

RMS *OLYMPIC*: THE MIS-DATED REFIT

By Mark Chirnside

It is widely known that *Olympic* underwent four major refits during her service life. One in 1912-13 followed *Titanic*'s loss, incorporating new safety features and improvements largely confined to her first class accommodation. In 1919-20 came the conversion from a coal-burner to an oil-burner, and the restoration of her interiors for the post-war period. By 1928, her interiors were upgraded to cope with the new tourist class, and first class accommodation was improved. And, in 1932-33 *Olympic*'s final major refit involved engine work and further improvements in passenger accommodation. However, evidence is increasingly coming to light that some of the changes attributed to her third major refit around 1928 were actually incorporated over time, making it two more minor affairs.

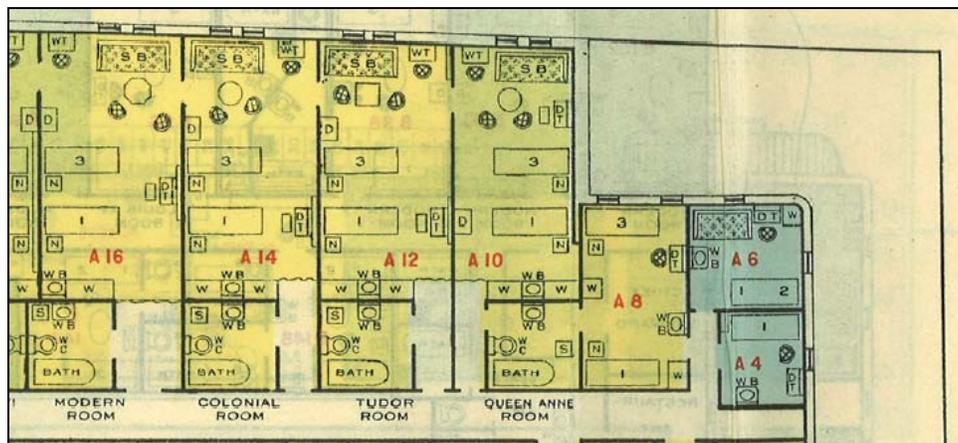
Although '1928' is often given as the date of *Olympic*'s third major refit, documentation exists from 1927 as to some of the changes which involved creating the new tourist class public rooms. (One of these is shown in the 1931 deck plan presented in the Poderjay article on this website.) It seems certain that this work was completed while *Olympic* was out of service for around a month between late December 1927 and late January 1928. The *New York Times* referred to the changes for tourist class and reported in February 1928: 'but the first class accommodations have been changed also. Suites de luxe [sic] have been installed.' It also spoke in general terms and said: 'cabins have been altered, companionways constructed, bulkheads and doorways built and old ones removed, all within six weeks.'

At first glance, the newspaper's statements appears to confirm the view that the first class promenade forward of the grand staircase on B-deck [by 1911 lettering] was removed in the 1927-28 refit and replaced by the new luxury suites to cater for ever-more demanding passengers. Further confirmation appeared to come from the deck plans (dating from 1928 or afterwards) that showed *Olympic*'s interior arrangements in her later life. To the best of my knowledge at the time of writing, none of these available plans have shown either the tourist class changes without the new first class suites or vice versa, which implied that these changes were made at the same time. This view appeared to be confirmed again in a contemporary White Star Line brochure dating from around 1928, which mentioned changes in first class including the redecoration of the Café Parisian:

'Several additional cabins - on decks A and B - each with private bath and lavatory. The demand for these deluxe accommodations always far exceeds the supply!'

However, it was at this stage that doubts began to surface. The White Star Line saw the new suites on B-deck as a significant improvement to *Olympic*'s first class

accommodation. Although these did indeed have their own private facilities it is a little dismissive to call them ‘several additional cabins’ when they were in fact sixteen luxury suites decorated in a variety of styles. Competition on the Atlantic was intensifying in the late 1920s and the White Star Line wanted to emphasize the *Olympic’s* merits to the travelling public; after a poor year in 1926, the liner’s average passenger lists rose every year until the depression struck in 1930. The classes that benefited most were second, tourist and third class. While these new suites would not massively raise *Olympic’s* average first class passenger lists, they would have had an influence of sorts and I checked her carryings in 1927, 1928 and 1929. These showed an average of 391 in 1927, dipping to 343 in 1928 and 365 in 1929 – hardly conclusive evidence as to any changes, while the best list in any of those years came in 1928 when *Olympic* carried almost seven hundred first class passengers westbound. Yet in light of increasing competition *Olympic’s* first class passenger lists certainly did not show a declining trend, and what the figures do not show is the earnings from first class, as the White Star Line could earn far more from two people booking one of the new luxury suites than one of the lesser first class staterooms.



Above: This summer 1934 plan shows the forward end of B-deck on the port side, after the new first class suites had been installed. From left to right, a few of the many decorative styles are indicated: Modern A16, Colonial A14, Tudor A12, and Queen Anne A10. The lettering of the first class rooms has changed, since B-deck had been renamed A-deck by this time. The deckhouse corner formed by staterooms A8, A6 and A4 indicates the original width of the deckhouse, before the promenade was removed to make room for the new suites. These three rooms were in the small minority of first class accommodation on this deck without their own private facilities, yet the occupants had a fine view. At the top of the plan the narrowing of the hull is visible – as each suite closer to the bow (on the right) is shorter than the previous one. The spacing of the suite windows is visible on the plan, showing that they were cut in pairs and replaced the evenly-spaced windows that had been here (forming the enclosed promenade) before the new suites were added. This change is visible in exterior photographs of the *Olympic* taken before and after the new suites were installed. (Author’s collection)

Reinforcing these doubts as to the time the suites were installed was a photo in Bruce Beveridge's possession which was specifically dated to June 1928. This showed the windows along B-deck just as they had been ever since 1913, whereas photos from the 1930s clearly show the distinctive window pattern of the new suites forward on B-deck. These windows were clearly missing from the photo, which was taken *after* the suites had been believed to have been installed.

Whereas one photograph, even one dated so precisely, cast doubt on the date that the new suites had been added, it was not conclusive proof by itself. After all, what was to say that the photo should not have been dated a year afterwards in 1929? However, after investigation the necessary proof was not long in coming.

Some newspaper references dating from 1929 referred to new suites being added 'recently,' yet that could still have meant up to a year before. After a little digging, one reference from February 1929 stated that

'sixteen new staterooms in the styles of Louis XVI and Queen Anne were built and fifty-three additional private bathrooms were installed in the first class quarters. To provide the space necessary for these alterations a section of the B-deck forward of the main companionway was utilised and the rooms were extended to the side of the ship.'

This was a clear reference to the new B-deck suites, even if far more individual styles had been used than the above newspaper report stated. It noted that some of the suite rooms were twenty-two feet long, and that every single one was 'equipped with a private bathroom and roomy wardrobes.' To make matters even better, the report clarified when the first class dining saloon's forward bulkhead was moved forward three frames (nine feet). It noted that the dining saloon had been extended and a dance floor fitted between December 22nd 1928 and *Olympic's* February 13th 1929 Southampton departure, as well as indicating some of the redecoration of *Olympic's* first class oak companionways. Since this report appears largely accurate, it seems reasonable to conclude that the extension of the first class dining saloon and the installation of the new B-deck suites (as well as some of the new private baths) took place during the refit at the turn of 1928-29. The redecoration of the Café Parisian, other minor changes to first class, the new tourist class public rooms, construction of new third class rooms forward on D-deck [1911 lettering] and other alterations had taken place during the 1927-28 refit. In fact, the new first class suites are referred to in a previously overlooked comment from Board of Trade notes dated March 1929:

'During the "lay-up" the first class accommodation on the bridge deck for about 98 feet at the fore end has

been carried out to the [ship's] side. The plating is 0.38 inches and [the] framing 6½ x 4½ x 0.5 inch angles at the normal [hull] frame spacing, replacing angles [of] 6½ x 4½ x 0.5 inches on alternate frames...

'Slight alterations have been made in the first class passenger accommodation by the provision of a number of bathrooms en suite.'

Confirming the Board of Trade notes, I noted an evacuation plan showing *Olympic's* new tourist class public rooms and the forward end of B-deck bereft of the new suites – which is yet more confirmation that they were not installed at the same time.

While I made every effort to assign these changes their correct dates in my *Olympic* book, it appears that I made a mistake in attributing some of the changes of 1928-29 to the refit over the turn of 1927-28. In truth, it would have been far easier to maintain *Olympic's* hectic schedule (forty-six round trips from 1927-29) by allocating the changes to two overhauls, rather than taking the ship out of service for a longer overhaul. It is hoped that this article will help to correct the apparent myth that there was one major refit in 1928, whereas instead the changes occurred at the turn of 1927-28 and 1928-29, during the liner's winter overhaul. However, the evidence presented in the earlier part of the article serves to highlight the necessity of questioning *everything!*

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