

Not Enough Boats for All

Perhaps the most controversial and imponderable question facing the British and American Boards of Enquiry was that of lifeboat capacity. Today it seems madness that legislation was not in place to ensure that, at the very minimum, at least one lifeboat space was available for every passenger and crewmember of the world's largest ship.

Titanic sailed with 2,228 persons on board, below the maximum 3,547 she could accommodate. Yet the sixteen lifeboats and four 'collapsible' boats had a capacity of 1,178 or about a third of what was needed for a full ship. Board of Trade regulations of 1884 had not been updated despite the huge growth in ship size. Indeed Titanic had 216 spaces above minimum requirements.

A further fact was that Harland and Wolff's original design shows that it was intended to have three lifeboats at each station. Special 'double acting' Welin davits had been installed that could accommodate two boats nesting in one another with a third boat inboard on the deck. If such an arrangement had been installed then lifeboat capacity would have been tripled at a stroke.

No definitive answer has come forth as to why the owners settled for the almost minimum capacity under the woefully inadequate standards of the day. Aesthetics played a big role in the design of these ships and perhaps they felt her clean lines would be compromised by a clutter of boats. Another factor was the belief that if the ship was "practically unsinkable" all the lifeboats would be used for, would be to ferry passengers from an incapacitated Titanic to waiting steamers called to her aid by the world's most powerful marine wireless telegraph station.

Whatever the reasoning, the lifeboat question haunted survivors, victims' families and White Star officials for years. Prominent among these was the owner J. Bruce Ismay who made the decision to take one of the lifeboat spaces that could have gone to any one of his passengers or crew who were to meet their fate that night.