

RMS *AQUITANIA*: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)

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Didn't *Aquitania*'s grill room serve as an *a la carte* restaurant?

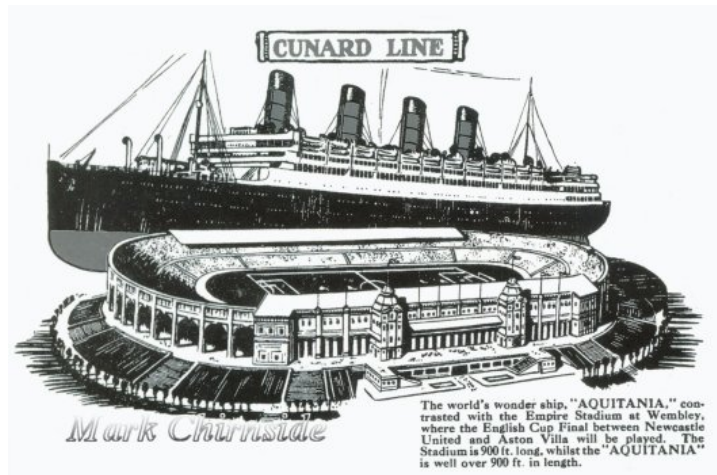
No. Contrary to popular belief, *Aquitania* did not have an *a la carte* restaurant. Cunard's negative attitude towards an extra-tariff facility of this sort was rather different to the White Star Line's, or that of HAPAG.

When *Olympic* entered service in 1911, she proved very popular with first class passengers. Her *a la carte* restaurant was so popular that additional tables were soon ordered, and it was enlarged during the ship's 1912-13 refit. One Cunard observer thought that the restaurant's décor made it one of the nicest public rooms on the ship. However, Cunard's naval architect, Leonard Peskett, felt that the restaurant created 'a new class of passenger' – aloof from other first class diners, or the *crème de la crème* of first class. He felt that this was a major objection, despite the revenue possibilities. This attitude continued into the post-war years. When the German liner *Imperator* joined Cunard's fleet and was renamed *Berengaria*, her *a la carte* restaurant was removed and instead the room served as a ballroom; after the

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Right: Aquitania's length was exaggerated slightly in this comparison card, issued circa 1924. She was not 'well over 900 feet in length,' rather she exceeded this mark by a mere eighteen inches. (Author's Collection.)

Below: (Newspaper quote author's collection/courtesy The New York Times)



Cunard White Star merger in 1934, the *a la carte* restaurants onboard both *Olympic* and *Majestic* were closed down before the year's end. (The galley equipment from *Majestic*'s restaurant was removed early in 1935.)

An early plan for an *a la carte* restaurant onboard *Lusitania* and *Mauretania* was cancelled before their first class public rooms were finalised. Similarly, *Aquitania* was bereft of an additional extra-tariff restaurant. In fact, *Aquitania*'s arrangement was rather unique. The main first class dining saloon was designated as a 'restaurant.' However, an additional first class grill room was also provided aft of the dining saloon – on the port side – and it is this room which is often mistaken for an *a la carte* restaurant.

The New York Times reviewed *Aquitania*'s first class accommodation when she arrived in New York for the first time, writing:

The restaurant is 150 feet by 100 feet, and will seat 800 persons comfortably. There is a gallery running around the restaurant on the deck, 19 feet above, where coffee may be taken, but there are no dining tables there. Passengers walk into the restaurant at any time and order meals. Seats are only booked for dinner, so that one may tip his steward after each meal as he would in a restaurant and sit at another table at night when seats are booked for dinner. Adjoining the dining room is a grill room where passengers may order any dish from two electric grills at any hour without charge. The drawing room is on the "A" deck. The principal feature is an oval dome with lunettes, treated with lead moldings and ornaments which hold the glass. The general idea of the first class smoking room has been to retain a ship effect with architectural proportions. It is an adaptation from Greenwich Hospital in the period of Charles II. The floor is of oak, with oak carvings on the walls and a fine portrait of James I. over the mantelpiece.

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Left: A photo of Aquitania's Grill Room, taken during the 1920s. (J. Kent Layton Collection)

It is clear that the meals available to first class passengers in the grill room were offered 'without charge.' The room did not serve as an extra-tariff restaurant, merely providing an additional seating area for first class diners if they preferred to eat in the grill room's more intimate atmosphere. When Aquitania made her maiden eastbound crossing in June 1914, some difficulties arose due to the large number of first class passengers:

'Owing to the dining room now being called [a] restaurant, and it being advertised in New York that a la carte meals would be served, without charge, full advantage has been taken by the passengers. It has been one continuous meal, and I am afraid large numbers of crew will not sign on again.

'...I would suggest that a notice be printed on the breakfast menu that no a la carte orders for luncheon can be taken after 10 o'clock, and on the luncheon menu that no a la carte dinner orders can be taken after 2 p.m. The menus are all of good variety, and to relieve the great pressure at luncheon, I put each day two dishes extra, marked as "special dishes" and it met with a great success.'

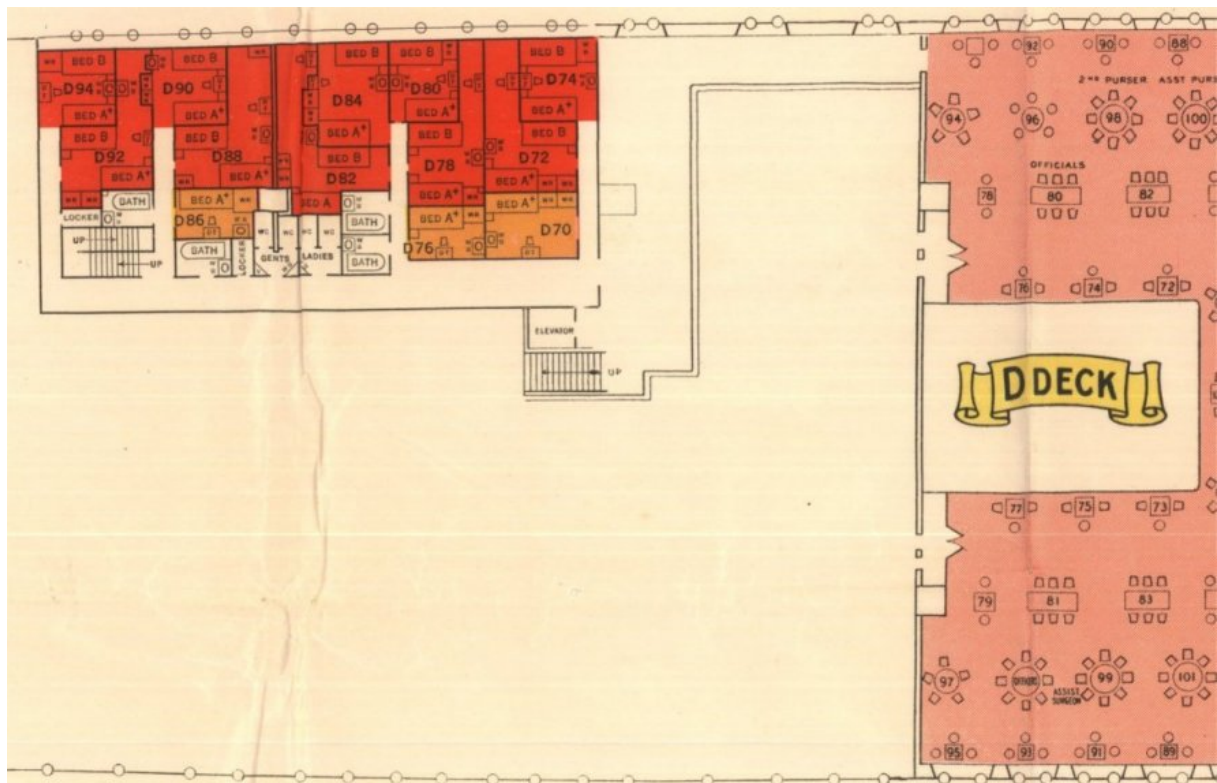
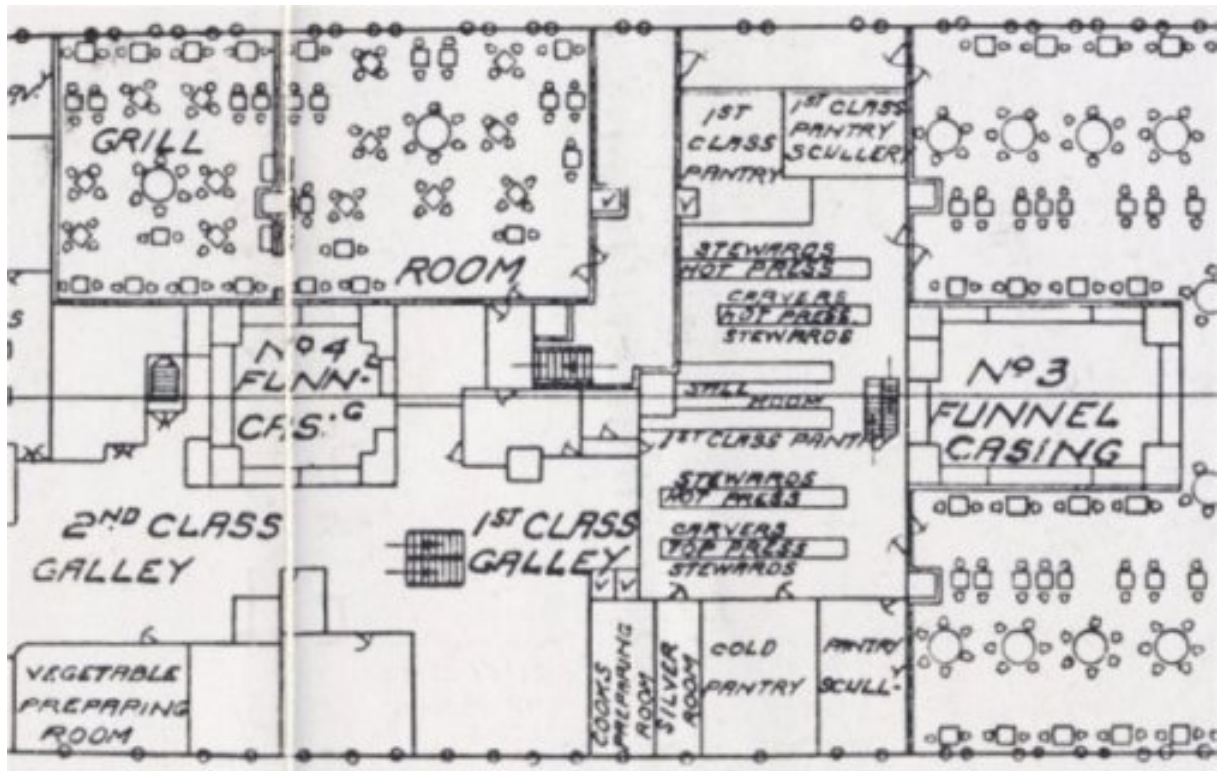
John Maxtone-Graham's fine book, *Crossing & Cruising*, examines the issue of the grill room in detail.

Why was the grill room removed?

By 1935, the first class grill room was not as popular as it had been, nor were first class passenger lists as high as they had been during *Aquitania's* heyday. At an executive committee meeting in early September 1935, some defects were noted:

...very shabby appearance of the Ruboleum tiling in the grill room of the *Aquitania*, also in the corridor leading to that room. Renewal of this tiling was included in the schedule submitted for the vessel's overhaul last winter but was deferred.

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Opposite left: Although creased, this deckplan shows the location of the original first class grill room. (The Shipbuilder, 1914/Author's Collection.)

Opposite lower left: The first class grill room was removed in 1936, providing additional space for new staterooms. Even after Queen Mary entered service, Aquitania's recovery from the lean years of the early 1930s continued, and Cunard White Star installed the new staterooms to ensure that she had the capacity to take advantage of increasing passenger numbers. They calculated that the expense of the alterations would be more than offset by the increased revenues generated. Orange designated rooms with 'a bed and upper berth'. (Author's Collection.)

Removal and re-laying the tiling would cost approximately £335, but in view of the fact that the grill room is not very extensively used, it has been submitted that the deck be covered with carpet ex *Olympic* restaurant which is in quite good condition.

During a meeting in September 1936, Cunard's Board decided that they needed to increase *Aquitania's* tourist class passenger capacity to meet an anticipated increase in tourist class passengers in 1937 and beyond. Since the grill room was 'not very extensively used,' it was sacrificed:

It has been found possible, by converting the existing grill room on D-deck into passenger space, to provide for 44 passengers [*sic*]. The cost of the work is estimated at £7,000, and the passenger department is satisfied that this increase in the vessel's earning capacity would produce £18,000 in the first year.

Although *Aquitania's* first (and, later, cabin) class passenger lists recovered in the late 1930s, they did not regain their pre-1931 level. In 1937, her highest cabin passenger lists were 436 westbound and 413 eastbound – less than her averages in the 1920s. They were easily accommodated in the main first class restaurant (or dining saloon). Sure enough, in tourist class, *Aquitania* had a slightly better year in 1937 and recorded her best performance since 1932; third class numbers rose very sharply, to their best since 1924.