

MARITIME ARCHIVES & LIBRARY

INFORMATION SHEET 42

RMS *LUSITANIA*

The RMS *Lusitania*, or "*The Lucy*" as she was affectionately known, was launched on Thursday 7 June 1906, at the shipyard of John Brown & Co, Clydebank. She was built as a result of negotiations between the British Government and Cunard Line to build two superliners capable of taking back the Blue Riband for the fastest Atlantic crossing. At her launch she was described by Charles McLaren, Chairman of John Brown, as "the largest vessel ever to have put into the water... whilst her engine power would be such as to send her across the Atlantic at a speed never yet accomplished, except by a torpedo boat destroyer". She was the first British passenger ship to be built with four funnels, with a gross tonnage of 32,500 tons and overall length of 785 ft, and with seven decks for the use of passengers.

On Saturday 7 September 1907, after the completion of her trials, she sailed from Liverpool on her maiden voyage to Queenstown and New York, watched by a crowd of 200,000 spectators. However, poor weather conditions meant that she could not live up to the expectation of winning the Blue Riband. On her second voyage in more favourable weather, *Lusitania* achieved a voyage time of 4 days, 19 hours and 52 minutes and won the Blue Riband for Britain, the record being held for the next 22 years. In March 1914 *Lusitania* broke her last speed record, 618 miles in 24 hours from Liverpool to New York, breaking the previous record set by her younger sister, the second of the two super liners, *Mauretania* in 1911.

Lusitania completed her last peacetime voyage from New York, arriving in Liverpool on the day Great Britain declared war on Germany, 4 August 1914. *Lusitania* was not requisitioned by the Admiralty but continued to sail for Cunard once a month to New York. Between 16 December and 13 March 1915 four more successful round voyages were made, although these were not without incident. On the second of these voyages whilst sailing in heavy seas off the Irish coast, her commander Captain Dow, afraid of the ship being torpedoed, hoisted the "Stars & Stripes" much to the delight of the American passengers on board, and resulting in a great deal of world press coverage.

The waters around the British Isles were dangerous for Allied shipping, and in April 1915 the German Embassy published warnings in the New York newspapers that passengers travelling on Allied ships travelled at their own risk. At this time the *Lusitania* was taking on board passengers at Pier 54, New York, for the homeward voyage, departing on Saturday, 1 May 1915, with 1,266 passengers including many wealthy and notable Americans, and 696 crew aboard.

By Friday 7 May, *Lusitania* had sailed once more into the dangerous seas approaching Queenstown, Ireland, where the risk of attack by enemy submarines was greatest. Precautions were taken, life-boats swung out, look-outs doubled and steam pressure kept high for extra speed in case of emergency. *Lusitania* had been steaming at 21 knots, but by now had reduced her speed to 18 knots to enable her to catch the tide at the Mersey Bar for her arrival next morning at Liverpool.

She was sighted off the Old Head of Kinsale at 1.40 pm and was about 10-15 miles off the Irish coast when Captain Turner was informed by the second officer: "There is a torpedo

coming, sir". Almost immediately the ship exploded on the starboard side, between the 3rd and 4th funnels. A second explosion thought at the time to be a second torpedo followed. The *Lusitania* listed to starboard and in about 20 minutes had sunk taking 1,191 lives with her.

Amongst the 1,191 who lost their lives were 786 passengers and 405 crew, and the trawlers *Bluebell* and *Peel* rescued most of the 771 survivors. Controversy remains over the cause of the second explosion. Only one torpedo was fired by the German submarine U-20, the second explosion, instrumental in causing the vessel to sink in less than twenty minutes, is thought to have been caused by one of the boilers exploding or possibly by coal dust. However, the German Government insisted that this was proof that the *Lusitania* was carrying munitions, which was vigorously denied by the British Government. The lasting legacy of the *Lusitania* was the public condemnation of the sinking on both sides of the Atlantic, and this was a contributory factor in America joining the war on the side of the Allies.

Original Archives

A number of general arrangement plans and associated papers can be found in the Cunard archive:

- Career papers of Captain Dow, who served on both the *Lusitania* and *Mauretania* during his career with Cunard, 1907-1920 (D/DOW).
- Correspondence, re victims, life-jackets, the survivor's relief fund and a change of route for Cunard vessels is to be found in the D/LUS archive.

There are a number of interesting items in the DX/SAS collections, especially relating to the *Lusitania's* crew. These include:

- Papers of R.W. Blythyn, Steward on the *Lusitania*, which include a list of passengers and crew for the last voyage, and also newscuttings, memorial napkins, etc. (DX/1055a).
- A Discharge Book stamped, "vessel sunk off Kinsale", belonging to George Knill, a 15-year old scullery boy, who swam away from the sinking vessel (DX/1055e).
- A brochure, *Luxury and Comfort on board Lusitania and Mauretania*, 1908, and a letter from Swan Hunter, re the speed of the *Lusitania*, 1908 (DX/1412a).
- Photocopy of the official passenger and crew list for the last voyage of the RMS *Lusitania* is available in the Reading Room.

Select Bibliography

For a comprehensive bibliography, see:

THRELFALL, H. *Titanic & Lusitania: A Bibliography of works in the English Language held by the Maritime Archives & Library, Merseyside Maritime Museum*. Liverpool: NML, 2001. Price £1.00.

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WARREN, Mark D. *The Cunard Turbine-Driven Quadruple-Screw Atlantic Liner: Lusitania*. Wellingborough: Patrick Stephens Ltd., 1986.

SIMPSON, Colin. *LUSITANIA*. London: Book Club Associates, 1972.

HICKEY, Des & SMITH, Gus. *Seven Days to Disaster! The Sinking of the Lusitania*. London: Collins, 1981.