

Narrowing the Range of “White Star Buff”

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Introduction

In documents and plans of ships built for the White Star Line, the funnel paint colors are specified as “buff” with a black smoke band. The specification of “buff” has the lack of specificity much like the color designation “beige”. Modelers and historians have analyzed available evidence to try to determine what this particular “buff” color is. It has come to be known as “White Star Buff” (WSB). The result of this search has been as varied as the sources which were examined. No paint sample of WSB has ever been recovered from the Titanic wreck. Neither has any paint formulation ever been found in available records.

With apparently no objective information available, the subjective approach has been the only one available. The question which will be explored in this article is not whether subjectivity can be eliminated in trying to determine the color WSB. Rather what will be explored is whether there is objective evidence which can narrow the range of candidates for WSB.

The Subjective Approach

Until the present, all interpretations of WSB have to be considered subjective. In this approach artists and modelers have drawn from a variety of sources and have synthesized that information into an “educated guess” about what the color WSB should be. This approach is understandable when there is no objective information available. A number of sources have been consulted to try to accumulate the best evidence for WSB. Several of these will be discussed.

Period Paintings – Most of the period paintings of WSL ships were usually either in the form of advertisement posters or postcards. One would think that artists painting at the same time these vessels existed would produce some of the most accurate representations. The reality of what they produced as far as funnel colors couldn’t be more variable. One can only speculate on the reasons for the variation in funnel colors in these paintings but it is clear that these paintings can’t be used as any reliable source of information about what color WSB was. In the next figures I am posting some of the extremes in color which are found in period paintings of WSB. I do this to show how unreliable these paintings are without a standard with which to compare them. (Figures 1,2 & 3)



Figure 1



Figure 2

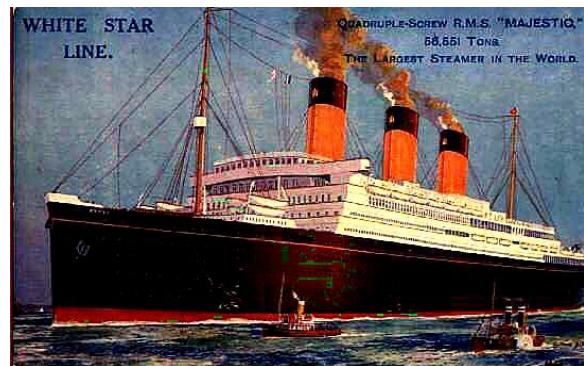


Figure 3

Someone may look at these examples and consider them to be absurd. If one does not have an objective standard, how can any of them be considered absurd?

Period Models – Like period paintings, period models are often thought to provide a close link to the past in their representations of the color WSB. Unfortunately, these models also suffer from the same variability of representations of WSB. Perhaps the variation is not as extreme as

the paintings but a number of problems present themselves. First, was the model built by the shipbuilder or was it contracted to a model building firm? Is the color now present on the funnels original or was it restored and possibly changed? If the color is original, would the paint need conservation procedures performed to restore it to its original color? The following examples of period WSL ship models shows some of the variation in WSB. (Figures 4,5,6)



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Another problem with period models and especially builders' models is that if we compare them to the actual ships they represent, we can see many discrepancies. It has been proposed that the builders would keep a watchful eye on these models to ensure that they were correct. We can see clearly that didn't happen with many of the erroneous details present in them. The question then becomes, are the errors confined to construction errors or do they extend to the

paint colors as well? How does one separate out the paint colors and say that they were untouched by the other errors that are found on these models?

Photographs – I am aware of only one period color photo which includes a WSL ship, RMS *Olympic* in 1928 in Southampton. It was discovered in the distance in a photo of RMS *Mauretania* (Figure 7).



Figure 7

There are two problems with this photo. The first is the quality. *Olympic* is at a considerable distance from the camera such that details and color are not considered reliable. The second and probably the most crucial is that this photo was taken in 1928. In the introduction to this article I linked to an article which I previously wrote which makes the case that the formula for WSB changed some time in the early 1920s (probably 1921) when other aspects of WSL livery changed. One of the identifying changes was that the yellow sheer stripe was lowered. The WSB color appears to have changed to a “pinkish beige” color which looks decidedly light in period black and white photos.

Other photos which are offered as evidence for WSB are color photos of MV *Britannic* and MV *Georgic*. These are better quality photos but not only are they past the period of the early formulation of WSB which appeared during *Titanic*’s time but they are post-merger with Cunard. There has been speculation that the formulation of WSB changed even further from the original formula after the merger with Cunard. I can’t positively confirm this because it is not something I have studied yet but there are those who contend that it is indeed different. Suffice to say, these photos don’t represent the formulation of WSB at the time of *Titanic*.

Some have used black and white photos taken of Titanic to try to gauge the relative lightness or darkness of the color WSB. What they fail to appreciate is that the nature of black and white film used in 1912 was different. It was a blue-sensitive formulation which tended to make warmer colors with red and yellow content appear much darker than they would in modern black and white film. Blue skies turn nearly white. For illustrative purposes, Figure 8 shows the effect of a blue sensitive black and white conversion of a color image.

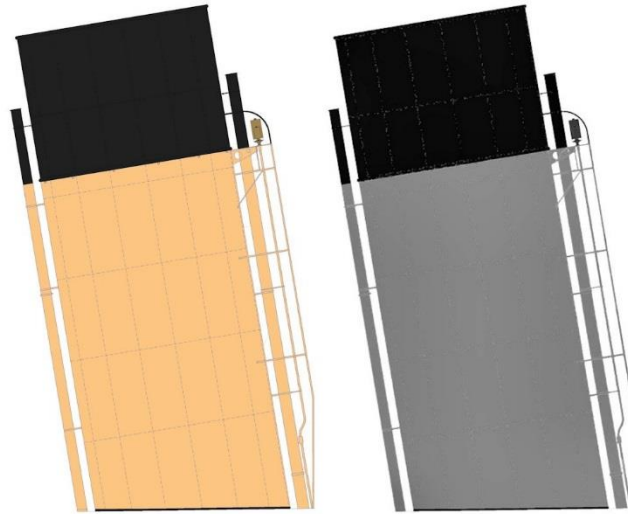


Figure 8

This simulation illustrates how a photo taken with blue-sensitive black and white film used during the time of *Titanic* can make a relatively light color seem to be a darker shade than it actually is.

Black and white film not only doesn't tell us anything about the color of an object but the old blue-sensitive black and white film can't tell us much about the relative lightness or darkness of a color.

Eyewitness Observation – If eyewitness observations by period artists have been shown to be unreliable, how much more unreliable are the observations of non-artists who are not used to communicating precise observations of color? I know of two period observations. The first was by a newspaper reporter commenting on *Titanic* in an article where he described WSB as “tawny-brown”. Again, what color is that? It is as imprecise as if he described the color as “beige”.

The second is from *Titanic* historian Walter Lord who sailed on RMS *Olympic* in 1926 at the age of nine. He produced a drawing for the producers of the movie “A Night to Remember” 32 years later where he tried to recreate the color of the funnel he saw. Not only would the recollections of a 9 year old boy 32 years later be considered suspect but the date of 1926 puts it within the time period after which I believe the formulation of WSB changed. So even if his

recollection was reliable, he probably wasn't looking at the same formulation of WSB that existed in 1912.

Appeal to Authority – This category which is treated as “evidence” is probably the most influential of all. An appeal to authority is when one adopts the position of a person that is recognized as an authority on a subject. If Expert A thinks that WSB is a certain color then that must be the color that WSB is. Critical thinking is excluded. It is just assumed that the authority must know what he is talking about or he wouldn't be an authority. The authority is never asked to make an objective case. What might be discovered if the authority is challenged is that his position is not based on objective evidence but rather subjective evidence. This is the most popular category of “evidence” because it requires no work on the part of those who accept the position of the authority. An added bonus is that there is security in having a position where if it is challenged, one can just refer the challenge to the authority.

Within all of the categories of the subjective approach there may be kernels of truth. The problem is that there is no way of discerning which is which outside of some objective standard. I believe that the subjective approach still rules the day in discussions about WSB in large part because most are unaware that there might be an objective standard which could be offered as evidence for WSB.

A Different Approach

If we had objective evidence for WSB like a paint sample from a recovered part of one of Titanic's funnels or possibly a documented paint formula, then we could rule out the subjective elements in the search for WSB. Unfortunately those two pieces of evidence don't currently exist.

Another approach would be to evaluate the evidence from the Shaw, Savill & Albion line (SSA). While this will not completely eliminate the subjective element in our search for evidence, it will eliminate a lot of it. This will have the effect of significantly narrowing the range of possible candidates for WSB.

Shaw, Savill & Albion evidence

In 2011 an invaluable book was written by Henry C. Spong and Richard H. Osborne entitled “Shaw, Savill & Albion: A Fleet History” (Figure 9)

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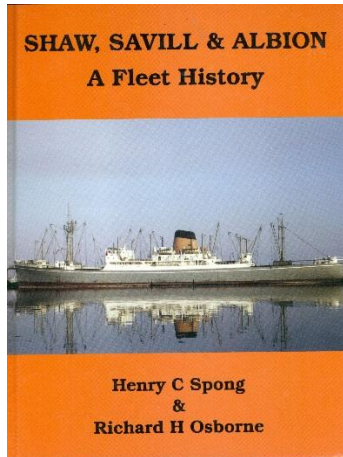


Figure 9

This is the most comprehensive history ever written about Shaw, Savill & Albion (SSA). Most importantly, it traces the relationship between SSA and WSL.

SSA was formed in 1882 by a merger of Shaw, Savill with the Albion line. The reason for forming SSA was to operate a service from England to New Zealand using steam powered vessels. SSA started by chartering ships for this service.

In the early 1880s WSL had become established with steam ships on the North Atlantic route. Having produced excess tonnage, WSL was looking for new opportunities. WSL approached SSA and by 1884 the two companies formed a joint service from England to New Zealand. A monthly service was to be undertaken by three WSL steamers and two new steamers to be built for SSA. These two SSA ships were *Arawa* and *Tainui*.

The key point in this cooperative venture by WSL and SSA as it bears on the matter of WSB is quoted here on p. 55 of "Shaw, Savill & Albion: A Fleet History": "The colour scheme adopted for the maiden voyage of both vessels [*Arawa* and *Tainui*] was a red funnel with a black top and black hull with painted ports. **This livery was soon changed to that worn by White Star vessels, which was a black hull with a yellow band one strake down, white upperworks with bright buff funnels with black tops**" WSL and SSA's joint service arrangement would last until 1933. SSA would operate in continuous service until 1985.

There is no evidence that after the conversion of their funnel livery to WSB in 1884 that SSA ever changed that original funnel livery. The importance of this historical discovery is that SSA continued well into the era of color photography. We have every reason to believe that the color we see in those color photos is identical to the original WSB before WSL changed their formulation in the early 1920s.

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SSA Funnel Color Examples

In the previous section evidence was presented which linked the funnel colors of SSA with that of the WSB color at the time of Titanic. In this section, color photo examples will be presented to show this range of SSA funnel colors in color photos. It is not necessarily that the funnels in these photos were actually different but that due to varying conditions of lighting, film used, etc. that there is a range of colors.

SS New Australia



SS Southern Cross



SS Northern Star



SS Dominion Monarch



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SS Northern Star



The Brown Component

Within the last several years there has been a shift in the colors that the most widely acclaimed artists and modelers are using to portray WSB. The trend, for some reason, has been shifting to a much more pronounced brown shade for WSB. I suspect that the spread of the popularity of this color has to do with cross-influence among those who form opinions. Some of these same artists/modelers used to portray WSB as a color much more like the SSA examples. To illustrate this trend toward a more brown color I have sampled the WSB colors of five of these influential modelers/artists of how they are now portraying WSB in their works in Figure 10.



Figure 10

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The areas sampled were from representative images of their works. Very dark and light areas were avoided to give a true representation of their color choices.

If one is using a subjective approach to determine the color WSB then almost anything goes. But if one uses historical evidence such as that from the SSA ships then these brown hues must be excluded. The identity of the modelers/artists who have used the colors shown above will not be revealed here. Their names are known to anybody who has done at least a little Titanic research. The point is not *who* favors these brown shades but rather that with the evidence we now have that these brown shades should be abandoned by those who wish to base their choice of WSB on the highest level of objective evidence possible.

Conclusion

This article has examined two approaches toward determining the color “White Star Buff”. The approach that has prevailed to this day is the subjective approach. This was the only approach available until the evidence of the link between Shaw, Savill & Albion ships and White Star Line ships was uncovered in the 2000’s. With this historical link it was now possible to examine color photos of SSA ships and establish a relatively narrow range for the color WSB. It is not known whether this evidence from SSA ships is unknown to current artists and modelers or if it is rejected. For whatever reason, there has been a decided shift in the interpretation of WSB by leading artists/modelers toward a more brown hue. The SSA evidence does not remove every element of subjectivity from determining the color WSB but it narrows the range of colors which can be considered historically accurate considerably.