

THE ENCLOSURE OF *TITANIC*'S FORWARD A-DECK PROMENADE: POPULAR MYTH?

By Mark Chirnside

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‘The forward half of the first class promenade on A Deck was also enclosed with glass to eliminate the annoying sea spray that some of *Olympic*'s first class passengers had complained about.’

‘Many *Olympic* passengers complained about sea spray blowing onto that deck, so Harland & Wolff closed off a little more than a third of *Titanic*'s deck to accommodate *Titanic*'s passengers.’

‘A-deck was fitted with an enclosed promenade area as this area on *Olympic* suffered in bad weather, showering the passengers in sea water and rain...’

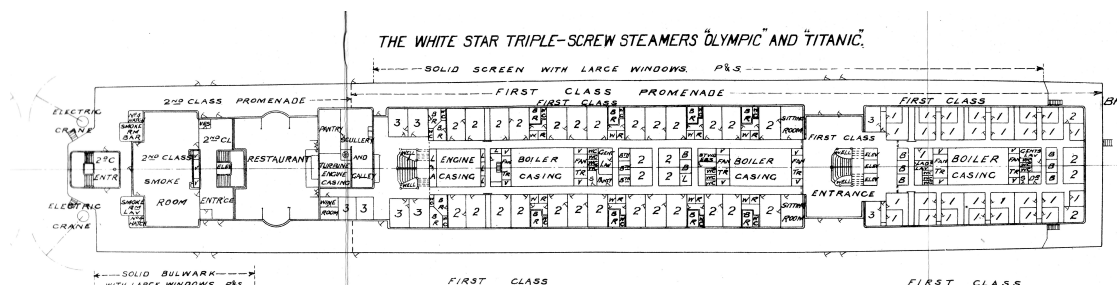
These three quotations are a small, anonymous selection from a vast range of *Titanic* literature. They illustrate a widespread belief that the enclosure of *Titanic*'s forward A-deck promenade was implemented as a result of passengers on *Olympic* complaining about sea spray at some unspecified point in 1911 or early 1912. Whether they were ‘many’, or ‘some’, passengers, plenty of authors make a claim along these lines. Judging from articles, lectures and public discussions, plenty of people interested in the subject believe and repeat these claims as well.

Unfortunately, there does not appear to be any contemporary, primary source documentation to support this. Who were these passengers who complained? And, where is it documented that this was the reason this modification was made to *Titanic*? As far as it is possible to see, none exists.

In January 1912, *Olympic* experienced ‘very rough weather’ when she ran into one of the worst North Atlantic storms Captain Smith had experienced in his lengthy career and was battered by heavy seas. Among other damage, on Sunday afternoon enormous seas ‘tore off the cover of No. 1 hatch on the foc’sle deck and lifted it bodily over the guard rails at the

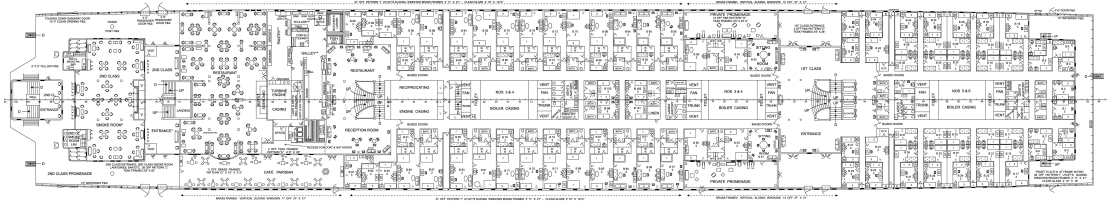
break of the deck and deposited it safely on the well deck below'. J. Bruce Ismay was among the passengers. Although the *New York Times* reported he 'had one of his ports smashed by the big sea', an interesting observation of Ismay's was that 'the ship rolled and pitched a good deal, but that her promenade decks were dry and that the majority of the passengers were able to go into the saloon for their meals'. If he had received any complaints, they were not borne out by his reported comments.

Olympic's first class passengers had access to an abundance of open deck space on the boat deck; a large promenade on A-deck that was sheltered overhead and open at the sides; and a large promenade running much of the length of B-deck that was both sheltered overhead and enclosed from the elements by glass windows along its length. Any passengers who wanted to walk the decks in severe storms or windy, rainy conditions had the obvious option of using the enclosed promenade on B-deck. Why would they choose to use the open promenade forward on A-deck, only to complain about the weather conditions?



Olympic's B-deck in 1911. (The Shipbuilder, 1911/Ioannis Georgiou collection)

An important difference between *Titanic* and her older sister provides a plausible answer as to why the forward end of her A-deck promenade was enclosed. In December 1911, first class accommodation plans showed important changes on B-deck compared to *Olympic*: first class staterooms along the deck were improved and extended to the ship's side at the expense of the enclosed first class promenade deck; the *a la carte* restaurant was extended to the port side of the ship at the expense of second class passengers' deck space; and on the starboard side of the restaurant a small 'restaurant promenade' area was provided as an enclosed area for first class. Even this was subsequently used for a new feature, the Café Parisien, which appeared on first class accommodation plans a month before the maiden voyage.



Titanic's B-deck as she was completed in 1912. (Bruce Beveridge collection)

These changes were worthwhile improvements and represented some of the most significant differences between the two sister ships as completed in 1911 and 1912. However, they did mean that *Titanic* no longer had any enclosed promenade deck for her first class passengers. It seems reasonable to speculate that the enclosure of the forward A-deck promenade was intended to remedy this problem. An article by Andrew Robinson for the British *Titanic* Society in 2000 made this very suggestion.

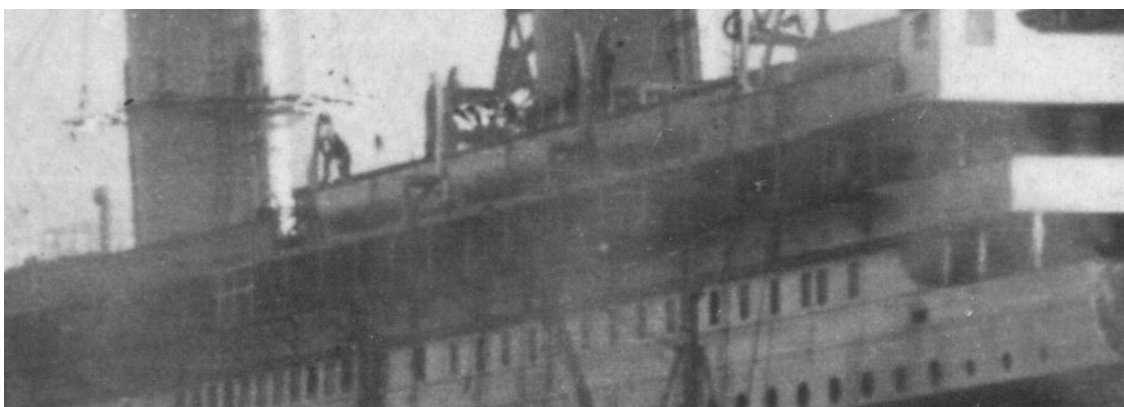
It is interesting to note that the original 'Design "D"' concept for *Olympic* and *Titanic*, which was approved at the end of July 1908, envisaged a 'screen with carriage windows port and starboard' on A-deck extending from the fore end of the deck to a little abaft the third funnel casing. The configuration at that time had more in common with *Adriatic*, which entered service in 1907 with an open upper promenade and promenade deck but was subsequently fitted with an enclosed screen on the fore part of the upper promenade deck. The concept also envisaged a screen at the fore end of the deck with a sliding door, to enclose this part of the promenade entirely. In these respects, the modifications to the fore end of *Titanic's* A-deck promenade were a reversion to something similar to the original approved design concept four years earlier.

On 14 February 1912, an amendment was made to the ship's plans insofar as a new 'weather wall' with a door and window was sketched at the fore end of the A-deck promenade. It is logical to suppose that this modification, made at a late stage in construction, went hand in hand with the enclosure of the fore end of the A-deck promenade.

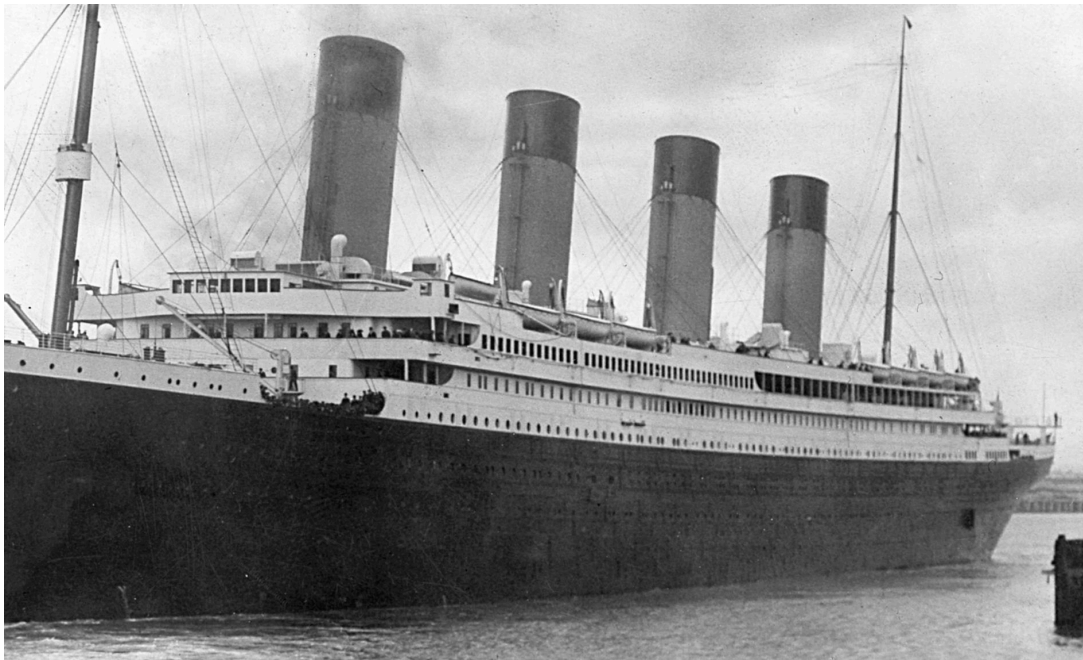


Photographic evidence shows that arrangements were clearly underway to fit the new screens on 2 March 1912. Scaffolding was being prepared to enable the workmen to undertake the work. However, they were not fitted as of 8 March 1912 and therefore they were installed at some stage in the period 9 March to 31 March 1912. Photographs taken on 1 April 1912 show the completed screen fully in place.

We can see here that the scaffolding platforms along the fore end of A-deck (visible from a distance as a darker section in front of the white-painted superstructure) were in place on the port side on 6 March 1912. (Klistorner and Hall collection. *Titanic in Photographs*. The History Press; 2011. Robert Welch: Plate 1715.)

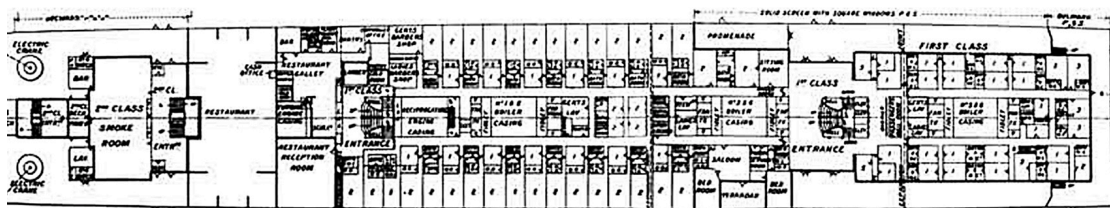


This close up view of the starboard side was taken on 2 March 1912 and shows the same preparations were being made. (Ioannis Georgiou collection)



Titanic's departure from Southampton on 10 April 1912. The completed screen fitted to the fore part of the port side A-deck promenade is visible. (Klistorner and Hall collection. *Titanic in Photographs*. The History Press; 2011.)

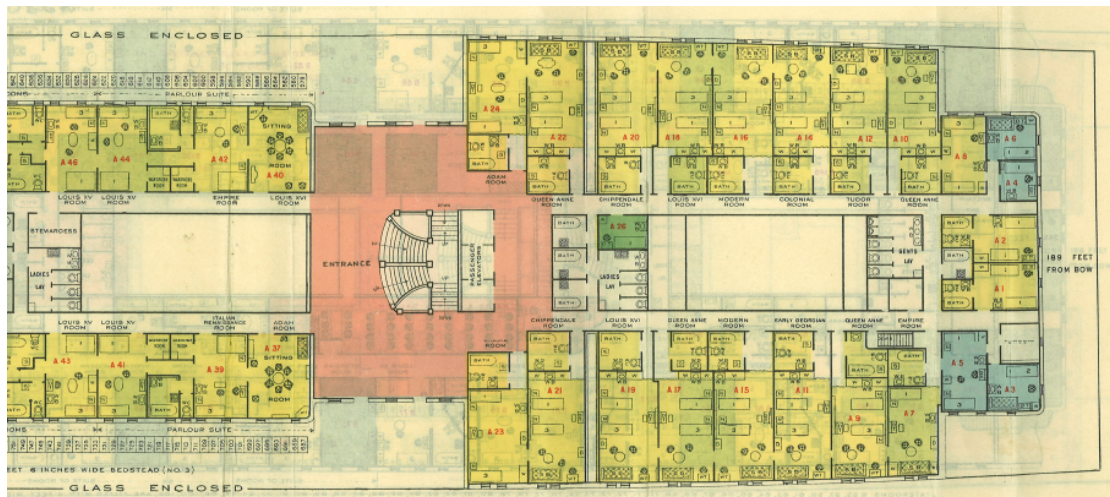
We also know that *Britannic* retained an enclosed forward A-deck promenade. Although she had a small enclosed promenade area on B-deck forward of the grand staircase she, too, lost much of original enclosed promenade area that *Olympic* had in 1911.



Britannic's B-deck as designed, 1914. (J. Kent Layton collection)

After the 1912-13 refit, *Olympic* lost a portion of the B-deck promenade area when the restaurant was extended to the port side and a Café Parisien was added on the starboard side. However, this was at the expense of second class, and the enclosed first class promenade deck further forward remained. There was, therefore, no need to enclose *Olympic's* forward A-deck promenade in order to provide enclosed promenade space for first class passengers.

In 1928-29, *Olympic*'s first class accommodation was improved in a number of ways. One significant change was that the original first class staterooms forward of the grand staircase on B-deck were removed and replaced with large, modern suites of rooms which extended to the ship's side. As a result, she lost the section of enclosed promenade deck space forward of the grand staircase and retained a smaller enclosed promenade area amidships on B-deck.



Olympic's new first class suite rooms, fitted forward on B-deck in 1928-29 and shown here on June 1934 first class accommodation plans. (Author's collection)

It is interesting to note that, shortly after this change, the White Star Line discussed a proposal to enclose the forward end of *Olympic*'s A-deck promenade. They decided against it on the grounds of cost – the company's financial strength in 1929 was far below what it had been before the war – but the timing of the discussion is interesting as it may be linked to the loss of part of the original enclosed promenade on B-deck. While this is speculation, it does seem to fit with the known facts.

Based on all of this information, it seems far more likely that *Titanic*'s forward A-deck promenade was enclosed as a response to the loss of the enclosed promenade area on B-deck, rather than as a result of any passenger complaints about sea spray. There is, however, the question of timing. The notation from 14 February 1912 is evidence that the new 'weather wall' had been decided upon by that time. It is reasonable to assume that this modification went hand in hand with the decision to enclose the fore end of the promenade deck. The work to install the screens was not underway visibly until March 1912, but the decision to replace the B-deck enclosed promenade with expanded first class

stateroom accommodation came as early as June 1911 and work to modify B-deck was underway by August 1911.

This implies that there was a considerable gap between the decision to remove the enclosed promenade on B-deck and, consequently, provide an enclosed promenade area on A-deck. What, if anything, changed? There are several possibilities. The enclosed restaurant promenade area on B-deck (shown on December 1911 first class accommodation plans) became the Café Parisien and was shown as such on first class accommodation plans four months later, removing the final remnant of the original enclosed B-deck promenade on *Titanic*. It is also possible that the severe storms *Olympic* experienced in December 1911 and January 1912 highlighted the general issue that *Titanic* no longer had an enclosed promenade area for first class passengers as she neared completion.

In the grand scheme of things, it is perhaps a fairly minor detail. However it does bring home the importance of re-examining what we think we know about *Titanic* and her sisters. The subject appears so well documented that so much information has been passed from book to book, becoming accepted as fact over the years when the evidence does not seem to support it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & BIBLIOGRAPHY

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