

Titanic's Mystery Whistles

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Introduction

Researchers attempting to verify popularly accepted information about Titanic sometimes reach a dead end with period primary sources. It seems that sometimes certain narratives were started through misinformation or misunderstanding and then quickly became accepted fact. The commonly accepted notion is that Titanic's whistles on her #1 and #2 funnels were fully functional and those on her #3 and #4 funnels were non-functional "dummy" whistles. This article will attempt to verify that claim.

The References

Most of the information we know of the structure of Titanic has been derived from relatively few primary sources. These will be examined to see if they support the notion of non-functional whistles on the aft two funnels.

Drawing Office Copy, a.k.a. "Andrews Notebook" - **"2 White Star Elec. Steam Whistles; one on ford. funnel and one on No. 2 funnel"**

The Shipbuilder - **"One set has been fitted to the two foremost funnels."**

Engineering - **"The two whistles are controlled by the Willett-Bruce system."**

Post-disaster investigation testimony - The only testimony about the whistles was that they were not used the night of the disaster.

Leonard Peskett's Olympic Notes - No entries regarding the whistles was found.

The Britannic Specification Book - No entries regarding the whistles were found.

Olympic Auction Catalog, 1935: **"The ship's sirens as fitted to four funnels with brass casings."**

Shipping World (provided courtesy of Dr. Paul Lee): **"It has been decided to fit a set on the forward funnel and another on the second forward funnel."**

"Machinery and Pipe Arrangement on Shipboard" (1922) by C.C. Pounder (Technical Director at Harland and Wolff) p. 62 **"For the sake of appearance cast-iron whistles and dummy pipes are often fitted to dummy funnels."**

If there are any other primary period references, they have as yet not surfaced. The C.C. Pounder reference is the most persuasive that the aft two whistles were non-functional. His reference to whistles attached to dummy funnels would seem to point to the Olympic class ships since he was employed at H&W.

Wreck Evidence

The only evidence we have that there was a difference between the forward two funnels and the aft two funnels is one of the whistle dome recovered from one of the aft two funnels. This dome is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1

One of the whistle domes recovered from one of the forward two funnels is shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2

The difference in the appearance of the two whistles is striking. The reason the aft whistle is deformed is because it was constructed of a wrought metal which was riveted. Wrought materials bend under stress. The forward whistle has no deformation because it is cast metal. Cast metals fracture under stress rather than bending. The appearance of the two whistles also suggests that they are made from different metal alloys. The aft whistle is probably a less expensive type of metal known as Muntz metal.

Functional or Non-Functional?

The wreck evidence has established that the aft two whistles were of different composition and construction but were they non-functional? While different, we have no direct reference stating specifically that the aft two whistles of Titanic and the other Olympic class ships were non-functional. The C.C. Pounder reference would tend to tip the balance toward non-functioning whistles. By regulation, whistles were only to be used while a ship was moving under its own power. If a ship was not moving, whistles were not permitted but rather bells were used. This would seem to rule out other functions for the aft two whistles if they were indeed functional.

Conclusion

The functional status of Titanic's aft two whistles has been repeated often as non-functional. The bulk of primary references have literally nothing to say about the aft two whistles. The one primary reference which probably carries the greatest weight is that of C.C. Pounder who was Technical Director at Harland and Wolff. In the reference listed above in 1922, he clearly states that there was precedent for non-functioning whistles to be installed on funnels. His reference to them being installed on "dummy" funnels would point more specifically to the Olympic class. Although his reference does not specifically mention the Olympic class, his statement is enough to persuade me that the aft two whistles on Titanic were more likely non-functional than functional.