

Titanic's Builders' Plaques

By Bob Read, D.M.D.

Introduction

For some time, I have wanted to write an article about *Titanic's* builders' plaques but unfortunately certain specific information was missing. Recently information has been uncovered which has supplied the missing information. This article will outline the best information we have at the present time.

The Builders' Plaques and their Locations

The reason that "plaques" is plural in the title is because there were two of them on *Titanic*. Figure 1 shows the location of the exterior plaque on the forward "B" deck bulkhead of *Titanic*.



Figure 1

Exterior builders' plaque on *Titanic*

We have known for some time that Harland and Wolff (H&W) placed a second builders' plaque in the engine rooms of their ships. The photos we have of earlier H&W ships show them variously on the bulkheads and columns in the engine rooms. We have no direct evidence about the location of *Titanic's* room builders' plaque. However, a recent expedition to the HMHS *Britannic* wreck found her engine room builders' plaque intact on one of the engine room centerline support columns. It is not clear which of the three, centerline, 12-inch diameter columns it was mounted to. Given previous precedent, I would speculate that *Titanic's* builders' plaque in the engine room was on the forwardmost of the three midline support columns on the forward face of the column.

Text on *Titanic's* Builders' Plaques

The text on H&W's builders' plaques was modified over the years. Some examples of the various H&W builders' plaques are shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2

Various styles of H&W builders' plaques

There is no source of which I am aware that specifies the styles of the plaques and correlates them with the periods during which they appeared. The method which had to be employed is "bracketing". In this method we find images with earlier and later dates on either side of *Titanic's* advent for each builders' plaque. The exterior plaque earlier than *Titanic* for which we have a photo example is RMS *Celtic* (1901). The exterior plaque later than *Titanic* for which we have a photo example is SS *Katoomba* (1913). These are shown in Figure 3. The engine room plaque earlier than *Titanic* for which we have a photo example is SS *Aragon* (1905). The engine room plaque later than *Titanic* is HMHS *Britannic* (1914). These are shown in Figure 4.



RMS Celtic (1901)



**SS Katoomba
(1913)**

Figure 3

Exterior builders' plaques before and after launch of *Titanic*



SS Aragon (1905)



**HMHS Britannic
(1914)**

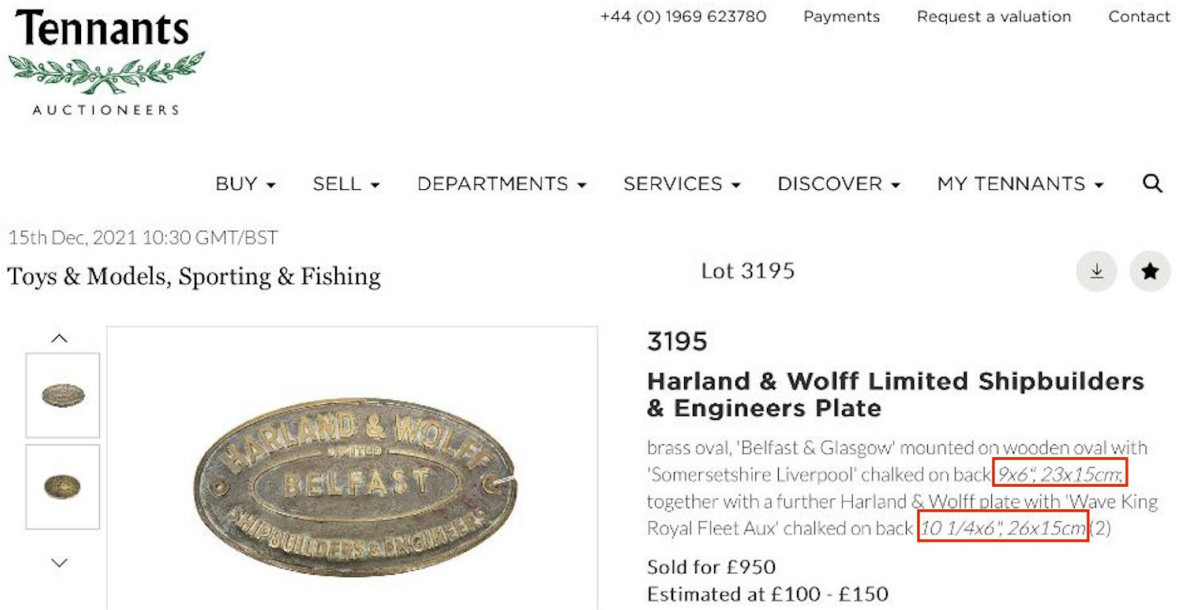
Figure 4

Engine room builders' plaques before and after the launch of *Titanic*

The difference between the HMHS *Britannic* and SS *Aragon* engine room plaques is that on the HMHS *Britannic* plaque the location "Glasgow" is added to "Belfast". If we look at a history of H&W, we see that the Glasgow yards were not acquired until sometime in 1912. *Titanic's* plaques would already have been in place before the Glasgow yards were acquired. Therefore, we can say with reasonable confidence that the location on *Titanic's* plaques was "Belfast" only. Otherwise, the text on both plaques would be the same except for minor font differences.

Dimensions

The recent discovery regarding dimensions demonstrates that the exterior builders' plaque and the engine room builders' plaque had different dimensions. Figure 5 shows an auction specification for two H&W builders' plaques from Tennant's auction house. It specifies dimensions for both an exterior plaque and an engine room plaque. This specification is shown in Figure 5.



Tennants
AUCTIONEERS

+44 (0) 1969 623780 Payments Request a valuation Contact

BUY ▾ SELL ▾ DEPARTMENTS ▾ SERVICES ▾ DISCOVER ▾ MY TENNANTS ▾ Q

15th Dec, 2021 10:30 GMT/BST

Toys & Models, Sporting & Fishing Lot 3195 ⬇ ★

3195
Harland & Wolff Limited Shipbuilders & Engineers Plate

brass oval, 'Belfast & Glasgow' mounted on wooden oval with 'Somersetshire Liverpool' chalked on back **9x6", 23x15cm**, together with a further Harland & Wolff plate with 'Wave King Royal Fleet Aux' chalked on back **10 1/4x6", 26x15cm** (2)

Sold for £950
Estimated at £100 - £150

Figure 5

Dimensions for two builders' plaques from Tennant's auction house

The dimensions for the exterior plaque are 10-1/4 inches wide by 6 inches high. The dimensions for the engine room plaque are 9 inches wide by 6 inches high. From this we can see that the vertical dimension for both plaques was constant while the horizontal dimensions varied. Figure 6 shows a comparison of the dimensions of both types of plaques.

Go to next page

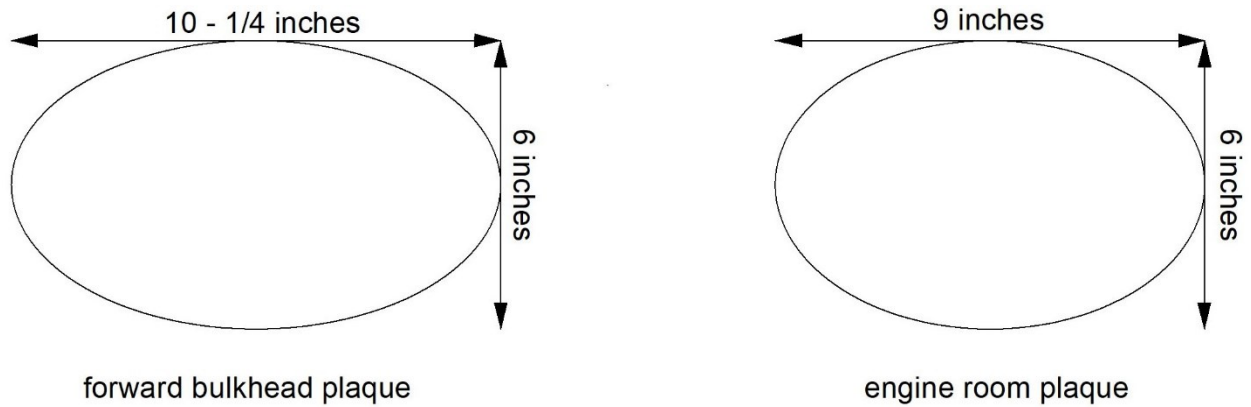


Figure 6

Dimensions for both types of builders' plaques

Text Characteristics

Titanic's builders' plaques had two distinct styles of text. The exterior plaque had raised lettering. The background of the lettering had a fine crosshatch engraved into the plaque. The engine room plaque had engraved lettering with the engraved letters filled in with black paint or some other type of coloring material. There was no cross-hatching pattern on the plaque.

Wood Base

Both the exterior and engine room plaques were mounted on wood bases. The bases were not for decorative purposes. Since the plaques were brass, if they were mounted against a steel surface and they were exposed to moisture, galvanic corrosion could develop between the brass and the steel. It is difficult from photos to estimate the dimensions of the wood base. It appears to protrude roughly 3/8 inch beyond the perimeter of the plaque.

A secondary purpose of the wood base was to conform to something other than a flat surface. This allowed the plaque to remain flat while the wood could be shaped to conform to the irregular surface. This would be necessary for the flat plaque to be mounted to the circular engine room column. Figure 7 shows what I believe may be the configuration of the wood bases.

Go to next page

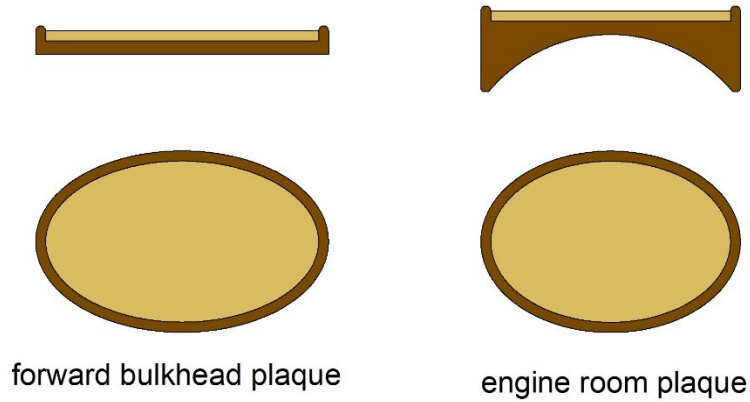


Figure 7

Proposed configuration of the wood bases

If we look at the engine room builders' plaque of *SS Aragon* which is mounted to a circular column, we can see in Figure 8 the shadow cast by the overhead lighting of the plaque and wood base. The shadow looks very much like the profile of the engine room plaque and wood base shown in Figure 7.



Figure 8

Shadow cast by engine room plaque and wood base

The wood base was secured to the ship with larger bolts or rivets while the plaque was secured to the wood base with smaller screws or bolts. One difference between the fastening of the

exterior plaque and the engine room plaque is that the exterior plaque was secured to the wood base with only two screws while the engine room plaque was secured with four screws.

Wood Base Controversy

Titanic's wood base for her exterior builder's plaque has been recovered from the wreck. It has been exhibited and is shown in Figure 9 which is a photo from the exhibit.



Figure 9

Titanic's recovered exterior builders' plaque wood base

Some have looked at this photo of the exterior builders' plaque wood base and concluded that the holes in the base indicate where the plaque was attached to the wood base and the bulkhead. There are several problems with this conclusion. The first is that I have never see any

H&W exterior builders' plaque examples where the attachment holes are placed inside the inner ring on the plaque. If there are any examples, the proponents of such a plaque need to produce even one example. Second, I know of no example where the holes for the attachment through the plaque have been of this large a diameter. Third, if one looks at photos of builders' plaques with their wood bases intact, the edges of the wood bases are rounded. This base shows no rounding. The face toward the camera is essentially flat out to the edges. I suspect, but cannot prove that we may be looking at the face of the base which would be in contact with the bulkhead. If you look at the photo in Figure 9, there is an image of a H&W plaque with superimposed mounting holes with the same spacing as the wood base above it. With mounting holes located where they are shown, they go right through text on the plaque. Again, I would like to see an example of such a practice.

While this is undoubtedly *Titanic's* exterior builders' plaque wood base shown in Figure 9, it would appear to make a stronger case for a separate attachment of the wood base to the bulkhead rather than common mounting bolts through both plaque and wood base.

Titanic's Builders' Plaques

I believe that it is now possible to show what *Titanic's* builders' plaques looked like. In Figure 10 we have a drawing of what I propose the engine room builders' plaque on *Titanic* looked like. Since the plaques within *Titanic's* period shown in Figure 3 are of relatively limited quality, I have drawn an image of what I believe those plaques would look like face on with more detail. The engine room builders' plaque image has been altered digitally to remove the "Glasgow" and to enlarge and reposition the "Belfast".

Go to next page



Figure 10

Proposed configuration of *Titanic's* exterior builders' plaque

Go to next page



Figure 11

Proposed configuration of *Titanic's* engine room builders' plaque

Conclusion

This article has described the dimensions and configurations of *Titanic's* exterior and engine room builders' plaques. New evidence was used to refine the dimensions of the plaques. Further new evidence has provided us with information about the textual elements of *Titanic's* engine room builders' plaque. We have had to wait a long time for this new information but I believe the wait was worth it. Thanks to Patrick Parsons for the images in Figure 3.