

## **AQUITANIA: 'THE GRAND OLD LADY' DOSSIER**

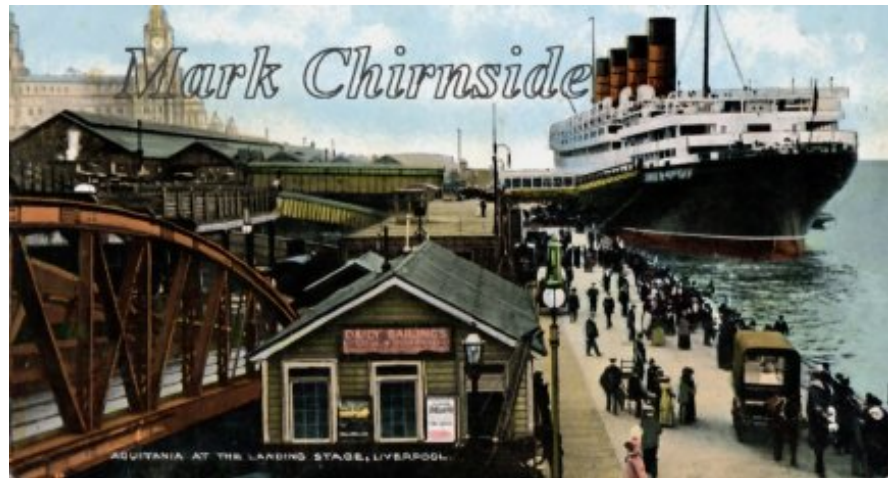
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*Aquitania's* sound construction is demonstrated by her lengthy and successful career, yet like all liners she aged. Originally placed on the Board of Trade's Confidential List owing to repairs to her stern frame and rudder castings, she began to show signs of weakness towards the bow – ahead of, and beneath the fore end of the superstructure.

In March 1924 two fractures were noted near two side scuttles (portholes) between E and F-deck forward; by February 1925 rivets in one of the remedial doublers were slack; in March 1928 nearby rivets were slack and required renewal; and in January 1929 slack rivets were noticed again. In April 1931, a fracture in the shell plating near another porthole close by on F-deck needed doublers fitting, and a weakness gradually became apparent between frames 235 and 242. During her annual survey and reconditioning, in November 1933, the shell plating fractured over twelve inches beneath 'the lower after corner of the forward gangway [door] opening immediately below the break of the bridge' on both the port and starboard sides. To make matters worse, a large fracture on the port side (about thirty inches long) was

## Mark Chirnside's Reception Room

*Right: An interesting colourised image of Aquitania at Liverpool's Landing Stage, issued during her early career. (Author's Collection.)*



discovered 'through the sheer strake and the doubling' and starting from the top edge of the sheer strake at the front of the superstructure. The starboard side fractured as well, although not through the doubler.

Repairs were carried out to the various defects, including the replacement of fractured plating near the gangways; for additional strength, the affected gangway doors on each side were permanently removed and plated. Looking back to the 1915 (some sources have 1919) grounding in the Mersey, one of the Board of Trade surveyors recalled she had 'sustained very bad bottom damage...there is no doubt the vessel was badly strained in the vicinity of the break of the bridge forward.' *Aquitania* had shown 'signs of weakness' here 'over a long period,' although whether the grounding exacerbated an already existing problem or created a potential weakness to show up years later is a matter for debate.

Storms on the Atlantic in winter were particularly heavy. When *Aquitania* arrived in Southampton on December 19th 1930 after encountering 'very heavy weather,' it was found that girders on the port and starboard sides of B-deck were cracked, requiring welding and the fitting of doublers. The strain on them had been exacerbated by the new bulkheads installed at the edge of the original raised section of the promenade deck, when the first class suites had been extended in 1926. Signs of fatigue appeared in the superstructure near to expansion joints.

Returning to Southampton on November 20th 1931 after very bad weather, *Aquitania's* forepeak was 'badly strained' with nine hundred rivets requiring renewal, and two starboard shell plates had fractured; in the oil bunkers 1,100 rivets were renewed and others tightened up. The after peak tank was strained, requiring the renewal of rivets, while the starboard bilge keel 'required attention.' Renewal of large numbers of rivets around the oil bunkers was a common task throughout the 1930s. In August 1935 damage to the after part of the port side bilge keel (ninety-two feet of plating required renewal) was attributed to the January 24th 1934 grounding, although it had not been noted at the time.

## *Aquitania*: The 'Grand Old Lady' Dossier

When *Aquitania* arrived at Southampton on September 20th 1938 a strake of heavy plating was fractured across a line of rivets amidships on B-deck, which was a 'definite through fracture' close to the B-deck repairs of 1931. An inspection in September 1943 had revealed that the long-standing crack on C-deck, in the shell plating 'at the starboard side of the break of the bridge,' had not extended. New furnace fronts were fitted to all the boilers. In October 1944, *Aquitania* was generally 'in good condition' while the interior surfaces 'of shell plating and bulkheads, where stripped for conversion to troop accommodation, were in [an] excellent state of preservation.'

After over thirty years' service, *Aquitania* was by any standard an old liner and not surprisingly she showed increasing signs of age. In 1947 the boilers were largely sound, but a number of related repairs were completed the year afterwards. By May 1948, the fracture in the starboard shell plating on C-deck at the break of the bridge had 'continued to extend' and 'substantial repairs' were required, similar to repairs completed to the port side fracture in 1933. It was reported that the January 1931 repairs to the B-deck girders 'remained in a satisfactory condition.' During the previous season, repairs had been carried out on A-deck, to the buckled bulkhead plating at the forward end; stiffeners on C-deck's number 2 hatch cover were removed and replaced; while four fractures in bulwark plating abreast of number 2 expansion joint had required welding and the fitting of doublers. At the same time, the B-deck deck plating abreast of the third funnel hatch was inspected and localised fractures required repairs: new doublers and 'straps' were fitted. All gangway doors had been overhauled, while slight leaks were calked 'or injected as required' in the oil fuel bunkers.

At the May 1949 survey a number of minor repairs were completed, including caulking rivets and welding on the port and starboard bilge keels, yet the items dealt with the previous year remained 'in good condition.' *Aquitania*'s passenger and safety certificates were issued to expire at December 31st 1949, at the same time as her load line certificate, yet for new certificates to be issued beyond 1949 permanent repairs would be required to several defects.