

***OLYMPIC:* A FLOATING FRENCH HOTEL**

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Although *Queen Mary* became a floating hotel when she was withdrawn from service, it is popularly believed that such an idea had not been considered thirty years earlier, when such ships as *Mauretania*, *Homeric*, *Olympic*, and *Majestic* were coming to the end of their Atlantic service. In fact, this is not true and there are some interesting references to the contrary. It is worth taking a short look at them.

Olympic returned to Southampton on April 12th 1935, having completed 514 commercial crossings of the Atlantic and 257 round trips from Southampton to New York and back. It would prove to be her final crossing, yet her summer cruise schedule had been cancelled rather suddenly and rumours began to circulate regarding her future. The older express liners suffered in the early 1930s, as passenger numbers fell, newer competitors secured an increasing slice of a smaller pie, and excess capacity made itself felt.

Writing to the Cunard White Star New York office, the general managers at Liverpool indicated on April 27th 1935:

'As a matter of fact, no decision has yet been taken to actually dispose of her [*Olympic*], although between ourselves it is extremely unlikely that we will put her in commission again. The fact that in the meanwhile we have entirely closed down the ship and dispensed with all surplus staff is bound to give rise to the view that she has come to the end of her career.'

Asked about *Olympic* being scrapped, Mr. Franklin had told reporters: 'I would hate to hear that such a terrible thing was even being considered. The *Olympic* in my opinion is the finest ship afloat.' He was quoted in *The New York Times*, which itself included a April 13th 1935 wireless dispatch from London confirming that *Olympic's* planned cruise schedule from

June 29th 1935 was being cancelled and that she would be laid up. In response, the general managers were:

'rather interested in the remark attributed to Mr. P.A.S. Franklin that the *Olympic* in his opinion is the finest ship afloat. If it were possible for the necessary formalities to be complied with we might not be averse to disposing of her to Mr. Franklin and obtaining from him the very high price he no doubt would be desirous of paying!'

One of Cunard White Star's general managers, Mr. A. B. Cauty, subsequently wrote to Mr. Franklin after the liner had been sold for scrap, offering *Olympic's* wheel as a souvenir.

'As promised when you were in London, I have now secured a souvenir of the *Olympic* in the shape of the 3'9" steering wheel, which I hope to send forward by the *Britannic* on Saturday. I hope it is not too big, but think perhaps you will find room for it in your country house, where it would be an acceptable reminder of the fine old ship that did such good work for the Oceanic Company [sic] in happier days than the present.'

Rather than bill Mr. Franklin, Thomas Ward's chairman, Mr. Joseph Ward, sent him the wheel with compliments. Although it missed *Britannic's* sailing, it was subsequently sent by another ship and appears to have arrived safely.

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As the spring of 1935 gave way to the summer, however, *Olympic's* fate was being decided. Our focus is on the possibility that she was going to be sold for continued service, for less than a month after she had returned to Southampton, interest had been expressed by a French consortium who wished to operate her as a floating hotel in the South of France.

On May 7th 1935, Paul Thiemann wrote to ship brokers Messrs. S. C. Chambers & Co., at King Street in Liverpool, saying that he regretted he had been unable to purchase *Mauretania*.

'I found it impossible to obtain the necessary concession from the French authorities in time [original emphasis] to negotiate with you for the ship. This was principally due to the fact that

the Municipal Elections all over France were pending and actually took place yesterday.

'The authorities were characteristically reluctant to give any decision until the result of the elections was made known.

'Now that these elections are over I hope, very shortly, to obtain all the required authorisations.'

Thiemann's scheme was, he said, 'a very big one.' As a result, he had taken on a business partner, Captain Brian Griesson-Carr of the Royal Societies Club, in St James' Street, London, SW1. He had already been informed on April 25th 1935 that the legendary Blue Riband holder had been sold for scrapping, but held out hopes for another ship:

'Having seen certain announcements in the English papers we assume that the ship in question may be either the *Olympic* or the *Aquitania*, both of these ships would suit very well but we prefer the *Olympic*.

'As already stated, we must await the replies from the competent French authorities before proceeding to make a new offer for another ship but, in the meantime, we should feel very grateful if you would be good enough to let me have any information that you give about the ship.'

On May 25th 1935, a Cunard White Star general managers' office memorandum outlined the position at that time:

'The present position is that Lloyd [Mr. Lloyd, of Messrs. S. C. Chambers & Co.] [is] in communication with Thiemann about the use of the steamer at the Riviera.

'Lloyd had a letter which had rather an optimistic tone about it (copy herewith) and Thiemann was waiting to get the necessary approval of the authorities concerned. He asked for a price and said his partner, Carr, was there with him. We have told Lloyd to say that if Thiemann likes to put forward a figure in the neighbourhood of £150,000 we would consider [it]. This figure is based upon what we suggested for the *Mauretania*, viz.: £110,000. Lloyd has written accordingly.

'Meantime we have deferred putting the ship on the market or taking any steps to strip her. Thiemann has asked that all furniture and equipment should be left in the ship. We are not agreeing as far as badged gear is concerned.

'We told Lloyd also to tell Thiemann that if he wants the ship seriously he should be prepared to pay us a deposit next week and this Lloyd is doing.

'Meantime Lloyd has found that Japanese breakers would probably be about the best market and thinks he could get in the neighbourhood of £100,000 with delivery here, or £125,000 delivery in Japan.'

Interestingly enough, the memo concluded:

'Jarvis definitely off.

'Metal Industries will consider but not ready until *Mauretania* is out of the way.'

The reason for the pessimism on that front was that Sir John Jarvis had written to Mr. Lloyd five days earlier, thanking the directors of Cunard White Star for their offer to consider a proposal from him to buy *Olympic*, but stating: 'I find it will be quite impossible to get a vessel of this size alongside the wharf at Jarrow, consequently I fear that this is not the ship we want to start out breaking operations.' In the end, the difficulty was overcome, but as of May 25th 1935 *Olympic*'s eventual fate was the only option that had been 'definitely' ruled out.

On the same day, Thiemann was asking Lloyd if he could 'possibly secure an option for about one or two months on the *Olympic*? Everything is going well at this end and I am confident that this time we shall succeed.' He was clearly interested, having asked for blueprints and publicity material relating to *Olympic*, but as he had stated on May 21st 1935 the French authorities were being sluggish:

'The position is that we are now urging the officials to grant the necessary concessions without delay.

'This was not possible as we have already informed you until the new Municipal Council was installed; it only took place yesterday.

'Last evening the new Mayor was interviewed by our lawyers and we have already been told that we

shall get satisfaction at the earliest possible date.

'We should be very sorry to lose the chance of acquiring the *Olympic*, but we have the offer of another suitable ship. We must admit that, having carefully examined the accommodation plans and other details of both vessels, the *Olympic* is considered to be the most suitable. Besides I want to do the deal for the ship with you because we have worked together on the *Mauretania* and you have very kindly gone to so much trouble about the matter on my account.

'We should, therefore, be very glad of the chance to purchase the *Olympic* and anything you can do to help us will be much appreciated.

We can only complete financial arrangements when the concessions are finally approved. We shall then be in a position to make you a definite offer for the ship.

'In the meantime can you kindly let us know what amount in your opinion, we should eventually offer in the event of our being in time to buy the vessel.

'We assume, of course, that in the case of the *Olympic* there will be no restrictions such as those which the company intended to impose in the case of the *Mauretania*. We should expect delivery of the ship at Southampton fully equipped, as she stands today, including plate and linen etc. i.e. lock, stock and barrel. We should also require the right to continue to use the name *Olympic* until the company shall want the name for another new ship, and finally, there must be no reservation, on the part of the company, with regard to ultimate disposal for breaking up or other purposes.'

In a subsequent letter, Thiemann said that they 'quite understand that the company cannot hold the ship available indefinitely, particularly as you point out that there are other purchasers in the market.' He assured Lloyd: 'We cannot possibly however, hurry matters along more quickly than we are doing at present...I sincerely hope you will be able to gain sufficient time for us to be able to put the deal through.'

By June 4th 1935, Thiemann explained:

'There has been further slight delay on account of the very recent change of French Government.

'We are only now awaiting the final approval of the Ministry of Finance. The new Ministers permanent Secretary was interview [sic] on Saturday last by our lawyer who was given definite assurance that the necessary authorisation would be given, but the new Government only take up office today and it may take another week to get the Ministers' sanction.'

Nothing much had changed by July 2nd 1935. Mr. A. B. Cauty wrote to another potential purchaser:

'The position at the moment is that the man who was thinking of buying the *Mauretania* to anchor her off Nice – which you will remember was spoken of at the Board meeting some time ago – and failed to get the necessary permission from the authorities, has since got over that difficulty, and is now interested in the *Olympic*, but he has not yet been able to arrange his finance. If he overcomes that difficulty we ought to get a considerably better price from him than we would for breaking up.'

It was not to be. *Olympic* was not to have another career as a floating hotel.

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On July 18th 1935, the French government were putting out feelers as to the price of *Olympic*, for they were 'seriously interested in the purchase of the vessel.' Cunard White Star indicated to the intermediary: 'we have not yet decided as to the ultimate disposal of this vessel, and are not able to name any price, but if you could obtain an indication from your friends it would receive our consideration.'

The company understood that the French government had been interested in purchasing *Olympic* 'in order to prevent the ship going to the Italians, and our informants were doubtful just how far this information should be divulged.' Rumours were circulating that the Italian government wanted to use her as a troopship, and with tensions in Europe rising France evidently did not want *Olympic* to fall into Mussolini's hands. Cunard White Star's Paris representative, Commander Levaigue, was well known to French ministers and officials, and the company told him on July 23rd 1935:

'I may say that we shall very shortly be putting the ship into the breaking up market but if we could do better by selling her for other purposes we will be glad to consider this.

'Also for your private information, we had a scheme presented to us a little while ago for using the ship as a private hotel and we believe the prospective purchasers were considering offering a figure somewhere between £150,000 and £200,000...if we can get in touch with somebody who would like to buy the ship at more than breaking up price it would probably suit us to accept it.'

At the end of July 1935, the company had not 'heard any definite advice from Italy as to the probability of their negotiating for this vessel as a running proposition.'

As the summer wore on, *Olympic*'s paintwork deteriorated. After dredging work had been carried out, alleviating his concerns that she was too big, Sir John Jarvis was keen to buy *Olympic* for dismantling at Jarrow. Following an inspection in August 1935, his offer to purchase *Olympic* for scrapping was accepted, yet her fate could easily have been different. Instead, it is a matter for alternative history.

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