

BISMARCK

Compiled by Mark Chirnside

Although sometimes overlooked, *Bismarck's* completion for the White Star Line (who subsequently renamed her *Majestic*) was not without its difficulties. While a great deal of new information was published in my *Majestic* book, for reasons of space and editorial considerations there was little chance of including everything. For those interested in this aspect of the liner's history, this page has been added to the 'RMS *Majestic* Notebook.'

In July 1920 Harland & Wolff's Messrs. Wilding and Rebbeck compiled a report about *Bismarck's* condition as she lay at Hamburg. White Star's Harold Sanderson requested that it be forwarded to Cunard's Sir Alfred Booth for his information.

NOTES OF AN INSPECTION OF SS *BISMARCK*

As stated in our verbal report on Friday, 2nd July, the *Bismarck* was inspected by Mr. W. J. Willett Bruce of the White Star Line and Mr. Boyd of the Ministry of Shipping, in the forenoon of Wednesday, the 30th ultimo. The information was got from them by a careful cross-examination the same evening, and read over with them and verified the following day.

In our verbal report in London, some details of the position of the work on the ship were given, and what follows is only for the purposes of record: -

Machinery and Boilers:

The machinery spaces are all nearly complete, and the representative of the Builders' Firm, who accompanied the Inspectors, stated that the work could be completed in about six weeks, the number of men required being about 300. So far as could be seen, all auxiliaries, deck and otherwise, are onboard, and all pipe connections in position and 90% coupled up. A few auxiliaries are apparently motor driven, but the majority including fans throughout the ship are steam driven. The ship has turbo driven dynamos, understood to be 4 in number, all in position and connected up. The main leads are carried up to the switch board position, but the switchboard itself has not yet been erected. Steam, exhaust, water, tank and bilge piping is all complete. The propellers, which are not yet fitted, are

being made of cast steel, in view of the shortage of bronze.

Boilers:

There are 48 coal fired boilers of the Durr water tube type, each with 3 furnace doors, with Schmidt super heaters and Howden's forced draught. The boilers are in 4 rooms, each containing 12 boilers. The Boiler Rooms have no longitudinal subdivision, and no cross bunkers, side bunkers being fitted throughout. No boiler lagging or cleaning has yet been done, though the preparatory work is all complete. As regards deck equipment, all auxiliaries are in position and connected up. The steering gear is actually in its compartment ready for sliding into position after the rudder has been shipped. The masts, mast tables, bulwarks, rails, davits, boat control gear, and castings are all in position. Priming coats have been applied to nearly all steel work, and these are in good condition, but no final painting has been done anywhere on the ship. No Navigating Bridge equipment is onboard, though it is understood all has been ordered, and the connections are now being completed. The teak wood Charthouse is almost complete. It might be noted that there are 3 expansion joints, 2 closely spaced forward of midships, and the third well aft of midships. Smiths' work and Shipwrights' work is all practically completed, as are also all ship's side discharges, and, judging by the general conditions, the plumbing work is well on, though little could be seen.

Accommodation:

In the 1st Class Public and Luxe Rooms, no decoration has been done. This work is a separate Owners' contract upon which all work has been stopped in view of the uncertainty as to the future of the ship. In general, no internal fittings have been installed in the Cabins, Turkish, Electric, and other Bathrooms; no lifts have as yet been installed. Ventilation throughout the ship is mechanical, and ventilation trunking is generally in place. All main leads for bell wiring and electric light are complete; no fittings are yet installed. In the 2nd Class Dining Saloon, the material is all finished and waiting erection. Nothing is onboard for the remaining

2nd Class Public Rooms. 2nd Class Staterooms were all locked up, and the inference is that most of the work is completed. Neither 3rd Class accommodation aft nor 4th Class forward was inspected, but the impression gained was that the spaces were finished, but no fittings in place. Firemen's accommodation, which is abreast the Boiler Rooms over the wing bunkers, is complete, except for the upholstery, as is also that for the Engineering Artificers' Class.

Galleys and Pantries:

In these the heavy fittings are all completed and in position, though special machinery, such as dough mixers, etc., has not yet been installed. The Provision and Refrigerated Stores are all quite complete with the exception of tiling.

Beyond the grounding, no painting has been done anywhere on the ship, and nowhere have the tiles yet been laid, due, it is understood, to the extreme difficulty in obtaining tiles in Germany.

Summing up, it may be stated that the ship is 85 to 90% completed. Dr. Blohm estimated that the ship would be completed in Germany in about 9 months with from 2,000 to 2,500 men. This estimate was given after he had been informed by Herr Artus, the German Liaison Officer, that the Inspectors were visiting the ship with a view to considering her being taken over by the British and possibly completed in the United Kingdom. Her completion in this country might be a more lengthy process, as time would be required to pick up the work that had already been done, even though we were provided with accurate and full detail plans that had been worked to for the connections already on board. But the determining factor would be the time taken in completing the necessary decorations of the Public Rooms which are numerous, and are large in size.

If the rudder were shipped, the vessel could be towed over to this country at any time, and this appears to be the better way of getting her cross.

[Signed] Ed. Wilding.
F. E. Rebbeck.

On July 21st 1920, a meeting was held at The Hague to discuss *Bismarck's* future.

PRECIS OF STATEMENTS MADE AT MEETING HELD AT THE HAGUE...

Present: -

Mr. Blohm

Mr. Fischer

Mr. Suchting

Mr. Sanderson

Mr. Cauty

Mr. Willet t Bruce

Mr. Wilding

Mr. Boyd

Mr. Sykes

Mr. Sanderson opened the proceedings by making a short statement as to the future of the ship, provided the present negotiations proceeding between the White Star Line and the British Government resulted in the vessel being purchased by the White Star Line. In this event, it was intended that the ship should be completed for, and run by the White Star Line as one of their own vessels but that, just as in the case of the *Imperator*, the Cunard Co. and the White Star Line would both have a financial interest in the ship. All orders to the builders and all arrangements for completion and the carrying out of any alterations necessary for the new service of the ship would be given by the White Star Line or by their advisers, Messrs. Harland & Wolff.

He pointed out that the White Star Line had no technical staff of their own and were dependent for advice on such matters on their builders and hoped that he could equally rely on Messrs. Blohm & Voss in the same way.

He went on to say that he hoped Mr. Blohm would appreciate the feeling he had, without in any way reflecting on the builders, of some misgivings as to the possibility of the ship being satisfactorily completed in Germany under present conditions and stated that he would like to be assured that there would be no difficulty in this matter either from the firm's staff or their workmen.

He alluded to the great reputation of the firm of Blohm and Voss and felt convinced that if they undertook to complete the ship in Germany they would do so to the

best of their ability and for the enhancement of their present reputation.

He asked if the builders would have any objection to a representative of Messrs. Harland & Wolff being stationed in Hamburg to assist in arranging that the ship should be completed in accordance with the standard practices of the new ownership and being given all facilities for inspection and advising as to the progress of the work on the ship.

Mr. Blohm, in his reply, thanked Mr. Sanderson for the frank way in which he had explained the situation and for the generous tribute he had paid to the firm which he represented.

He hastened to give an assurance that, if they were ordered to complete the ship in Hamburg, they would give the same attention to the work as if she were being completed for a German ownership. He was jealous of their reputation as shipbuilders and would do everything possible to see that the ship was completed in accordance with their traditions and with the requirements of the new owners.

He had little doubt that their employees would work well on the job and he anticipated very little trouble in that direction.

As to the presence of a representative of Messrs. Harland & Wolff in Hamburg, he quite appreciated the situation and would raise no objection to this course being adopted and would give him every facility for carrying out his duties.

He expressed the hope that, in the event of the vessel passing to the White Star Line, there would be direct dealing between themselves and the White Star Line as regards the alterations to and the completion of the ship and that there would be no passing of orders through the agency of the respective Governments.

He pointed out that under pressure from the German Government they were obliged to proceed with work in the ship in accordance with the present design but that they were giving out no further orders for new material for the ship and urged that any decision as regards the completion of the ship should be arrived at with as little delay as possible.

Mr. Sanderson, in reply, stated that he would do all in his power to cause an early decision on the financial side of the matter to be reached and fully agreed that

once the ship is formally allotted to the White Star Line, there should be only direct dealings between the new owners and the builders.

He thanked Mr. Blohm for the frank nature of his statement and said he felt very much reassured by what he had said and assured him that he would do everything possible to render the position, which was naturally embarrassing, as easy as possible for all concerned.

The discussion then became general and dealt mainly with technical details.

While it is well-known that the October 1920 fire delayed the liner's completion, the detailed reports above on these pages relate to her condition prior to the fire. One November 1921 newspaper article recalled that the removal of copper and brass from the hull in the final stages of the war had been necessary for the construction of torpedoes for German U-boats, yet it also went into some detail regarding the fire:

'Fire broke out in her hull in October 1920, but despite reports current that she was ruined it later developed that the fire started in a coal bunker used as a store room and worked upward until fireproofing arrested its progress. It was rumoured at the time that some Germans had fired her purposely to prevent her from being turned over to the Allies, but the resultant loss was borne by them, as they must turn the ship over complete.

'During much of 1920 and the present year a thousand men have been kept busy on her. Her funnels were hoisted into place last May. Representatives of Harland & Wolff and the White Star Line are keeping track of the progress of the ship and are confident that she will be moved to Southampton on time to make her first voyage next April. The *Homeric* is due to precede her to this port by about a month.'

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www.markchirnside.co.uk

Mark Chirnside's Reception Room 2004-