

'THE OLD RULES...ARE ENTIRELY OBSOLETE': BRITISH LIFEBOAT REGULATION IN THE 1880S

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'I think all I can say is that the old rules on this subject are entirely obsolete, and we are perfectly well aware at the Board of Trade that they are obsolete'.

Sir Digby Murray, then the Professional Member of the Marine Department of the Board of Trade, June 1887

T*tanic's* loss prompted plenty of discussion about the lifeboat regulations which were in force at the time of the disaster, both in 1912 and then through to the present day. They dated back to the Merchant Shipping Act (1894). A generation earlier, the rules were 'entirely obsolete' and a senior Board of Trade official acknowledged that the Board was 'perfectly well aware' of the situation. There has been much less commentary on the rules in force in the 1880s, which dated back thirty years.

What did the lifeboat regulations require in the 1880s?

The Passenger Act (1855) included various scales, particularly for 'Class E' ships which were 'passenger steam vessels carrying emigrants or other across the Atlantic to ports on the east coast of North America'. The scale extended from ships with a registered tonnage of 'less than 200 tons' through to ships of '1,500 [tons] and upwards'. (To put that in context, the tender *Nomadic* (1911), constructed to serve the '*Olympic*' class ships at Cherbourg, would have been in one of the higher categories in terms of size.)

Steamships in the highest category of 1,500 tons and more needed to have 'not less than' seven lifeboats. The 'minimum cubic contents of all the boats of the ship' needed to be 2,160 cubic feet. On the basis of allocating ten cubic feet per person, it equated to a lifeboat capacity of 216 people.

A snapshot of White Star's North Atlantic fleet in the mid 1880s demonstrates that all of their ships fell into the highest category under the regulations:

	Registered tonnage*	No. of Boats	Cubic Capacity (feet)	Lifeboat Capacity required (persons)	Lifeboat capacity required as a percentage of passengers and crew	Percentage of passengers and crew accommodated in lifeboats	Lifeboat capacity surplus vs. requirements
<i>Germanic</i>	3,150	10	3,082	216	15.2%	21.7%	6.5%
<i>Britannic</i>	3,152	10	3,086	216	15.3%	21.9%	6.6%
<i>Baltic</i>	2,209	8	2,178	216	17.1%	17.2%	0.1%
<i>Adriatic</i>	2,458	8	2,502	216	17.2%	20.0%	2.8%
<i>Republic</i>	2,187	8	2,170	216	19.7%	19.8%	0.1%
<i>Celtic</i>	2,438	8	2,513	216	18.8%	21.9%	3.1%
				Average	17.2%	20.4%	3.2%

* The gross tonnage in each case was significantly higher. For example, *Germanic's* gross tonnage was 5,008 tons, whereas her registered tonnage was 3,150 tons. The registered tonnage represented a measure of the total enclosed space which was available for commercial use such as passenger accommodation or cargo holds. Gross tonnage included those areas as well as enclosed space taken up by machinery and other spaces which was not available for commercial use.

The Allan Line's fleet was required to provide lifeboat accommodation for an average of 20.7% of passengers and crew, but they provided 26.7%; and the British Shipowner's Company was required to provide 25.4%, but provided 27.6%. While all the shipping lines provided more than they were required to, Cunard's policy stood out because they opted for almost double what they were obliged to.

The following table provides a selection of shipping lines to help appreciate the context:

	Lifeboat capacity required as a percentage of passengers and crew	Percentage of passengers and crew accommodated in lifeboats	Lifeboat capacity surplus vs. requirements	Lifeboat capacity provided vs. requirements (proportional increase)
Cunard Line	19.8%	39.4%	+19.6%	99.0%
Inman Line	15.2%	26.4%	+11.2%	73.7%
Guion Line	26.6%	40.4%	+13.8%	51.9%
Allan Line	20.7%	26.7%	+6.0%	29.0%
White Star Line	17.2%	20.4%	+3.2%	18.6%
British Shipowner's Company	25.4%	27.6%	+2.2%	8.7%

What did all these percentages mean in terms of absolute numbers? Lifeboat accommodation was required for no more than 216 persons, which meant that ships such as Cunard's *Servia* (up to 1,100 passengers and 200 crew) could legally go to sea with lifeboat accommodation for 16.6% of the people onboard. That would have left her short of almost 1,100 lifeboat spaces. Cunard provided more than that, nonetheless only one ship in the Cunard fleet provided lifeboat accommodation for more than half her passengers and crew. Another example was White Star's *Germanic* (up to 1,270 passengers and 150 crew). She was required to carry lifeboat accommodation for 15.2% of the people onboard but, instead, provided 21.7%: the shortfall was over 1,100 lifeboat spaces.

Sir Digby Murray's view was that the best way to preserve life was by sound watertight compartmentalisation:

'The *Britannic* especially has been saved twice by her bulkheads; once with two compartments full; this last time with one compartment full. **And I need not tell you that there is very great risk to life even in smooth weather the moment you have to lower your boats** [author's emphasis]...I think you can make ships perfectly safe by subdivision of them; I think the *Britannic* has amply proved that'.

The report of a British government committee examining 'Boats, Rafts and Lifesaving Apparatus' was presented to Parliament in 1887. They praised 'many liberal and careful shipowners who do all in their power to provide for the safety of their passengers by equipping their vessels with boats far in excess of the number required by statute'. At the same time 'there are others carrying large numbers of emigrants who do no

more than they are required to do by law'. The committee recommended 'that the boats required by Act [law] should be increased 100 per cent, and in addition to them that the owners should be induced to carry sufficient collapsible boats and approved rafts, so that each ship will have sufficient lifesaving gear for all on board at one time'. Their thoughts were among those of many who considered the safety of life at sea and influenced subsequent legislation...