

The Case for a Change in the Color of Titanic's Cargo Hatch Coamings

By Bob Read, D.M.D.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to make the case for a change in our understanding of the color of Titanic's cargo hatch coamings from the previous "dark mast" color to black. Like most articles about colors on Titanic, the evidence will be circumstantial because of the fact that no color photos were ever taken of Titanic. Despite this, we have been able to assemble strong circumstantial evidence about most of the exterior colors found on Titanic.

Documentary Evidence

The primary documentary evidence for colors found on Titanic has been the Britannic Specification Book. This book was developed at the start of construction of each of the Olympic class ships but the Britannic Specification Book is the only document which survives for any of the Olympic class ships. In the book were specifications for the outfitting of the ship. The Britannic Specification Book was written for RMS Britannic, not the HMHS hospital ship version. The importance of this is that all the specifications were for Britannic as she would appear in civilian service. Thus, the paint specifications would be very similar because there were few changes made from ship to ship within the class. The book does not contain construction details and drawings. It would be used primarily as a guide during fitting out after launch. The development of Britannic's specification book probably took place sometime in 1912. The reason that the 1912 date is significant during Olympic's first year in service, a few minor changes were made in her paint scheme. I believe that these changes were incorporated in Titanic during the latter stages of her fitting out and were also incorporated in Britannic's paint specifications.

Though we have had the Britannic Specification Book for quite a few years now, the colors of the hatch coamings were apparently misinterpreted early on and that misinterpretation was perpetuated because the specification book was not studied closely with regard to the color of the hatch coamings. Figure 1 shows the pertinent excerpt from the Britannic Specification Book regarding the paint specifications for the cargo hatch coamings. The cargo hatch coaming is the part of the hatch above the deck which prevented water from flowing into the hatch and also provided a safety barrier for men doing cargo work at the hatch.

Hatch Coamings (in)	-	-	1 ^x	-	2	-	Dark Mast	x	Red Lead.
„ „ (out)	-	-	1 ^x	-	1	-	Black	x	Red Lead.
„ „ (Insulated)									
„ Covers									
„ Trunks	-	-	1	-	2	-	Dark Mast.		

Figure 1

Britannic specification for the cargo hatch coamings

As can be seen in Figure 1, the specifications give the exterior color of the cargo hatch coamings as black which it notes as (out) and the interior color as dark mast (in). There are other specifications for primer coats and for hatch trunks which are found below the weather deck. Some have questioned the (in) and (out) notations and wonder whether (out) means above deck and the (in) means below deck. If that were true, then the hatch coamings we can see above deck would be black according to the specification book. The simple explanation is that it refers to the interior and exterior surfaces of the hatch coamings.

The Photos

Black and white photos taking during the time of Titanic were “blue sensitive”. This means that blue colors appeared almost white while warm colors like yellows and reds looked much darker than they normally would. When looking at the color “dark mast” which was kind of a rust color shown in Figure 2, it appeared black in the blue sensitive black and white film.



Figure 2

Dark mast color sample

An example in Figure 3 shows how dark this color is in the blue sensitive black and white film.

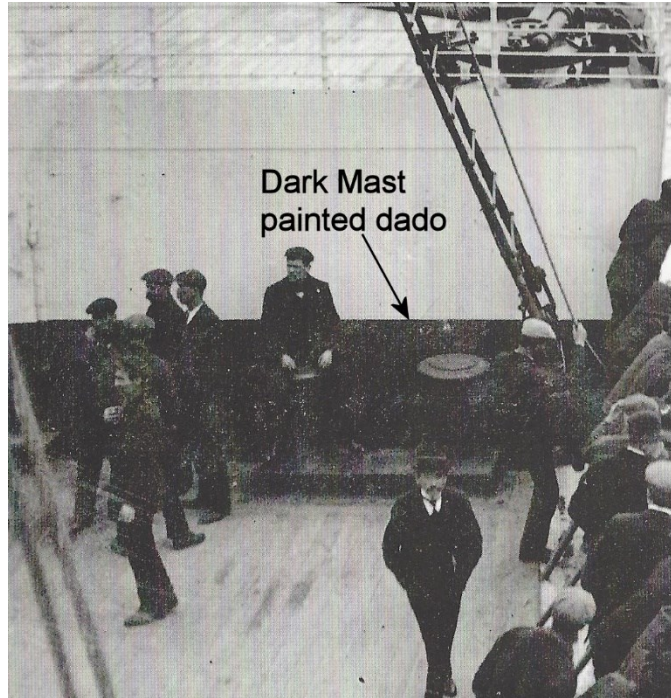


Figure 3

Appearance of color dark mast in blue sensitive
black and white film

The problem that this presents is that is that if the exterior of the cargo hatch coamings were, in fact, black then it would be almost impossible to distinguish them from the dark mast dados near them. Fortunately, I recently discovered improved quality photos taken of Olympic's forward well deck during cargo operations. The photos were taken from a book called "The Longshoremen". They were taken in bright sunlight which improved the quality of the photos. Because of some structural changes made to Olympic's original configuration, I would date this photo as most likely being post-Titanic disaster sometime in the middle of 1912. Figures 4 and 5 show two of the pertinent photos. It is clear in these photos that the shade of the hatch coaming of cargo hatch #2 is darker than the dark mast painted forward well deck dados.

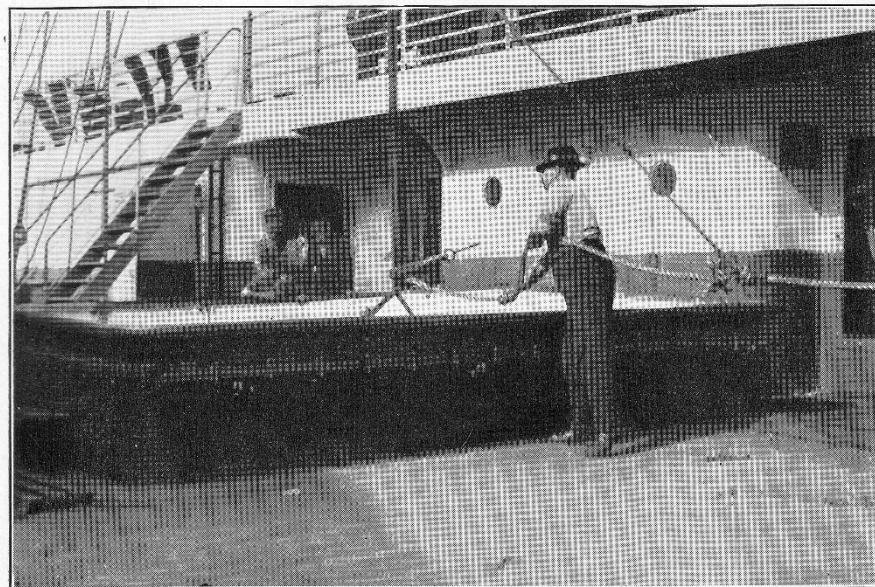
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A large draft has been landed on deck. The gangway man is unhooking the up and down fall. As no regular place is provided for the men's coats, they are seen hanging and lying about

Figure 4

Olympic's forward well deck



Throwing the burton hook; an exhibition of skill. The hatch coamings are sufficiently high to afford some protection

Figure 5

Comparison of hatch coaming and dark mast dado

One difference with the Britannic Specification Book is that the interior of the hatch coaming is white rather than dark mast. Probably when Olympic's hatch coamings were raised during her 1913 refit, the interiors were repainted dark mast but I don't have any photo evidence of this. However, this does not change the photo evidence that the exteriors of the hatch coamings were visibly darker than the dark mast dadoses and were most likely black. It is also clear in the photos that the interior was painted white at the time of Titanic in 1912.

#4 Cargo Hatches

On B deck aft are port and starboard hatches which were for loading food provisions. These were always painted white on their exteriors throughout Olympic's service career. The reason that this exception is not noted in the Britannic Specification Book is because Britannic did not have exterior hatch coamings for the #4 hatches. These hatches on Britannic were behind doors and not visible from the exterior. The Britannic Specification Book does not list any exceptions in the paint scheme of the various cargo hatch coamings. Therefore, I believe we can expect there to be no exceptions on Titanic other than the #4 (p & s) cargo hatches.

Figure 6 is a color representation of what I believe was the appearance of Titanic's #2 cargo hatch coaming looking forward.

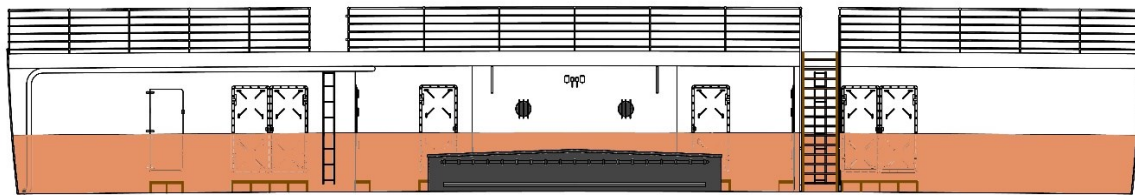


Figure 6

Titanic's #2 hatch looking forward

Conclusion

Based on the Britannic Specification Book and photos, I believe that the cargo hatch coamings on Titanic were painted black on their exteriors and white on their interiors. The only exceptions are the two #4 (p & s) cargo hatch coamings which were painted white on their exteriors and interiors. Additionally, the aft face of the #1 hatch coaming aft of the breakwaters was white.

Credit for this particular discovery goes to Titanic researcher João Goncalves. He had noticed this discrepancy between how the hatch coamings are usually portrayed and the actual evidence. My part has been to locate photo corroboration of his discovery and to document it

in this article. Any assumptions made in this article are mine alone since João and I have not collaborated on this article.