

The Titanic

Introduction to lesson

(To be read over music from Youtube: Titanic-Hymn to the sea)

At the turn of the last century if you wanted to cross the Atlantic in style you did so on a large, expensive, luxurious liner that had all possible comforts for your trip. At the time various steamship companies competed with each other to provide the very best in terms of both luxury and speed – every company wanted their ship to hold the title of the fastest Atlantic crossing. The Titanic was thought to be the ultimate in size, luxury and it was hoped, speed. What is more it was considered to be unsinkable.

No expense had been spared in the fitting of the ship's interior. Apart from the more usual accommodation there was a gym, a Turkish bath, a squash court, a swimming pool, hair-dressers, elegant verandas, and selection of the most exquisite suites for the really wealthy passengers. Only one feature had been skimmed on...the provision of life boats. While there was accommodation for 2300 people, there were only enough lifeboats for 1200.

On Wednesday 10th April 1912, the Titanic set sail from Southampton on it's maiden Atlantic crossing. On board were 1300 passengers and almost 900 crew. The passengers were sailing either First Class, Second Class or Third Class and the accommodation clearly showed these class divisions. There were many well known First Class passengers many of whom were millionaires. The Second Class passengers (this was the smallest passenger group) were what we might call middle class – shop keepers, school teachers, clergymen, engineers, many returning from visiting Europe, many visiting American relatives. The Third Class included many people from Ireland most of whom were seeking their fortunes in America.

Icebergs were always a hazard in the North Atlantic at this time of year. Captain Smith on the Titanic received several warnings of large icebergs from ships already in the Atlantic, but possibly driven by a desire to make the fastest ever Atlantic crossing he chose to ignore them. No reduction of speed was ordered, no extra look-outs were posted, and those on duty were not equipped with binoculars.

At twenty minutes past midnight on Sunday 14th April 1912, the Titanic collided with a large iceberg. The passengers and crew felt only the slightest judder, but the collision had left a gash some 100 metres far below the ship's water line. Water rushed into the ship's first five so-called 'watertight' compartments, and as they filled up and the bow of the ship tilted forward, so the water flowed over these compartments' divisions into each succeeding section. Gradually the ship tipped further and further forward and twenty past two (only two hours and forty minutes after the collision), the Titanic slid below the calm surface of an icy sea.

The radio operator had sent distress signals using the new call sign 'S.O.S' ; 58 miles away another ship Carpathia raced to the rescue. The Californian only 10 miles away ignored the Titanic – their radio operator was off duty and the crew asleep. On board the Titanic the ship's orchestra played to the very end. 'Women and children first' had been the cry, but it had also been 'First Class, then Second Class, then...'

Of the 322 First Class passengers, 202 were saved.

Of the 277 Second Class passengers, 115 were saved.

Of the 709 Third Class passengers, 176 were saved.

Of the 898 crew members, 210 were saved.

The loss of the Titanic remains the biggest civilian sea disaster.