

Underwater Archaeology or Grave Robbing?

With the discovery of Titanic on the ocean floor in 1985 a number of companies were formed with the express purpose of visiting the wreck and retrieving objects and effects from the ship. Over the past dozen years hundreds of artefacts have returned from the deep to be conserved, documented and exhibited.

Millions of people have visited special exhibitions round the globe viewing these objects and learning more on the ship and how it met its fate. Those organising the expeditions would argue that they are undertaking proper marine archaeology and following stringent museum conservation and display practice.

But many have questioned the ethics of these operations. Titanic survivors were divided on the merits of the recovery of artefacts with some viewing those involved as nothing more than grave robbers and 'pirates'. The International Congress of Maritime Museums, which many United Kingdom Maritime Museums are members of, passed a resolution in 1988 that no member museum should exhibit artefacts raised from the wreck. Despite this a number of major museums have shown this material.

Titanic Honour and Glory does not contain any objects from the Titanic wreck site. It has objects that were on the ship for the trip from Belfast to Southampton and to Cherbourg. Beautiful objects from Olympic and other White Star Line ships further augment the exhibition.

And yet there are also artefacts recovered from Britannic which was sunk by enemy action in 1916 with the loss of twenty-nine people. The story of Britannic is virtually unknown compared with Titanic and therefore it is unlikely to arouse controversy but one can argue that the principal should still apply.

Legacy

The considerable press attention given to Olympic and Titanic up to the latter's fateful voyage gave these ships a high level of public recognition. The many human stories of loss and heroism that surrounded Titanic's end served to feed the public's fascination with these ships.

The White Star Line had the challenge of rebuilding confidence in sea travel and embarked on an emergency programme of works. This culminated in the advertising of Olympic as 'two ships in one' by April 1913 with the installation of lifeboats occurring immediately after Titanic's loss.

The days and months following the sinking saw a huge number of commemorative articles, booklets, postcards and even sheet music produced. Public appetite for all sorts of artefacts seemed unabated and the hundreds of appeals for funds resulted in memorials to the passengers and crew being erected in towns and cities associated with the ship.

Preoccupation with the 1914-18 war saw an end to the fascination with Titanic.

It was the publication in the 1950s of the book 'A Night to Remember' by Walter Lord that triggered renewed interest in the story that would continue into the 21st century.

Such was the interest generated by the book that a highly successful film of the same name was released in 1956. By the 1960s and 70s there were serious efforts to locate the wreck

site. Technology of that period was not advanced enough to result in success, nevertheless the public's interest was aroused.

When Titanic was discovered on 1st September 1985 by a team of oceanographers lead by Dr. Robert Ballard the world's media gave the story massive coverage. Many crucial questions about the ship's fate were quickly resolved most notably the fact that she had broken in two, just as some eyewitnesses had stated. Interest was such that a further series of expeditions were mounted over the next decade.

The release of the Hollywood film Titanic in 1997 and its subsequent massive box office record brought the story of the ship to new audiences. The film and its spin-offs resulted in the fact that Titanic is probably the best-known ship ever built, a fact that will undoubtedly continue right up to her hundredth anniversary in 2012.