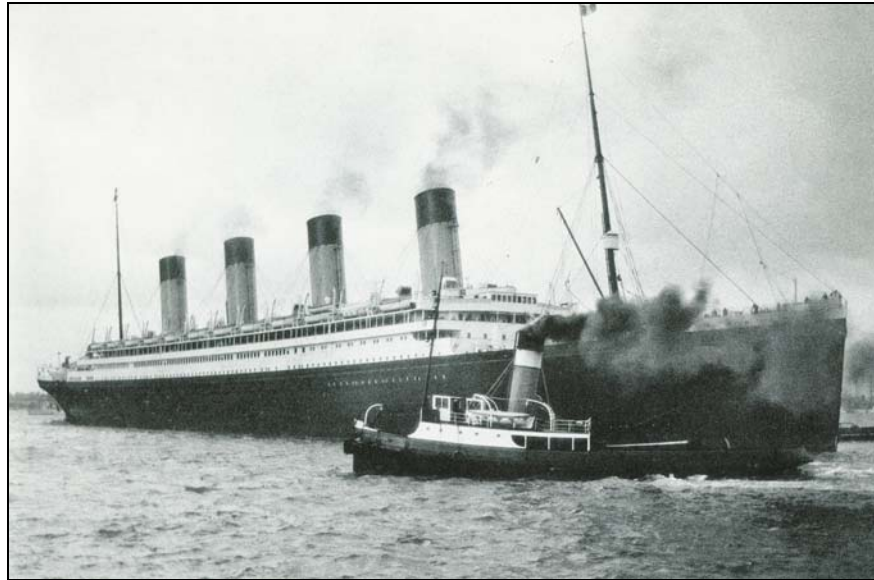


# RMS *OLYMPIC*'S RETIREMENT

By Mark Chirnside



Above: Always the handsome ship, *Olympic* departed from Southampton at noon on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1934 with a healthy first class passenger list, set to carry a total of 618 passengers to New York. (Author's collection.)

## **INTRODUCTION**

My short article *RMS Olympic: Another Premature Death?* – which was published on Encyclopedia-Titanica in the spring of 2002\* – drew attention to some of the pertinent circumstances surrounding *Olympic*'s withdrawal from service in 1935. The belief that high maintenance costs and an ageing structure had led to *Olympic*'s retirement appeared to be fairly widespread from the late 1990s. Since I felt that this belief was at odds with the available evidence, the article provided an alternative viewpoint. I outlined *Olympic*'s lean fuel consumption and lower running costs compared to her running mates (in 1934-35) *Aquitania*, *Berengaria* and *Majestic*; and I included a brief comparison of the four liners' structural condition. There does not appear to be any evidence that her maintenance costs were higher than her running mates – quite the reverse. However, the article leads to the question as to why the *Olympic* was withdrawn from service, and it is the purpose of this article to provide a follow-up to the original.

It is obvious that the large liners of *Olympic*'s generation were nearing the end of their lives by the mid 1930s. It should be emphasized that the depression, more than anything, contributed to the demise of these liners. Even with the decline in third

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\* The article can be accessed at: <http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/item/1502> (also accessible through the external article links page).

class travel from the early 1920s and new competition from the mid 1920s, passenger lists had been good. Certainly they were more than enough to generate a very healthy profit in *Olympic's* case, and the same is true for the other liners. The figures for Cunard and White Star's express services in 1929 bear this out. Had this level of passenger traffic continued, the pre-war liners could have been profitable for much longer, even on secondary routes if new tonnage was made available for the express service. Yet passenger numbers overall halved between 1929 and 1934, falling to less than half a million per year on the Atlantic. As the previous article outlined, during a time of depressed Atlantic travel Cunard-White Star were left with four large liners capable of operating the express service from Southampton to New York, yet their new *Queen Mary* was due to enter service in 1936. It was clear that they would not be able to find profitable employment for all four ships, and that in time they would be withdrawn from service. It is the sequence of these withdrawals that requires studying, at a time when the older liners were competition against newer ships for their share of a shrinking pie.

### ***POPULARITY & PASSENGER CARRYINGS 1931-34***

In my book, *RMS Olympic: Titanic's Sister*, I published in some detail information about the comparative running costs of the *Olympic* and her fleet mates. This included additional material to that published in my previous article, and there does not seem any reason to revise my view that *Olympic* was cheaper to operate. However, I did note that in April 1935 *Olympic* was carrying fewer passengers than (respectively) the *Majestic*, *Aquitania* and *Berengaria*. *Berengaria* was the most popular liner that month, carrying 1,200 passengers on one round trip, yet that is merely one month in isolation. I suggested that *Olympic's* passenger carryings might be worth considering as a reason to explain the timing of her withdrawal from service, and it seems worth comparing them here.

As the depression began to bite in 1930, that year *Olympic* carried less than twenty thousand passengers (for the first time in her history when she had been in service for the whole year). It brought to an end the steady increase in her average passenger lists seen between 1926 and 1929, which had taken her average westbound lists to almost 1,000 by the end of the 1920s. (Westbound regularly bettering Eastbound lists for most of the large liners.) Her yearly transatlantic passenger carryings plunged to 13,975 passengers in 1931; 9,458 passengers in 1932, and an all-time year's low of 9,170 passengers in 1933.\* Over her peacetime career, it was not until 1930 that *Olympic's* cumulative average passenger lists fell below 1,000; yet in 1933 they fell below 900. The situation stabilised before showing a gradual, modest improvement. In 1934 she carried 9,777 passengers, a slight overall improvement with her westbound passenger lists broadly the same as in 1933, yet her eastbound performance was the worst of her career and she averaged less than three hundred passengers per crossing in that direction – the first and last time that she would ever

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\* It should be remembered that these figures are for transatlantic passengers. In 1931, for instance, *Olympic* completed a number of cruises, and two of them alone carried a combined total of around 1,150 passengers. When the other cruises are considered, then it seems clear a number of passengers should be added to the total.

do so. As 1935 began, *Olympic*'s performance was more pleasing: she averaged 326 passengers on five westbound crossings and 312 passengers on the eastbound crossings. While that may not sound particularly good, when we consider the time of year (a poor time for passenger traffic) then her carryings increased by 38 percent compared to 1934, and were the best since 1932. There are other signs of a recovery of passenger numbers.

At this point it might be constructive to examine the number of passengers carried by the *Aquitania*, *Berengaria* and *Majestic* from 1931-34:

	1931	1932	1933	1934
<i>Aquitania</i>	21,992	14,435	13,992	13,317
<i>Berengaria</i>	13,408	18,311	15,795	17,307
<i>Majestic</i>	16,345	18,051	13,573*	15,465
<i>Olympic</i>	13,975	9,458	9,170	9,777

It is clear that (apart from in 1931) *Olympic* consistently carried fewer passengers, the most extreme difference coming in 1932. She was less popular than her running mates. There are a number of reasons that may lie behind this, and these go all the way back to the *Olympic*'s maiden voyage in 1911. In 1911, as *Olympic* proved very popular, Cunard had studied her in service as a means of improving the design of their upcoming *Aquitania*; similarly, it is known that a Hamburg-Amerika Line director was among the 2,301 passengers on *Olympic*'s eastbound maiden voyage. These rival companies, Cunard and Hamburg-Amerika (or HAPAG) had the advantage of observing White Star's flagship in service so that they could build their own new large ships to be even more popular. At the time of the *Olympic*'s design, the White Star Line enjoyed no such luxury, and although it could be argued that the *Lusitania* and *Mauretania* were in service from 1907, they had been designed primarily for high speed rather than the luxury that was the focus of *Olympic*'s designers. Similarly, in 1911 *Olympic* was the world's largest and most luxurious liner by a larger margin. The concept, of a large liner bigger than 45,000 gross tons, designed for luxury and (in comparison with Cunard's speedsters) more moderate speed, was a basic one that Cunard followed with the *Aquitania*; and HAPAG sought to improve upon with their trio of ships well over 50,000 gross tons. (Two of which ultimately became Cunard-White Star's *Berengaria* and *Majestic* after 1934.) It would have reflected badly on the new Cunard and HAPAG liners if they had not at least matched the popularity *Olympic* enjoyed; in fact, it could be said that it would have reflected badly on them if they had not proved even more popular. Yet aside

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\* Taking this figure as an example, some White Star records (see page 289 of my *RMS Olympic* book) showed *Majestic* carrying 13,298 passengers in 1933, based on thirty-one crossings; however, the figure shown here – 13,573 is taken from the Transatlantic Passenger Conference's figures, which took thirty-two crossings as the total. Since some voyages carried on into the following year before the ship returned to port, this explains most of the variations in the number of crossings shown by different sources – some count entire voyages as belonging to the previous year, if they ended in early January. Similarly, some company records match the conference's, yet within the individual ship tables of the conference there can be variations. An example is the figure for 3,128 passengers for *Olympic* in 1935, from Cunard-White Star's records, which contrasts with a figure of 3,190 passengers according to one of the conference's tables; yet both give the same number of voyages.

from improving upon the flagship first class accommodation, Cunard's and the German designers could concentrate on second and third class in an effort to outdo White Star. *Olympic's* second and third class accommodation undoubtedly set benchmarks when she was new, second class being considered equal to first class on some of the older liners, yet it seems particularly true that it was in these classes that her Cunard and German rivals had the biggest advantage of improvement when they were building their new liners. *Aquitania's* second class was a great improvement compared to Cunard's previous liners, and no doubt the same would have been true for the new German ships.

Yet if these reasons were true in 1911, as her rivals were being built and *Olympic* suffered the setback of the *Hawke* collision and the well-publicised loss of her now legendary sister *Titanic*, then more reasons can be found after the war. It is well-known that, by the time of the merger with Cunard, White Star was the weaker company by a significant margin. To what extent the company's finances influenced the modernisation of their liners from the late 1920s is a subject for debate, yet it is clear that the *Aquitania's* refit in 1929 was more extensive than any *Olympic* (or *Majestic*) received. There is no space to describe all the changes, which included a number of new first class suites, but in particular Cunard boasted that: 'In one section of the ship the accommodation has been completely remodelled, providing no less than four new public rooms, new staterooms and promenade space for the new class known as tourist third cabin.' An 'entirely new range' of public rooms included a smoke room, lounge, dining saloon and winter garden for tourist third passengers, and these extensive changes no doubt helped the liner to carry nearly 6,000 tourist third passengers in 1931 alone. *Olympic* had received a number of new first class suites forward on B-deck in the late 1920s, not to mention the continuing increase in private bathrooms in 1928 and 1933, yet although she also received some new public rooms (such as the 'tourist class' dance floor on the port side of D-deck, aft of the tourist dining saloon, which was also referred to as a 'tourist lounge' in the 1930s) the refit was not as extensive. (It would be interesting to compare *Berengaria's* 1933 refit with the changes made to *Olympic* and *Aquitania* around the same time.) An extensive documentation of every single change made in every refit for each liner from the 1920s would be out of place, but it does seem reasonable to speculate that Cunard's liners enjoyed a greater quantity of funds to make passenger-attracting upgrades.

It seems likely that these reasons go a long way to explaining the difference in passenger carryings, yet it is undeniable that *Olympic* maintained a reputation for popularity. Throughout her career, there are continued references to her popularity and reliability. She was undeniably popular, and it was not until 1930 that her cumulative average passenger lists dropped below 1,000 passengers. The 1930s did not hit her quite as hard as some seem to believe, and despite the decline in passenger traffic when the *Olympic* is compared to other large liners her financial performance comes out fairly well – as we shall see. In 1933 the stylish eleven-year-old *Paris* completed thirteen round trips, the same as *Olympic*, yet she averaged 329

passengers per crossing; hardly a significant variation on *Olympic's* average of 353 passengers. *Leviathan* averaged 256 passengers in 1933, on only four round trips. There will always be some examples like this, yet the *Ile de France* averaged 589 passengers the same year on a similar number of voyages to *Olympic*; and *Bremen* and *Europa* each completed thirty-nine crossings averaging around 750-70 passengers. (In 1934, *Paris* completed fourteen round trips averaging 338 passengers per one-way crossing, which compared to *Olympic's* fifteen round trips averaging 326 passengers per crossing. *Paris'* eastbound lists were better.) There was an undoubted trend towards newer ships, and although a number of liners averaged less than two hundred passengers per crossing by 1934, they were hardly in the league of the larger express ships (however old they were).

Although the total numbers of passengers carried by each ship are useful figures, perhaps the average number of passengers carried on each crossing are a little more revealing in terms of a ship's popularity.

	1931	1932	1933	1934
<i>Aquitania</i>	611	656	466	493
<i>Berengaria</i>	670	654	527	541
<i>Majestic</i>	629	531	424	499
<i>Olympic</i>	451	430	353	326

While the average number of passengers confirms the fact that *Olympic* was not as popular as the *Aquitania*, *Berengaria* and *Majestic* in the 1931-34 period, the difference does not seem as large as the total yearly passenger lists of the four ships seem to imply. The number of crossings could vary considerably from ship to ship, and year to year. In 1932, for instance, *Olympic* carried an average of 101 less passengers than the *Majestic*, which is not an enormous amount; in 1933, she was 71 passengers behind the *Majestic*, 113 passengers behind the *Aquitania* and 174 passengers behind the *Berengaria*. The largest difference was between *Olympic* and *Berengaria* in 1931: 233 passengers.

From a revenue point of view, the relative breakdown of first, tourist and third class passengers is important. It is worth recording the average number of first class passengers each liner carried on each crossing:

	1931	1932	1933	1934
<i>Aquitania</i>	213	171	170	192
<i>Berengaria</i>	227	174	166	176
<i>Majestic</i>	204	163	138	188
<i>Olympic</i>	148	125	117	118

From 1932, *Olympic's* total first class carryings were rising fairly significantly. However, her average first class passenger lists remained stable and the other ships' total first class passenger carryings were rising too. By means of comparison

between the first class passengers and the total number of passengers carried by each liner, the following table expresses the number of first class passengers as a percentage of the overall totals:

	1931	1932	1933	1934
<i>Aquitania</i>	35	26	36	39
<i>Berengaria</i>	34	27	32	33
<i>Majestic</i>	32	31	32	38
<i>Olympic</i>	34	29	33	36

There is not a single year in which the proportion of *Olympic's* first class passengers – in truth the most fruitful source of revenue, due to their higher fares – is less than that of any of her running mates. In 1931, her proportion is second only to *Aquitania*; in 1932, her proportion is second only to *Majestic*; in 1933, her proportion is second only to *Aquitania*; and in 1934 her proportion is third to *Aquitania* and *Majestic*. While this would appear to indicate that *Olympic's* proportion of first class passengers would not have benefited her earnings significantly compared to the other three vessels, she may have had a slight advantage. It is impossible to go into enough detail to know. While *Aquitania* and *Olympic* were both classed in the same group for fares by the Transatlantic Passenger Conference, and *Berengaria* and *Majestic* were in the higher class, there are significant variations even within first class. A single passenger hiring the finest suite would generate more revenue than several passengers in the lowliest first class cabins. To a lesser extent, fares also varied within tourist class and third class. Fortunately, there are complete revenue figures available for 1934 and these will be dealt with later.

As we have seen, it is apparent that *Olympic* carried fewer passengers than her running mates. Her eastbound passenger lists in 1934 were particularly disappointing and were probably the main reason why her average passenger list per crossing did not improve compared to 1933, even if the overall number of passengers she carried that year did.\* As her last in full year service, it is only possible to guess how she might have performed if she had not been withdrawn in 1935, but certainly her passenger lists early in 1935 were significantly better than for the same period in 1934.

### ***EARNINGS & RUNNING COSTS, VOYAGES 248-57: 1934-35***

Although data for the vast majority of her career has been lost, it is fortunate that we have some reliable estimates as to *Olympic's* running costs and the revenue she generated from her service in late 1934 and early 1935. These can be compared with the number of passengers that she carried from the late summer of 1934. Passenger

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\* To confuse matters, one handwritten archival document from 1934 shows around 12,000 passengers for *Olympic*. It begins by showing *Olympic's* crossings for the first half of the year, but then seems to list another ship's crossings for the final half, as upon examination these do not fit *Olympic's* schedule. The conference figure is undoubtedly more reliable!

traffic was picking up for the season and *Olympic* departed from Southampton at noon on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1934, set to carry a total of 618 passengers to New York (almost half in first class). Twenty days later, *Olympic* was departing from Southampton on her 248<sup>th</sup> round trip to New York. Her 807 passengers included 235 first class passengers, 391 tourist class and 181 third class. Yet *Olympic* left New York on August 29<sup>th</sup> 1934 with one of her lower passenger lists that year, with a total of 205 passengers (62 first class, 95 tourist class and 48 third class). The first class dining saloon must have appeared eerily quiet in the evenings! All in all, she carried 1,012 passengers on the round trip. From her 248<sup>th</sup> round trip, her passenger lists were as follows:\*

Round Trip	Southampton Departure	Passengers Carried
248	August 22 <sup>nd</sup> 1934	1,012
249	September 6 <sup>th</sup> 1934	938
250	September 26 <sup>th</sup> 1934	662
251	November 21 <sup>st</sup> 1934	634
252	December 12 <sup>th</sup> 1934	770
253	January 9 <sup>th</sup> 1935	599
254	January 30 <sup>th</sup> 1935	585
255	February 14 <sup>th</sup> 1935	553
256	March 6 <sup>th</sup> 1935	652
257	March 27 <sup>th</sup> 1935	801
Total:		7,206

Although the figures include the winter low in passenger traffic, for her last ten round trips *Olympic* averaged 360 passengers per one-way crossing – a little higher than her averages for 1933 and 1934. This seems to be a further sign that the ship's passenger lists were finally improving. We can now compare these passenger lists with *Olympic*'s revenue and running costs, although the revenue figures include freight earnings which varied:

Round Trip	Passengers Carried	Receipts	Disbursements	Gross Profit (or -loss)
248	1,012	£28,203	£25,425	£2,778
249	938	£29,939	£23,800	£6,139
250	662	£29,867	£26,300	£3,567
251	634	£21,329	£46,925	-£23,596
252	770	£26,179	£26,175	£4
253	599	£25,263	£28,625	-£3,362
254	585	£24,335	£25,675	-£1,340
255	553	£26,979	£24,000	£2,979
256	652	£24,890	£27,050	-£2,160

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\* All figures in this table for 1934-35 are taken from the individual Transatlantic Passenger Conference's tables for *Olympic* in 1934 and 1935, with the 1935 figure standing at 3,190 passengers (as opposed to the figure of 3,128 passengers which appears in my *Olympic* book and is taken from Cunard-White Star's own records).

257	801	£24,225	£26,600	-£2,375
Total:	7,206	£261,209	£280,575	-£17,370

With disbursements at a shocking £46,925 on her 251<sup>st</sup> round trip *Olympic* plunged deep into the red. These presumably included expenses related to her annual survey. Had it not been for this, *Olympic* would have shown a gross profit for the period. However, the picture changes when we consider the net profit – which was calculated considering depreciation, office and advertising expenses, and so forth – and on this measure the ship’s financial performance appears worse. Perhaps this is best expressed by adding a ‘net profits’ column to the table:

Round Trip	Passengers Carried	Receipts	Disbursements	Gross Profit (or loss)	Net Profit (or loss)
248	1,012	£28,203	£25,425	£2,778	-£10,139
249	938	£29,939	£23,800	£6,139	-£6,285
250	662	£29,867	£26,300	£3,567	-£16,752
251	634	£21,329	£46,925	-£23,596	-£46,216
252	770	£26,179	£26,175	£4	-£13,024
253	599	£25,263	£28,625	-£3,362	-£18,322
254	585	£24,335	£25,675	-£1,340	-£13,485
255	553	£26,979	£24,000	£2,979	-£8,870
256	652	£24,890	£27,050	-£2,160	-£15,160
257	801	£24,225	£26,600	-£2,375	-£15,130
Total:	7,206	£261,209	£280,575	-£17,370	-£163,383

While the disbursements of £46,925 (and net loss of £46,216) on her 251<sup>st</sup> round trip appears to be something of a one-off, even if the figure had matched *Olympic*’s average disbursements then she would have shown a net loss of over £140,000 in this period. This is hardly surprising with the dramatic decline in passenger traffic of the 1930s. However, if her net losses make her performance seem far worse than the gross figures, it is important to compare *Olympic* to her running mates. This can be done for the year of 1934, for which complete records are available, extending our focus beyond the *Olympic*’s final ten round trips.

### **EARNINGS & RUNNING COSTS, 1934-35: AQUITANIA, BERENGARIA, MAJESTIC & OLYMPIC**

My earlier article outlined *Olympic*’s lean fuel consumption, and when we look at the available data for the whole of 1934 it becomes clear that *Olympic* was significantly cheaper to operate than the other three ships. Her average disbursements per round trip were over £10,000 less than the figures for *Berengaria* and *Majestic*. In all fairness, operating costs could increase with a high passenger list (if additional stewards were required to cater for passengers, for instance), yet it is clear that with these liners the fuel bill was a very significant chunk of their overall costs. *Olympic* did slightly better than might have been feared on a gross

profit (or loss) basis: per voyage, on average she lagged behind *Aquitania* and *Berengaria*, yet she ran slightly closer to the black than the *Majestic*. This was at a time when the *Olympic*'s particularly poor eastbound passenger lists contributed to her average passenger lists declining to 326 in 1934, while *Aquitania* averaged 493 passengers, *Majestic* averaged 499 passengers and *Berengaria* averaged 541 passengers. The picture changes with the average net profit (or loss) per voyage, as *Olympic* was slightly behind even the *Majestic*. Only *Aquitania* stood out as doing significantly better than any of the other ships. In this respect, certainly for 1934 it is misleading to say that *Olympic*'s running costs *entirely* compensated for her lower passenger carryings. They did to a significant extent: if they had not, then *Olympic*'s financial performance would have lagged the other ships to the degree that her passenger lists did, and this is not the case at all. Even on a net basis, per round trip her performance was fairly similar to *Berengaria* and *Majestic*.\*

	Receipts	Disbursements	Gross profit	Net profit
<i>Aquitania</i>	£31,556	£31,811	-£255	-£8,638
<i>Berengaria</i>	£36,521	£38,847	-£2,536	-£14,616
<i>Majestic</i>	£33,151	£38,075	-£4,924	-£16,978
<i>Olympic</i>	£23,104	£27,962	-£4,858	-£17,253

Despite the good signs evident in *Olympic*'s performance, such as her low running costs and relatively good gross profit for the number of passengers she was carrying, the figures for the whole of 1934 highlight significant problems. Ironically, it was the White Star Line's '*Olympic*' class for whom economy of operation was so important, yet having given up the quest for speed her competitors who had copied the concept simply had the ability to attract more passengers. All four of the express ships were ageing, but if the *Olympic* had been able to attract as many passengers as *any* of the other three ships (and hence *match* their earnings) then she would have been running at a gross profit even in the cold economic times of 1934 and her net profit performance would have been significantly better. History records that she was not, and on a net basis – perhaps the best measure on which to judge a ship's financial performance – a loss of £17,253 per round voyage was by any standard horrific. That *Majestic* was doing almost as badly despite having higher passenger lists, or that *Olympic*'s performance was better than might have been expected given the circumstances, is irrelevant: adjusted using the retail price index, in 1934 *Olympic* was running at a thumping net loss of £793,284 at 2004 prices on *every* round voyage.

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\* Although a very rough measure that does not account for different freight earnings, to judge by each ship's revenue and passenger figures for 1934 *Olympic* earned the most money per passenger: £35.5, followed by: *Majestic* £34.3; *Berengaria* £33.8; and *Aquitania*: £30.8. This would seem to suggest that those passengers who did chose the *Olympic* were more concentrated in the ship's premier accommodation – for instance, her B-deck suites – than was the case for her running mates. However, it should be cautioned that these figures might change significantly if the full figures for freight were included, and they are included as a footnote for speculative value only.

An improvement of sorts appears to have been evident in the early part of 1935, from January to April where the *Berengaria*, *Majestic* and *Olympic* made five round trips each, yet valid comparisons between the express ships are difficult to make. *Aquitania* only made one westbound crossing and one round trip to New York and back during this period owing to the time she spent cruising, which means that the figures for her should be treated with a heavy dose of caution since they do not apply by any measure to a comparable number of voyages; similarly, *Majestic*'s 190<sup>th</sup> round trip which began with her February 20<sup>th</sup> 1935 Southampton departure was recorded as a 'lay-up' voyage – her disbursements were what might have been expected for two round trips rather than one, which influences the averages enormously. Nevertheless, this table shows each ship's averages per round trip in the early 1935 period:

	Receipts	Disbursements	Gross profit	Net profit
<i>Aquitania</i>	£35,612	£35,633	-£21	-£15,400
<i>Berengaria</i>	£33,672	£36,315	-£2,643	-£16,424
<i>Majestic</i>	£29,638	£41,205	-£11,567	-£24,597
<i>Olympic</i>	£25,138	£26,390	-£1,342	-£14,227

All in all, compared with her average showing for the whole of 1934, in the first few months of 1935 *Olympic*'s revenues rose by around £2,000 per round trip; her disbursements fell by nearly £1,600; her gross profit improved from a £4,858 deficit to a £1,342 deficit; and her net profit improved from a deficit of £17,253 to one of £14,227. Only *Berengaria* can really be compared with *Olympic* on a truly like-for-like basis in early 1935, and although she was earning significantly more than *Olympic* her higher disbursements led to her running a little deeper in the red. *Olympic*'s improvement is shown when we consider the comparable figures for *Olympic*'s voyages 238-42 in early 1934 and 253-57 in early 1935:

<i>Olympic</i> early 1934	£23,537	£28,266	-£4,729	-£16,170
<i>Olympic</i> early 1935	£25,138	£26,390	-£1,342	-£14,227

Despite the improvement, *Olympic* was still running at a loss on both a gross and net basis in early 1935. All the ships were. In terms of economy of operation, as always she was the 'leader of the pack,' yet it was perhaps the figures for the full year of 1934 that company directors had at the forefront of their thoughts. As *Olympic* returned to Southampton for the final time, leaving New York on April 5<sup>th</sup> 1935, Cunard-White Star's stated intention to withdraw her from the express service for cruising led to a key question surrounding her future: could alternative *profitable* employment be found for her?

## **RECOVERY: SPRING 1935**

Although she was showing an improvement in passenger numbers in 1935, her running mates still appeared more popular. *Olympic* did carry similar numbers of passengers to her running mates on any given crossing, yet her averages at the beginning of 1935 remained lower and over time the differences added up. The gap appears to have been narrowing compared to the average passenger lists seen in 1934, yet it is a shorter time period. Here are the average passenger lists for the four ships – apart from *Aquitania*, whose average is for fewer voyages due to her cruising, they apply for the first five round trips each liner made in 1935:

	Average passenger list
<i>Aquitania</i>	427
<i>Berengaria</i>	428
<i>Majestic</i>	434
<i>Olympic</i>	319

We know from the figures for 1934 that had *Olympic* earned as much (or attracted as many passengers as) *any* of her running mates, she would probably have been running at a gross profit even then. The same would appear to be true early in 1935. Yet the recovery in passenger numbers (*Olympic*'s lists were up a little under forty percent in early 1935 compared to the same time in 1934) nevertheless showed that *Olympic* could not carry an average number of passengers as high as her running mates could. Had she been able to, it is arguable that with her lower running costs *Olympic* might well have been retained in the express service in preference to the *Berengaria* (whose retirement was initially announced in November 1935) or *Majestic* (retired instead of *Berengaria* early in 1936), despite the fact that she was older and smaller.

Even if *Olympic*'s average passenger lists had matched her running mates', then there may have been another consideration at this time. Following the 1933 refit, *Olympic*'s registered capacity in all three classes came to 1,447 passengers; and when we consider that *Olympic* had carried 1,163 passengers as recently as July 1932, it is possible that capacity constraints may have been a worry. While it was true that these passenger lists were seen very rarely during the depression years, from 1933 *Olympic*'s passenger capacity consisted of 618 in first class, 447 in tourist, and 382 in third class. It was important that the ship was able to take full advantage of those passengers who did wish to travel on her, or at least consider one of the veteran Atlantic liners, yet on her August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1934 westbound crossing *Olympic*'s tourist class had been packed with 391 passengers – not far short of capacity. When she made her August 31<sup>st</sup> 1933 westbound crossing, tourist class was packed to only five passengers short of capacity. The larger first class capacity would have gone some way to increasing the ship's earning power if she was full, yet it does seem plausible to suggest that – when these passenger lists came at the height of the season – *Olympic* simply may not have had the necessary capacity to accommodate all prospective passengers, which would have been a worry to Cunard-

White Star. Perhaps this is insignificant, for these older ships faced increasing competition. However, if this was the case, then since *Olympic* had not proved more popular than her running mates for the remainder of the year the company would have faced these two real concerns: capacity constraints at the height of the season; and passenger lists which were lower than her running mates for the remainder of the year. If the former may be considered unlikely, the latter seems the most probable concern.

In 1935, *Aquitania*'s best passenger list came on her westbound voyage of August 31<sup>st</sup> 1935: 1,111 passengers; *Berengaria* carried 1,522 passengers when she departed for New York three days beforehand; *Majestic* carried 1,472 passengers on her August 21<sup>st</sup> 1935 westbound departure. It seemed that the recovery in passenger traffic was gathering momentum.

### ***THE 1935 THAT NEVER WAS***

There is some surviving documentation to indicate the voyages that *Olympic* might have completed in 1935, had she been retained in service. While it has never been published, to the best of my knowledge, one document drawn up for Cunard-White Star indicated a plausible timetable for the *Olympic* spending much of the summer as a cruise ship. It does have the quality of fitting both the five round trips *Olympic* did make in early 1935, and then the dates for cruises which were published in the newspapers for the summer. Similarly, Cunard-White Star compiled a list of estimated revenues and expenses for their ships in 1935, and *Olympic* was initially shown on this with her profits and losses projected all the way to December 1935. It lists the five round trips *Olympic* made until her final Southampton departure on March 27<sup>th</sup> 1935, followed by a voyage from Southampton to New York beginning on June 29<sup>th</sup> 1935. Four cruises are then scheduled, leaving New York on:

- July 6<sup>th</sup> 1935;
- August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1935;
- August 30<sup>th</sup> 1935;
- September 7<sup>th</sup> 1935.

Upon completion of these cruises, *Olympic* would depart New York on September 28<sup>th</sup> 1935 for the return half of the round voyage that had begun on her last Southampton departure. She would then leave Southampton on November 20<sup>th</sup> 1935 and December 11<sup>th</sup> 1935 for two final round trips to New York. However, while it seems reasonably fair to indicate that *Olympic* had been withdrawn from the express service due to her lower passenger carryings, the projections for her summer cruise schedule may help to explain why the schedule was suddenly cancelled by the company.

Although slightly at variance, the figures for *Olympic*'s five round trips (253-57) that she did complete are broadly the same as those shown in the '248-57' table above, yet there was some bad news for *Olympic*'s westbound crossing to New York

for June 29<sup>th</sup> 1935 in that she was expected to make a gross loss of £18,745 with passenger receipts at only £9,000. (Compared to her final, March 27<sup>th</sup> 1935 westbound crossing, freight receipts were projected to be down £1,750; first class receipts down £1,000; tourist class receipts up £420; third class receipts down £130; and mails receipts down £1,600.) The estimates for her cruises were better, although five cruises are shown rather than the four proposed in other documentation:

Departure	Gross profit
July 6 <sup>th</sup> 1935	-£315
July 20 <sup>th</sup> 1935	£1,540
August 3 <sup>rd</sup> 1935	£4,210
August 17 <sup>th</sup> 1935	£4,210
August 30 <sup>th</sup> 1935	£4,750
September 7 <sup>th</sup> 1935	-£185
Total profit:	£14,210

As can be seen, all in all *Olympic* was expected to make a gross profit of £14,210 on her cruises, yet the problem was that on her westbound crossing to New York prior to undertaking the cruises her expected loss was greater than the profit expected for all five cruises. Another problem is that the estimates deal with gross profit, and it seems probable that *Olympic* would still have made a net loss on her cruises unless she earned more than Cunard-White Star estimated she would. For her eastbound crossing, leaving New York on September 28<sup>th</sup> 1935, *Olympic* was expected to make a loss of £9,065, which would only increase the expected shortfall between revenues and disbursements. Tellingly, for her round trips of November 20<sup>th</sup> 1935 and December 11<sup>th</sup> 1935, *Olympic*'s disbursements were expected to be higher – and her revenues lower – than they had been for her round trips in early 1935, leading to gross losses of £11,955 and £7,475 respectively. Whether this would have been the case or not, it was a detailed estimate, and would appear to indicate the company's fears as to occasionally operating *Olympic* on the express service when she was not cruising.

Overall, according to forecasts dated March 5<sup>th</sup> 1935 and prepared in the Accountants' Department at Liverpool for the company, for the year *Olympic* was expected to earn £304,305 with disbursements of £345,300 for an overall gross loss of £40,995. Around £33,000 of this deficit would have been incurred after June 1935. *Olympic* would have missed the bumper four-figure passenger lists that might have been expected in August and September 1935, as she would have been cruising, and despite the apparent potential for her cruises to show a gross profit the deficits expected for her June 29<sup>th</sup> 1935 and September 28<sup>th</sup> 1935 crossings were substantial. The projections for 1935 showed *Majestic* recording a gross loss of £26,236 that year, with *Berengaria* making a profit of £56,100 and *Aquitania* in the black by £67,890.

## **CONCLUSION**

The depression and the subsequent decline in passenger traffic is probably the single most important factor in the demise of the *Olympic* and her contemporaries. Had the passenger lists seen in the later 1920s been maintained, it seems fair to suggest that profitable employment could have continued much longer for these liners, even if they had been moved from the express service to secondary routes. There was probably a perception of *Olympic* as a pre-war ship, older than her years, since *Berengaria* and *Aquitania* had seen so little commercial service before the war, and indeed *Majestic* had not even been completed. She had been launched less than two years before *Berengaria*, and two-and-a-half years before *Aquitania*. Even so, this perception may have had an influence on her in 1935. *Mauretania* had been retired before the *Olympic*, and she had four additional years of pre-war service behind her at a time when the *Lusitania* joined her to rule the Atlantic.

By the 1930s, *Olympic* did not suffer as much from the depression as appears to have been thought. (The apparent view that her average passenger lists plunged to below two hundred as soon as the depression hit is entirely misplaced.) Yet she did prove less popular – understandably – than the *Aquitania*, *Berengaria* and *Majestic*. These ships had specifically been designed to be more popular, after *Olympic*'s 1911 debut set the standard for the future. Through circumstances, *Aquitania* for instance had enjoyed more comprehensive refits to enhance her competitiveness further, and the White Star Line itself was weakening against Cunard. Nevertheless, *Olympic* did continue to attract a loyal following and remained a reliable, comfortable sea boat.

While it was true that *Olympic* was showing her age in some respects by the early 1930s, as her contemporaries were, there does not seem to be any evidence that she was withdrawn from service due to either mechanical or structural problems. Had there been any defect which necessitated expensive repairs or prevented *Olympic* passing her annual inspection, it is reasonable to suppose that there would have been a record of it – and as far as can be ascertained, this is simply not the case. She did show fatigue cracks in the topsides (mainly the superstructure and at the top of the structural hull), which was especially serious in early 1931, yet afterwards the surveys record as satisfactory the condition of the repairs carried out at that time (as they did in November 1934). These repairs consisted of extensive welding and the fitting of doubling plates to help strengthen and stiffen the structure. Despite the provision of two expansion joints to prevent excessive strain coming upon the thinner plating of the superstructure (which was not part of, and essentially sat on top of, the structural hull proper), twenty years of hard service had seen the material become over-fatigued.\* Contrary to popular belief, from 1932 *Olympic*'s passenger certificates were issued for the full twelve months (the sole exception during her career coming in 1931). It is known that the damage incurred in the Nantucket lightship collision in May 1934 had been repaired before the year ended, which

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\* For 'rivet counters,' the design refinement seen with *Britannic* (including the provision of additional expansion joints) makes an interesting area of study, showing the progression of the design as Harland & Wolff learned from the in-service experience of each subsequent vessel of the '*Olympic*' class.

would appear to disprove the view that there was any expensive damage remaining from that collision that would have made *Olympic's* continuation in service prohibitive. At the time of her scrapping, *Olympic's* hull was found to be 'surprisingly found.' The ship's engines themselves were performing 'better than ever' with the *Olympic* appearing 'like a new ship' after the 1932-33 engine work, according to one engineer. In the late summer of 1933, *Olympic* ran no less than 566 miles in a single day on a westbound crossing (an average of 22.8 knots despite the current working against her, indicating a probable speed through the water of over 23 knots), and she seems to have continued to exceed 23 knots. She regularly made crossings averaging in excess of twenty-two knots, as she had done since 1911. She remained the 'Old Reliable.' The repairs to the newer stern frame appear to have been satisfactory from 1932, and it is perhaps best to quote briefly from the February 1932 survey report to provide a summary which noted that 'the general condition is good.' My earlier article helped to put the *Olympic* in context in comparison with her running mates. It was noted at the time, perhaps recalling her war service, that *Olympic* had seen the hardest service of the quartet. Her engines and propelling machinery were very sound, while for a liner of her age her hull generally was in good condition, and the superstructure repairs completed in 1931 appear to have been more effective and enduring than expected.

If there are some myths that I believe are dispelled by the available sources, as I have outlined in this article there are some conclusions to be drawn as to why the *Olympic* was withdrawn when she was. Despite her lower running costs, ironically a result of White Star's comfort rather than speed policy, unfortunately the number of passengers *Olympic* was carrying by this time were simply not enough to reap the benefits. *Olympic's* low running costs helped to offset her lower passenger lists, but they did not compensate entirely – in 1934, her net profits were not so dissimilar to *Majestic* and *Berengaria*. The cold facts are that *Olympic* was losing the most money per round trip on a net basis in 1934, and her gross profits per round trip were only slightly better than the worst performer: *Majestic*. The situation improved in 1935, as she came close to operating on a gross profit, yet *Olympic's* passenger lists were still lower than her running mates and the figures from 1931-34 would have indicated to the company that this was a situation unlikely to change in the near future. While it seems unlikely, *Olympic's* passenger capacity after 1933 may have acted as a constraint in the high season as passenger traffic improved from 1935; and it does seem to be the case that there was a worry that her passenger lists were lower – on average – than her running mates for the remainder of the year. Having made the decision to withdraw her from the express service, Cunard-White Star's estimates showed that the profits that might be expected on cruises were simply not enough to offset losses made elsewhere: on her June 29<sup>th</sup> 1935 voyage to New York alone. This seems unfortunate, as if the *Olympic* had continued in service for a little longer then the *Berengaria's* increasing electrical problems may have necessitated retaining *Olympic* in the fleet, even as a reserve ship.

When we consider the figures from 1934-35, it seems fair to suggest *Olympic's* profits must have been very good indeed before the depression. *Majestic's* profits for the 1920s are known, and comparing her gross profit in 1929 with the total figure for White Star's express trio that year indicates that *Olympic* (and *Homeric*) must have done well too. Indeed, a *very rough* estimate which takes into account passenger carryings puts *Olympic's* gross profit in 1929 at over half a million pounds. While expenses were cut to the bone in the 1930s, throughout the 1920s her passenger lists were much higher than they were in the lean depression years, at a time before shipping companies cut rates in an attempt to stem the decline in passenger traffic. *Olympic* was still making a gross profit on occasions, the last on her 255<sup>th</sup> round voyage in February 1935, and in a number of instances it would not have required many more passengers for her to have shown a net profit too. The dramatic decline of the passenger traffic was nevertheless horrendous, condemning a ship regularly showered with praise.

'The *Olympic* is the best ship that Harland & Wolff ever turned out of their famous yard at Belfast, and she is the last hand-riveted big vessel afloat [sic]. She is in "A1" condition and can maintain 22½ knots under ordinary weather conditions if she has the fuel. I should be very sorry to hear of her going to the ship breakers.' - Captain James L. Thompson, Cunard White Star Line Assistant Marine Superintendent, August 5<sup>th</sup> 1935.

'The *Olympic* retires to the "bone yard" of ships with an enviable list of records.' - The Associated Press, August 20<sup>th</sup> 1935.

'Veterans in North Atlantic shipping said that after the scrapping of the *Olympic*, recognised as one of the finest steamships afloat, there were no surprises left.' - The *New York Times*, February 23<sup>rd</sup> 1936, commenting on *Majestic's* scrapping.

*Olympic* enjoyed a quarter of a century's illustrious service in peace and war, and any consideration of the circumstances of her retirement should not overlook that.

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As with the earlier article, *RMS Olympic: Another Premature Death?*, four years later the sources that proved so helpful then deserve my acknowledgement. These include the National Archives at Kew and the Cunard Steamship Company archives (by courtesy of the University of Liverpool). Hopefully both articles, taken together, will help to provide an interesting analysis into the reasons why *Olympic* was withdrawn from service. While the earlier article mainly helped to debunk the apparent myth that *Olympic* was ageing and expensive to run, it perhaps failed to consider the other side of the coin (passenger carryings and earnings over an *extended period*) in enough detail; in this one the emphasis has shifted to viewing the more probable causes of *Olympic*'s retirement and – in the process – refined my argument. Having argued that a commonly held view was not accurate, it was necessary to provide an alternative view supported by the available evidence. Some of my views have changed slightly, yet my overall argument has not: in terms of her structural and mechanical condition, *Olympic*'s retirement *was* another premature death. I am pleased that this thorough analysis of *Olympic*'s profit and losses help to suggest an alternative reason or two for her withdrawal from service.

After reading this article even hardcore *Olympic* fans will be rejoicing at finding such an effective insomnia cure, and it's perhaps best to close with a thank you to those who have bothered to read this far.

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