

The White Star Line

by George Henry Preble

THE WHITE STAR LINE, 1870.-The White Star Line was originally composed of a fleet of fast-sailing American clipper-ships, by the "Champion of the Seas," "Blue Jacket," "White Star," "Shalimar," etc., sailing to Australia. To this line Messrs. Imray [sic] & Co. succeeded, and still carry it on with fast vessels, built of iron.

In 1870 the establishment of the line of steamships taking this name was claimed as a new departure in ocean steamship management. The ships of the line differed in model, internal arrangements, and equipment from all their predecessors. They were designed to combine the highest speed with unprecedented comfort and convenience for passengers.

Nautical critics are conservative, and look with great distrust upon marked innovations in naval construction, and these vessels were the subject of unfavorable comments. They might do for summer passages, but doubts were expressed whether they would endure the test of a North Atlantic winter. It was an innovation that the vessels of the line should be built at Belfast instead of upon the Clyde, the stipulation being that the ships were to be constructed of strength, size and power to equal, if not surpass, anything upon the Mersey. The builders were not limited by contract, but left to fulfill the general instructions given. When the first vessels of the line were brought to Liverpool from Belfast they created a "sensation," and became the subject of comment and observation. Events have proved that the builders reached a high degree of speed and safety, and that no steamships have been better able to cope with the winter storms of the Atlantic. For ten years, in winter as in summer, the steamships of the White Star Line have lived down adverse criticism. The best evidence of the value of the improvements introduced by the White Star Company is that they have been adopted by rival lines. The White Star steamers range from 3,700 to 5,000 tons, and are among the largest in the world. They are built with regard to strength no less than speed, and constructed on the floating-tube principle, with seven water-tight and fireproof iron bulkheads. They are steered by steam, and have the principal saloon and state-rooms amidships. A complete inspection by the commanding officer is made before every voyage, when the men are put through a boat-service drill and a drill in defense of fire, which is repeated once or twice at sea on each voyage. The discipline is as pronounced as on board ships of the Royal Navy. From February to July, when the ice is drifting with the Gulf Stream, the White Star vessels are navigated by a southerly track, and vice versa from August to January. When the ice has drifted, and the northern parallels are clear of ice and fog, the boats take the northern track.

The average passages of the steamships of the White Star Line, both ways between Queenstown and New York, have been under 9 days, and many passages have been under 8 days. In July, 1875, the "Germania" [sic; appears this way throughout] made the passage from Queenstown to New York in 7 days, 23 hours, 7 minutes, and the return passage in August in 7 days, 22 hours, 8 minutes. The "Adriatic" and "Baltic" have made passages under 8 days, and in February, 1876, the "Germania" eclipsed herself and all other vessels of the line by steaming from Sandy Hook to Queenstown in 7 days, 15 hours, 17 minutes, having traversed 2,894 knots, equal to 15.8 knots per hour for the entire passage. In 1877 the "Germania" made the passage in 7 days, 11 hours, 27 minutes. The "Britannia" [sic] made the passage in 7 days, 10 hours, 53 minutes.

A passenger describing these vessels says of them:

"The state-rooms are also arranged amidships, at either end of the saloon, and are large, well-lighted, and furnished with every convenience, including electric bells. Bathrooms are within easy reach, and nothing that can promote the comfort of the passenger is omitted. The smoking room is not, as too often, a close little den, hut a large and handsome apartment; and the ladies' saloon is on a more liberal scale than usual, and far more attractive in its appointments. From their situation and the great length of the ships, the main saloon, the state-rooms, and all the rooms for the general use of the passengers, are almost entirely free from motion, except in the worst of weather, thus reducing the risk of sea-sickness to a minimum.

"Five watertight bulkheads run from the top to the bottom of the ship. These are supplemented by self-closing doors, and other appliances designed to confine a leak or the effect of an accident to that part of the vessel to which the mishap may have occurred. These doors are perfectly self-acting and almost independent of human agency. In one compartment, containing the after-set of boilers, the door which leads to the next compartment is arranged for prompt water-tight closing. Should the water find its way into the neighboring compartment, the engineer in charge has only to turn a lever and the ponderous door falls into its place, regulated in its descent by an air cylinder, which checks the door and causes it to fall in jerks. In another compartment you find that the iron way, upon which you walk, is automatic. Should the sea find its way beneath, the door (for the flooring upon which you have passed is, after all, only a kind of iron bridge) rises by the action of the water, and confines the water to a section of the vessel. There is nothing more remarkable in the fittings of these steamers than these self-acting doors, which are always kept in perfect order, working with a simplicity only equaled by the importance of the work they can accomplish.

The managers of the line have adopted "ic" as a termination for the names of their vessels, as "Adriatic," "Celtic," "Baltic," "Britannic," "Germanic," "Republic," etc.

At a meeting of the passengers assembled in the saloon of the steamer "Britannic," off Sandy Hook, on the evening of August 17, 1877, on the completion of the voyage from Queenstown in the unprecedented time of seven days, ten hours, and fifty-three minutes, it was "Resolved, To ask Captain Thompson to accept a souvenir, suitably inscribed, to commemorate this achievement." Thirty passengers and a number of invited guests were present. The souvenir consisted of a silver pitcher, with this inscription "Presented to Captain Wm. H. Thompson, of S. S. 'Britannic,' by the passengers, to commemorate the voyage from Queenstown to New York, August 10 to August 17, 1877." The presentation speech by D. W. James humorously contrasted the discomforts of ocean travel twenty years ago with the speed and conveniences which modern vessels afford.

A silver cup, appropriately inscribed was also presented to the Chief Engineer of the "Britannic," Thomas Sewell, as a mark of the passengers' appreciation of his skill and care during the voyage, September 29, 1877.

The "Coptic," the latest addition to the White Star Line, arrived at New York, December 3, 1881, after an exceedingly rough passage of sixteen days. The "Coptic" is a sister ship to the "Arabic," of the same line, and was built at Belfast, Ireland. The material used in her construction is milled steel, which was chosen on account of its strength and toughness. Her dimensions are: Length, 430 feet; breadth, 42 feet; and depth of hold, 34 feet. Her registered tonnage is 4,368 tons, but she will carry about 6,000. She is propelled by two double-cylindrical compound engines of 450 horse-power at 90 pounds pressure of steam. These were built by the Victoria Engine-Works, Liverpool. The main shaft is a built one. In the engine room are the very large pumps. In the next room are two dynamos which furnish electricity for the Swan electric lights used throughout the ship. There are three double elliptical boilers, which require twelve fires to heat them, and have been tested to 180 pounds. While the "Coptic" is intended to be used

more for carrying freight than passengers, the accommodation for passengers are very good. The staterooms are large and supplied with all the conveniences known to modern shipbuilders. The main saloon is handsomely upholstered in dark olive velvet, and is approached through an entrance hall from the main staircase. The saloon is paneled in wood made to simulate embossed leather. The chairs are cane-seated and revolving. The light all through the ship is furnished by the Swan electric lamps, which consist of carbonized threads inclosed in hermetically sealed glass bulbs. The hull of the "Coptic" is divided into eight compartments, either one of which might be stove in without endangering the vessel. The principle upon which the doors of these compartments are worked is comparatively new, and has been so highly approved by the English Admiralty Board that the government has adopted it in building vessels for the navy. The "Coptic" has four masts, three being square-rigged and the fourth being rigged fore-and-aft. There are three decks, braced in every direction, and turtle-backs forward and aft.

The "Coptic" left Queenstown on her first trip on the 17th of November, 1881. Her captain said of her, "She behaved very well. We had about as heavy weather as I have seen, and nothing could be more satisfactory than the 'Coptic.' When we were in about forty degrees west we were struck by a hurricane. On the 28th she was struck aft by a sea which stove in the after turtle-back over the rudder, swept everything loose away, stove in two boats, and carried two sailors overboard. We could do nothing to save them, because no boat could live in such a sea. The iron plates over the wheel were broken in. The stout iron rods were bent and twisted by the water as though they had been light wires in the hands of a strong man."

The chief engineer said of the engines, "They work beautifully. One man can, by moving six little levers, work the whole engine with one-half the effort ordinarily required to manage a small stationary engine. It works rapidly too. On this side is the signal-plate which connects with the bridge. The engineer can in less than a minute after receiving the order to stop, go ahead at full or half speed, or back. They are as easily managed as any engines I have ever seen. The new lights make the engine room as light as day."

The "Coptic" and her sister ship, the "Arabic," are intended for the carrying of freight and emigrants. The "Coptic" will probably be sent to the Pacific in two or three years, to run between San Francisco and Hong Kong. She will carry more freight, run faster on a given amount of coal, said her captain, than any vessel now running between New York and England. The "Coptic" on her first trip brought a few saloon passengers, three hundred emigrants, and a full cargo of freight.

Acknowledgements

From A Chronological History of the Origin and Development of
 Steam Navigation, by George Henry Preble, Philadelphia: L. R. Hamersly &
 Co.,1883, pages 358-362.

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