

TITANIC'S LIFEBOATS: FACT & FICTION

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In the introduction to my earlier short article, '*Titanic's* Lifeboats: An Increased Capacity', I wrote that 'There is all too much incomplete, out of context, inaccurate or plain misinformation about *Titanic*. Much of it stems from media sensationalism or simply the dissemination of inaccurate information in secondary sources. That is particularly true when it comes to *Titanic's* lifeboats...' This short article explores an example and highlights the importance of critical analysis of claims from secondary sources.

Following the release of James Cameron's blockbuster in the late 1990s, interest in *Titanic* probably reached its all-time peak. The number of books, articles and television programmes was extraordinary. Among the television offerings, Channel 4's series *The Liners* was well received in the United Kingdom. A lavishly illustrated hardback book to accompany the series was published in 1997.

Naturally, the series and the book touched upon *Titanic* and 'the most glaring aspect of the tragedy': the 'lack of lifeboats'. 'We [the television series' production team] were allowed to access the handwritten notebook that belonged to Thomas Andrews', the book's author wrote:

It was his day-to-day record of building details on both the *Olympic* and *Titanic*. Modifications and changes to the original *Olympic* plans for *Titanic* were made in red. On one double-page, under the heading 'Lifeboats', was a list of the boats planned for both giant liners. The left-hand page showed the breakdown of maximum crew and passenger numbers the ships could carry. On the right was a column indicating the total seating available in the lifeboats that the builders and designers were about to supply. The equation read:

Boats will accommodate – 3,538

Passengers & Crew – 3,473

Spare – 65

Then, through these details and those on the opposite page nominating full details of the style and type of boat to be supplied, Thomas Andrews had drawn a thick red line. But why?¹

The writer went on to quote a Harland & Wolff employee as saying that the original plan for both ships had ‘many more lifeboats’ and that White Star had ‘changed the specification to the very minimum number of lifeboats required’.² Not only that, but the book reproduced a photograph of the ‘Andrews notebook’ lying open at the pages the writer described. They implied that the ‘thick red line’ was evidence that the plan had been changed and the number of lifeboats reduced.

We saw in ‘[Titanic’s Lifeboats: An Increased Capacity](#)’ (*Atlantic Daily Bulletin*, September 2018) that the original ‘Design “D”’ general arrangement concept actually included *fewer lifeboats* than *Olympic* and *Titanic* as completed. The number of lifeboats was *increased* between the production of that design concept in July 1908 and *Olympic* and *Titanic*’s completion in 1911 and 1912. Another change was that the number of passengers and crew was reduced, so that *Titanic*’s lifeboat capacity (expressed as a proportion of the maximum passengers and crew she could carry) *increased* by about 39 per cent. The lifeboats supplied *exceeded* the requirements of the regulator, the British Board of Trade.

However, what of the ‘Andrews notebook’? It would be more accurate to describe it as an *Olympic* notebook. It was described as a ‘drawing office copy’ with ‘alterations in blue as vessel left Belfast 22/3/13 with inner skin fitted’ and ‘altered in red up to date 23-1-12’. The book had 56 numbered pages and included lots of details about the ship for reference, such as basic details like her official number, port of registry, dimensions; passenger and crew capacity; engines; technical specifications for everything from her boilers and electric fans fitted throughout the accommodation. It does not appear that there is any direct evidence it was written by Andrews at all. Copies of it were reproduced and sold in the late 1990s, although the black and white version can cause confusion for people because the colour coded amendments for 23 January 1912 and 22 March 1913 cannot be distinguished.

It is clear from studying both the copies of the notebook and the photo of the actual notebook lying open, which was reproduced in the book, that they are the same document. The relevant unnumbered page covering *Olympic*’s lifeboat outfit is reproduced here:

BOATS.

DESCRIPTION.	N° OF PERSONS EACH BOAT	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS.
14 OPEN LIFEBOATS. 30'-0" x 9'-0" x 4'-0"	64	896
2 WOOD CUTTERS 25'-0" x 7'-0" x 3'-0"	33	66
4 DECKED LIFEBOATS 28'-0" x 8'-0" x 3'-0"	40	160
12 OPEN LIFEBOATS 27'-5" x 8'-6" x 3'-7"	51	612
12 DECKED " 27'-5" x 8'-6" x 3'-7"	46	552
8 OPEN " 29'-0" x 8'-6" x 3'-7"	55	440
14 DECKED " 30'-0" x 9'-0" x 3'-7"	52	728
2 " 28'-0" x 8'-0" x 3'-0"	42	84
TOTAL NUMBER OF BOATS = 68	TOTAL	3538
TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS BOATS WILL ACCOMMODATE =		3538
" " " " ON BOARD.		3473
SPARE		65
ALL THESE BOATS ARE UNDER WELIN'S PATENT PATENTS.		

NEW BOATS TO COMPLY WITH NEW B. OF T. REGULATIONS.

BOATS ORIGINALLY FITTED TO COMPLY WITH OLD B. OF T. REGULATIONS.

Left: a copy of the unnumbered page in the so-called 'Andrews Notebook' that *The Liners* claimed showed the original proposals for *Olympic*/*Titanic* to have more lifeboats.

In fact, the page does not show the original lifeboat specification for the two ships at all. What it shows at the top of the table is:

- the original lifeboats supplied to *Olympic* in 1911 ('boats originally [my emphasis] fitted to comply with old [my emphasis] B. of T. [Board of Trade] regulations');
- the 'new boats to comply with new B. of T. [Board of Trade] regulations'.

The 'new boats' were those added to *Olympic* after the *Titanic* disaster.

Below: an extract from a blueprint from February 1913, recording the additional lifeboats fitted to *Olympic* during the 1912-13 refit. Notwithstanding that some of the individual lifeboat capacities have been calculated slightly differently, such as the '12 open lifeboats' whose capacity has been rounded to 50 instead of 51 persons, it makes it abundantly clear that the notebook is simply recording the lifeboats fitted in 1911 and those added to *Olympic* in 1913. The table layout and wording is virtually identical. (National Archives, United Kingdom)

SUMMARY OF BOATS.

DESCRIPTION.	NO. OF PERSONS EACH BOAT.	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS.
14 OPEN LIFEBOATS 30'-0" x 9'-0" x 4'-0"	64	896
2 WOOD CUTTERS 25'-0" x 7'-0" x 3'-0"	33	66
4 DECKED LIFEBOATS 28'-0" x 8'-0" x 3'-0"	40	160
12 OPEN LIFEBOATS 27'-5" x 8'-6" x 3'-7"	50	600
12 DECKED " 27'-5" x 8'-6" x 3'-7"	46	552
8 OPEN " 29'-0" x 8'-6" x 3'-7"	53	424
14 DECKED " 30'-0" x 9'-0" x 3'-7"	52	728
2 " 28'-0" x 8'-0" x 3'-0"	42	84
TOTAL NUMBER OF BOATS = 68	TOTAL	3510
TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS BOATS WILL ACCOMMODATE =		3510
" " " " ON BOARD		3450
SPARE		60

BOATS ORIGINALLY FITTED TO COMPLY WITH OLD B/T REGULATIONS

NEW BOATS TO COMPLY WITH NEW BOARD OF TRADE REGULATIONS

What about the book's claim that 'through these details and those on the opposite page nominating full details of the style and type of boat to be supplied, Thomas Andrews had drawn a thick red line'? The 'opposite page' is, in fact, page 44 of the notebook:

44.

<u>BOATS.</u>		<u>SUB. CAP.</u>	
		<u>EACH</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
14 WOOD LIFEBOATS	30'0" x 9'0" x 4'0"	648	9072
1 CUTTER	25'2" x 7'1" x 3'15"	338	338
1 " "	25'2" x 7'2" x 3'15"	343	343
4 ENGELHARDT COLLAPSIBLE BOATS	27'5" x 8' x 3'	396	1584
	<u>TOTAL.</u>		<u>11337</u>

~~THE 2 CUTTERS AND 14 LIFEBOATS ARE ALL UNDER~~
~~WELLS' PATENT DOUBLE ACTING DAVITS AND~~
~~FITTED WITH CAPT. MURRAY'S IMPROVED LOWERING~~
~~GEAR ALSO PROVISION TANKS.~~
~~THE 4 COLLAPSIBLE LIFEBOATS ARE ON DECK~~
~~& ASIDE ONE ON TOP OF THE OTHER~~
~~IMMEDIATELY UNDER THE FOR^D CUTTERS~~
~~ON BOAT DEK. & ASIDE ON TOP OF OFFICERS' HOUSE~~
~~ABREAST FORWARD FUNNEL.~~
~~ALL THE 30'0" LIFEBOATS ARE FITTED WITH~~
~~COPPER BUOYANCY TANKS, ALSO THE~~
~~TWO 25'2" CUTTERS.~~

The colour reproduction of these pages, which was used as an illustration in the book, has not been included here for copyright reasons, but can be seen on page 50 (*The Liners*, Boxtree; 1997). The small text added to the fourth line from the bottom, reading '& 1 aside on top of officers' house abreast forward funnel' was actually added in red ink, signifying that it was an amendment up to 23 January 1912.

Moreover, the page numbering is significant. The notebook contained details of 'Anchors and Cables' on page 43 and then 'Boats', *Olympic's* lifeboat outfit in 1911, on page 44. The unnumbered page between them that, as we have seen above, included details of the additional lifeboats added in 1913, was written later. It seems that when this was written in, the original lifeboat information was crossed out on page 44 because it was no longer relevant. The lifeboat configuration of 1913 superseded that of 1911.

What we have seen here is an example of inaccurate information being disseminated through a secondary source. *The Liners* appears to have been a successful television series for Channel 4 and the book that accompanied

it presumably sold well. Readers of the book can be forgiven for thinking the book's claims were accurate. It even appeared to reproduce primary source documentation supporting the false claims, giving them a heightened sense of credibility to the casual reader. However, on examination, the documentation does not support what was being claimed at all.

We have seen that:

- The book claimed that the original design for *Olympic* and *Titanic* showed enough lifeboats to accommodate all passengers and crew with 65 seats to spare. It indicated that this has been crossed out in the 'Andrews Notebook' [sic] because the White Star Line decided to reduce the number of lifeboats to the minimum.
- In fact, the evidence we have – outlined in detail in the previous article – shows clearly that the number of lifeboats and their capacity was *increased*. **The amendments in the drawing office notebook were one of Harland & Wolff's records of the additional lifeboats added to *Olympic* in the 1912-13 refit.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & BIBLIOGRAPHY

Thanks are due to the United Kingdom National Archives for allowing me to reproduce the blueprint. Specific citations are included within the text and the endnotes.

¹ McAuley, Rob, and Miller, William H. (consultant). *The Liners*. Boxtree; 1997. Pages 49-50.

² *Ibid*, page 50.