

## HMHS *BRITANNIC*: A MYSTERY OF NUMBERS

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The original article examined what was then a new photograph of *Britannic*, showing her official transport number as 'G.608', in the early part of 1916, and another which showed it as 'G.618' in October 1916. (It has been reproduced below, exactly as written in 2008.)

In May 2019, Ralph Currell discovered that *Llangorse* (formerly *Llanover*) was assigned the number 'G.608' with effect from 17 October 1916. The numbers were unique and would not have been assigned to different ships at the same time, thereby confirming the photographic evidence that *Britannic's* number had changed to 'G.618' by October 1916 and supporting the sailing orders given to Captain Bartlett on 18 October 1916.

The evidence available indicates *Britannic* had the number 'G.608' for the first phase of her career as a hospital ship and then 'G.618' for the second phase. The reason for the change is still not known as it is not specifically documented. However, it seems reasonable to suggest that the original number was simply freed up to be allocated to another ship, when *Britannic* was initially withdrawn from hospital ship service. She was then allocated another one when she returned to service a few months later.

**T**here are many gaps in our collective knowledge of His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Britannic*. Despite all the increased interest in recent years, some of these gaps remain. In many ways this is good because it encourages further research into this fascinating ship. Even today, for example, the statistic that the ship was '903 feet' in length is often cited, although a close examination of all the evidence disproves it in a comprehensive fashion. It is possible that the figure stems from press reports that the new liner would be about twenty feet longer than *Olympic*, whose overall length (rounded to the nearest foot) came to 883 feet. Yet even supposedly well-known facts can be open to question as research continues and new information comes to light.

An example of that is the official transport number assigned to *Britannic* when she was in hospital ship service. It had been universally reported as 'G.618,' prior to 2004, with the exception of Captain Bartlett's report following the ship's loss which gave the number as 'G.608.' Captain Bartlett would have been in a position to know his own ship's assigned number, and was intimately acquainted with *Britannic*. However, as the report was completed shortly after the sinking Bartlett's slip could be written off as a minor mistake – only natural under the circumstances. It might be entirely natural to get a single digit wrong, and the letter and other two numbers otherwise matched. It is also fair to point out that such primary source material is generally accessed only by a few researchers, and was not as well-known as the reports of the number 'G.618.'

The Public Records Office (now known as the National Archives) and British Ministry of Defence records both note number 'G.618' for the *Britannic*. For instance, the sailing orders issued to Captain Bartlett on October 18<sup>th</sup> 1916 included that number alongside the ship's name. Indeed, the *Service List: List of Vessels Engaged for Naval, Military and Commercial Purposes, etc.* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office; 1921) shows *Britannic's* identifying number as 'G.618.' There is no record of another number being assigned to her during her all too short life,<sup>1</sup> which seemed to confirm that *Britannic* was only ever assigned one number, and that her number was 'G.618.'

All that changed in 2004, when a new photograph surfaced. It was a stunning, hitherto unknown image of *Britannic* at Southampton in early 1916. The clarity of the photograph was remarkable, and one of the new discoveries to come to light was the number visible below the bridge windows: 'G.608.'<sup>2</sup> Oddly enough, the numbers were not quite on the ship's centreline, for instead of being directly beneath the middle three (out of a total of nine) bridge windows, they were positioned slightly towards *Britannic's* starboard side.



*Britannic's* bridge front as it looked early in 1916, which shows the number 'G.608'. Sometimes written without the full stop (or 'period' as they say in America), the number was displayed with one on the ship herself. The overhead lamp is positioned to illuminate the number at night. (Photo courtesy J & C McCutcheon collection/*The 'Olympic' Class Ships: Olympic, Titanic & Britannic* by Mark Chirnside.)

It did not take long for the number to come to the attention of *Britannic* enthusiasts and researchers. Author J. Kent Layton referenced the new discovery when he published *Atlantic Liners: A Trio of Trios*<sup>3</sup> and it became a hot topic in online debates. Bruce Beveridge considered the possibility that the number 'G.608' had been assigned to *Britannic* for the earlier part of her career, and then changed to 'G.618' when she re-entered service after being idle in the summer of 1916. The present author been thinking along similar lines, yet although it would seem to fit some of the available evidence there were further questions. If the number had changed, why had Captain Bartlett used the old number in his report, after using the new one? Could it have been a simple mistake? Under 'Part III – Signalling, etc.,' of the *Handbook of General Instructions for Masters of Transports and Hospital Ships on Military Service*:

'Transports whose number is preceded by a letter should always include the letter when signalling their number to HM Ships or War Signal Stations.'\*

Although such traffic was kept to a minimum, transports also had to 'illuminate their number boards when passing Calshot Castle after dark, both on the outward and inward voyages'. The number was far from an

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\* As a general rule, the handbook instructions – as the title implied – were applicable to troop transports and hospital ships. Where an instruction only applied to troop transports, a footnote indicated that it was 'not applicable to hospital ships.' It is clear that this instruction, originally issued on October 22<sup>nd</sup> 1914, applied to hospital ships as well.

academic concern, as it had a number of practical uses in service, although it does beg the question as to how often Captain Bartlett himself would have had cause to use it. Surely he should – or would – have been familiar with his ship’s number?

Answers to these questions involved doing some more digging in the existing archival records. It appeared to be the case that no researcher had run across a document with the number ‘G.608’ other than Captain Bartlett’s report. Since there had never been a definitive source for the number ‘G.608,’ the present author had never seriously questioned that ‘G.618’ had always been *Britannic*’s number – until the photographic record proved otherwise. It was possible that documentation might have been overlooked. Although that would have been disappointing, on the other hand at least some more information about that aspect would become available if such documentation did exist and could be located.

One file looked especially hopeful – a tantalising document entitled ‘Hospital Ships: Identification Particulars.’<sup>4</sup> An early entry for *Britannic* on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1915 gave her gross tonnage as 47,500 tons, which turned out to be an under-estimate when she was put on the British registry the following month. Meanwhile, an entry dated August 8<sup>th</sup> 1916 gave an updated estimate of 48,158 tons. She was shown as having two masts and four funnels, and there was a detailed table of particulars, giving the distance between the bow and foremast and other details:

	Bow to foremast	Foremast to funnel	Funnel to funnel	Funnel to funnel	Funnel to funnel	Funnel to mainmast	Mainmast to stern
<i>Britannic</i>	116’16”	125’6”	117’0”	117’6”	117’0”	116’6”	170’0”
<i>Aquitania</i>	141’0”	102’0”	104’0”	104’0”	100’0”	141’0”	192’0”

If the measurements were accurate, the distance between the second and third funnels was a mere six inches greater than the distance between the first and second funnels, and the third and fourth funnels. In contrast there were more significant differences in *Aquitania*’s funnel spacing. Aside from these details, there was no reference to, or explanation of, the identification number. It does seem a little strange in that any difference in funnel spacing would not be very apparent to a distant observer.



Almost a year after the 'G.608' photo had been published, another hitherto unpublished one came to light when it was purchased by leading *Britannic* researcher Michail Michailakis. Taken at Mudros in October 1916, the quality was high enough to ensure that the number 'G.618' was readable on *Britannic's* bridge front.

(Courtesy Michail Michailakis, webmaster  
[www.hospitalshipbritannic.com](http://www.hospitalshipbritannic.com))

It was, then, from the photographic record that *Britannic's* number was confirmed as 'G.618' in October 1916. In conjunction with Captain Bartlett's sailing orders that month, giving the same number, it seems clear that the number was being used at the time of the ship's loss and had been amended on the bridge front itself. As with the number in the earlier photo, it was not displayed precisely on the ship's centreline, but rather slightly to starboard. This seems to indicate the probability that only one digit was amended, and that the others were merely displayed as before. In spite of the amendment, the size of the letters and numbers appear to be precisely the same as before, although Michail's photo was taken from a greater distance.<sup>5</sup>

In the absence of any documents outlining a change from 'G.608' to 'G.618,' at least the photographic record indicates that *Britannic's* number had definitely been changed by October 1916. Yet finding the reason why it changed is still problematic. Other hospital ships' numbers may be of some use. An interesting reference appears in the sailing orders given to *Aquitania's* commander, when she was sent to the Mediterranean in December 1916 to provide much needed transportation for casualties who had been due to return on the *Britannic*. The orders were addressed:

The Master,  
 SS *Aquitania*,  
 Hospital Ship No. G.602  
 U/c The Principal Naval Transport Officer,  
 Southampton.

Although further research is needed to confirm it for definite, it is interesting that the number 'G.602' – assigned to *Aquitania* – would presumably have been issued before the number 'G.608' was given initially to *Britannic* when she entered service in December 1915. This seems only natural, since *Aquitania*'s hospital ship service dated back to September 1915, yet if that was the case it raises the question as to why *Aquitania*'s number remained the same in December 1916 after *Britannic*'s had been changed. Both vessels had been withdrawn from service in the intervening period as demand for hospital ships fell, so it seems impossible to attribute it to *Aquitania* remaining in service, as she did not.

Even this conclusion is tenuous, however. Hospital ships' assigned numbers are not ordered in any logical sequence, while there were different numbering conventions for troop transports and hospital ships. If it could be *assumed* that *Aquitania* was issued with G.602 and then *Britannic* with G.608 as the hospital ships were called up, the problem is that there does not appear to be any record of any of the numbers in between being used. Hospital ship numbers beginning with G include *Western Australia*'s G.16, *Glenart Castle*'s G.218, *Guildford Castle*'s G.601, *Aquitania*'s G.602, *Britannic*'s G.608 and G.618, *Warilda*'s G.681, *Ebani*'s G.821, *Llandovery Castle*'s G.1026, *Herefordshire*'s G.2016 and *Wandilla*'s G.6801. Despite the higher frequency of numbers that use a 6, 8, and a 1 somewhere as part of a four-figure letter and number combination, there is no discernable pattern that might help to determine a chronological order or system.†

It may be that *Britannic*'s number was changed as a result of deliberate misinformation, simply to add a little more confusion into the mix for

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† It is interesting to note that no number was given for *Mauretania*, for although her name was listed there was merely a blank space and a hyphen where the designated number should have been recorded. However, when she was photographed at Halifax around late October to late November 1916, she bore clearly the number 'G.1620'. (See: Newall, Peter. *Mauretania: Triumph & Resurrection*. Ships in Focus Publications; 2006. Pages 31-34.)

enemy spies.<sup>6</sup> (Security was a serious issue in wartime, even on hospital ships. Nurses and RAMC personnel were warned that the use of cameras was forbidden in the docks area – and it was even illegal to photograph His Majesty’s vessels.) If this was the case, then it does raise some intriguing questions: why change the number by a mere digit? Why bother to change it when *Britannic* was one of a very few four-funnelled hospital ships in service? To the nautical observer, the differences between – for example – *Mauretania* and *Britannic* would have been fairly easily identifiable. By 1916, the prestigious *Mauretania* had held the Blue Riband for seven years, while *Britannic* was the largest British vessel in service.‡

The British authorities were made aware of potential for confusion that was created by the similarity of transport numbers, in the case of the Canadian service. Towards the end of January 1916, Commander R. M. Stephens, Chief of Staff at the Department of the Naval Service in Ottawa, Ontario, was asked to ‘confirm the number of the *Frankmere* as 2610, and that of the *Sellasia* as G.2610, as you will notice the only difference is the addition of the letter, and the similarity of the numbers may easily lead to confusion, particularly in telegraphing.’ Although they were steamers engaged on the Canadian service, the general observation was interesting. Only a fortnight later, Stephens was told that ‘only today the Transport numbers of the *Sellasia* and *Frankmere* were mixed up in a telegraphic message.’ Meanwhile, *Egori*’s number B.621 was felt to be too similar to *Harmattan*’s G.621 and Stephens was

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‡ Eric Longo makes some interesting observations regarding the designated numbers and their display, speculating:

‘It is reasonable to assume the number plaques were intended to be seen – at the size they were they were intended to be seen at a close range. This would mean in port, where most time would be spent tied up. There is even a lamp above the number plaque in the “G.608” photo to illuminate the number at night. Why do that? The ships are painted out of their respective line colours, all made to appear the same (as a hospital ship anyway...and this generic appearance helps the number switch idea) and then a tiny plaque is illuminated at night with an ID number on it? From my experience (very limited though it is) it seems when you are right up on top of these huge vessels, as a spy might be, it is hard to “see the forest for the trees” at such close range – you might see a four funnelled vessel, but which? This lends some weight to the notion that these plaques would undergo change, rather frequently, to obfuscate which ship was where. Perhaps the small number of these four funnels liners, of great value, made it even more imperative to keep the enemy guessing – which four funnelled vessel where etc.. This would then lead into the idea of the shifting numbers on these ships.’

told: 'I suggest you point out to the Admiralty the desirability of having more distinctive numbers allotted to the steamers on the Canadian Transport Service.' On March 4<sup>th</sup> 1916, the Director of Transports E. J. Foley pointed out to Stephens that ships' names could be used as well as their numbers, in order to help prevent confusion. He wrote: 'The present system of numbering was adopted by the Admiralty after thorough consideration and was decided upon for convenience of communication between transports and H. M. Ships, and it is therefore regretted that it cannot be changed.' Although these events were related to the Canadian service, they do illustrate some of the potential difficulties if similar numbers were used – whether on troop transports or hospital ships. Yet no mention was made of hospital ships or the Mediterranean service. An interesting memo from February 8<sup>th</sup> 1916 stated that 'no complaints to this effect have been received from other Transport Officers, unless the action of the Mudros authorities in assigning new numbers be regarded as a complaint.'

The new 'local' numbers assigned by the authorities at Mudros seem to have created some confusion, as one minute outlined:

'All transports are given a number before they leave the United Kingdom and these numbers are portions of a special series included in the pendant board. It has been the practise in the Eastern Mediterranean to allot to the ships employed out there an entirely new series of numbers and this has led to a very considerable amount of trouble in connection with the mails and parcels for the ships. In consequence the Transport Officers at Cairo and Mudros were asked to discontinue the practise.'

Although a telegram from the Admiralty to the Vice Admiral Commanding Eastern Mediterranean had been sent on January 12<sup>th</sup> 1916, stating that 'instructions should be issued' for the local numbers to be abolished, it had not solved the problem:

'This has had no effect...The *Transylvania* reported herself as Z47, which, of course, would not be recognised by the Admiral Superintendent at Devonport or any HM Ship. It is proposed therefore to telegraph to the Vice-Admiral Commanding Eastern Mediterranean definitive instructions that the re-numbering of transports in the Eastern Mediterranean is to be discontinued at once, that all numbers allotted in the Mediterranean are to be

cancelled, and the numbers allocated at home reinstated and used in future.'

Never mind confusing the enemy! There seemed to be enough confusion amongst the British authorities themselves. Another telegram was issued on October 12<sup>th</sup> 1916, after mounting concerns had been reported in September 1916, yet the problem with local numbers may not be of much use as far as the *Britannic* research is concerned. They illustrate some general concerns at the time, but they do not shed any light on *Britannic* herself.

On September 8<sup>th</sup> 1915, an interesting list of transports and hospital ships in the Mediterranean included *Aquitania* and gave her a number of 32, while *Asturias* had the number (15) [original brackets]. *Britannic* had not been readied for service at the time. Since we are dealing with a local set of numbers as opposed to her official transport number assigned by the British authorities, once again no direct connection can be made regarding the change in *Britannic's* official number. Even if there was confusion created by local numbers, these were very different to the official numbers and it does not seem likely that it would have influenced the change in *Britannic's* case. It is also worthwhile remembering that the Admiralty had given the system of numbering 'thorough consideration' and were unwilling to change it as far as the Canadian transports were concerned, so it seems unlikely that they would have made any exceptions.

As yet, then, there does not seem to be a definitive answer as to why *Britannic's* number was changed from G.608 to G.618. Three years of ongoing research (hitting numerous 'dead ends') have not answered that question. It is a great step forward to confirm that *Britannic* was assigned two similar numbers, given that past references to G.608 had always been considered a simple mistake. It is hoped that further research may shed light on the question as to *precisely* when and why *Britannic's* number was changed.

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<sup>1</sup> MacKenzie, Iain. Curatorial Officer. Admiralty Library – Naval Historical Branch (Naval Staff) Ministry of Defence. *Olympic and Britannic*. April 5<sup>th</sup> 2006. Personal letter to Chirnside, Mark.

<sup>2</sup> The photograph was published on the back of *The 'Olympic' Class Ships: Olympic, Titanic & Britannic* (Tempus Publishing). Although the number 'G.608' was visible on the back cover of the book when it was published on October 27<sup>th</sup> 2004, the book's text itself only gave the number 'G.618.' Since the manuscript had been completed by 2002 and submitted to the publisher in January 2003, prior to the photo emerging, unfortunately the number on the photo was overlooked while the book's page proofs were being amended prior to publication. Due to high initial demand the book was reprinted in 2005, and the text itself was amended by the time of the 2006 reprint to reflect the new discovery.

<sup>3</sup> Layton, J. Kent. *Atlantic Liners: A Trio of Trios*. Café Press; 2005. Pages 177-78.

<sup>4</sup> See: National Archives, reference MT 23/668. Pieces T36205, T96257.

<sup>5</sup> One query from H. Hayes was submitted to the British *Titanic Society's Atlantic Daily Bulletin* in December 2005, and I was able to explain which numbers appeared in the available sources. See: Chirnside, Mark. *Atlantic Daily Bulletin* December 2005: Pages 8-10.

<sup>6</sup> My thanks to Eric Longo for a fascinating discussion on the subject.