Titanic would leave Southampton docks for New York, USA. If all went to plan, the journey would take six days. However she was never to reach her destination. Sinking deep in the North Atlantic Ocean she was next seen by oceanographer Robert Ballard and photographer Emory Kristof in the early hours of September 1, 1985. Kristof and his crew used a submersible search vehicle to dive into the icy depths and shoot more than 20,000 frames. It was the find of the century!



The Sinking

There were 1,316 fare paying passengers plus more than 900 members of crew aboard the Titanic. Captain Edward John Smith was in charge of a range of workers which included officers, seamen, radio operators, engineers, waiters, musicians and dozens of firemen who had the hot, dusty job of keeping the boiler fires burning around the clock.

Two of the crew were the lookouts, Frederick Fleet and Reginald Lee, who sighted the iceberg that would sink the ship at 11:40 on the evening of April 14th 1912.

However Captain Smith wasn't on the bridge when the collision took place. His first officer William Murdoch took the message and immediately ordered the crew to shut down the engines and steer the ship hard to port. The ship was unable to avoid the collision completely and scraped along the side of the iceberg. The collision was so gentle; the passengers felt nothing but a slight bump. But Captain Smith, resting in his cabin, felt a jolt and hurried up to the bridge.

The iceberg had ripped several holes in a row along the hull. Now ice-cold water was flooding the cargo and boiler rooms. Smith knew the ship was safe as long as only two compartments were flooded. But water was already pouring into five. The Titanic was going to sink.

John Phillips

The radio operator, John Phillips, sent out a distress call. He gave the ship's position and a CQD. Meaning "Come Quick - Danger!"

There were several ships nearby, but it was midnight and most radio operators had finished work and gone to bed. By luck the message was received by the Carpathia but she was more than three hours away.

Phillips stayed at his post and died in the tragedy. He and his family lived in Godalming, Surrey where a memorial to his bravery is located.



Lifeboats.

The Titanic's designers had believed the great liner was so sturdy; it could act as its own lifeboat. They never dreamed it might sink. There were only 20 lifeboats, enough for 1,200 people but 2,200 needed to be rescued.

Women and children were asked to board the boats first but hardly any of them wanted to because the ship still seemed stable in the water. Then the first few lifeboats were therefore lowered into the sea, still only half-full.

Eventually when the ship was at a definite slant and tables and chairs began to slide across the deck, people began to panic. Meanwhile the brave band members kept playing jazz music in the hope it would keep people's spirits up. They were all to perish.

Bruce Ismay got a place in one of the last lifeboats. But Captain Smith refused to desert his ship and stayed with hundreds of others, watching helplessly, as the lifeboats rowed away.

Rescue at last!

Eventually the Carpathia arrived and the survivors struggled aboard. Out of more than 2,200 passengers only 705 survived. She arrived in New York on the evening of Thursday April 18th.

Taken from an account by Anna Claybourne and Katie Daynes.