

The Case for *Titanic's* Capstans and Windlasses Being Painted Green

By Bob Read, D.M.D.

Introduction

Of all the research articles I have written, the ones about paint colors used on *Titanic* have caused the most controversy. I expect that this article will be no exception. In fact, this article may be the most controversial of all the articles about paint colors. The reason this article will perhaps be the most controversial is because the evidence is not as abundant as some of the other articles. I anticipate that my interpretation of the available evidence will be second-guessed. I personally believe and support the premise of this article but the reader will have to decide whether the case I will make is valid or not.

The Nature of Conventional Wisdom

One of the problems with conventional wisdom is that often it is built on a foundation of little or no evidence. The color of the capstans and windlasses is no exception. We have developed the majority of our understanding of paint colors aboard *Titanic* from the *Britannic* Specification Book. However, this specification book has **no** specifications for the capstans and windlasses. So where did the conventional wisdom come from that they were dark gray? I don't know for sure but it may have come from the assumption that since the capstans and windlass looked very dark in black and white photos that they must be dark gray or black.

To illustrate how conventional wisdom can be wrong, let's consider the winches aboard *Titanic*. For many years, in paintings and on models, the various winches were always painted black or dark gray. Then in recent years the *Britannic* Specification Book became more widely disseminated and it was discovered that the winches were, in fact, painted green. This proved that the conventional wisdom in the case of the winch color was wrong. So, since we don't have any specifications from the *Britannic* Specification book regarding the color of the capstans and windlasses, the current conventional wisdom which has the capstans and windlasses being painted dark gray is far from having any firm foundation.

Missing Specifications for Capstans and Windlasses

A curious aspect of the paint specifications in the *Britannic* Specification Book is that there are no paint specifications for the capstans and windlasses. This seems odd initially because these are prominent pieces of equipment on the forecastle and poop decks. From this we know at least that the capstans and windlasses did not have a formal paint specification to be carried out by Harland and Wolff. **The crucial question is *why* were specifications for capstans and windlasses omitted?**

The capstans and windlasses were supplied by Napier Brothers Ltd. of Glasgow. Since this equipment was manufactured and delivered to Harland and Wolff, it is reasonable to expect that the component parts were painted at Napier Brothers prior to assembly and delivery. Since Napier Brothers also supplied this kind of equipment to the Admiralty, we may assume that the colors of paint used on this equipment was specified by their customers.

If we look at the winches aboard *Titanic*, we see that the steam winches were manufactured by Harland and Wolff. The electric winches were supplied by Sunderland Forge and Engineering Company. The situation with Sunderland Forge would have been similar to that described for Napier Brothers in that the paint specifications for the winches would have been given to Sunderland Forge by Harland and Wolff so that the winches could be painted during assembly. It would then appear that the choice of green paint for the winches was chosen by Harland and Wolff in conjunction with White Star for the painting of their own steam winches and for the electric winches supplied by Sunderland Forge.

Evidence for Green Paint

Since there is no evidence in the *Britannic* Specification Book for any paint specifications for the capstans and windlasses, where would we get the possibility of green for a paint color? In the archives of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), there is a colored ship's portrait drawn by Harland and Wolff for SS *Oceanic* (II) which was launched in 1899. These colored drawings were prepared for each Harland and Wolff ship built. Unfortunately, we do not have such a surviving portrait for any of the *Olympic* class ships which included *Titanic*. A cropped portion of this plan is shown in Figure 1.

Go to next page

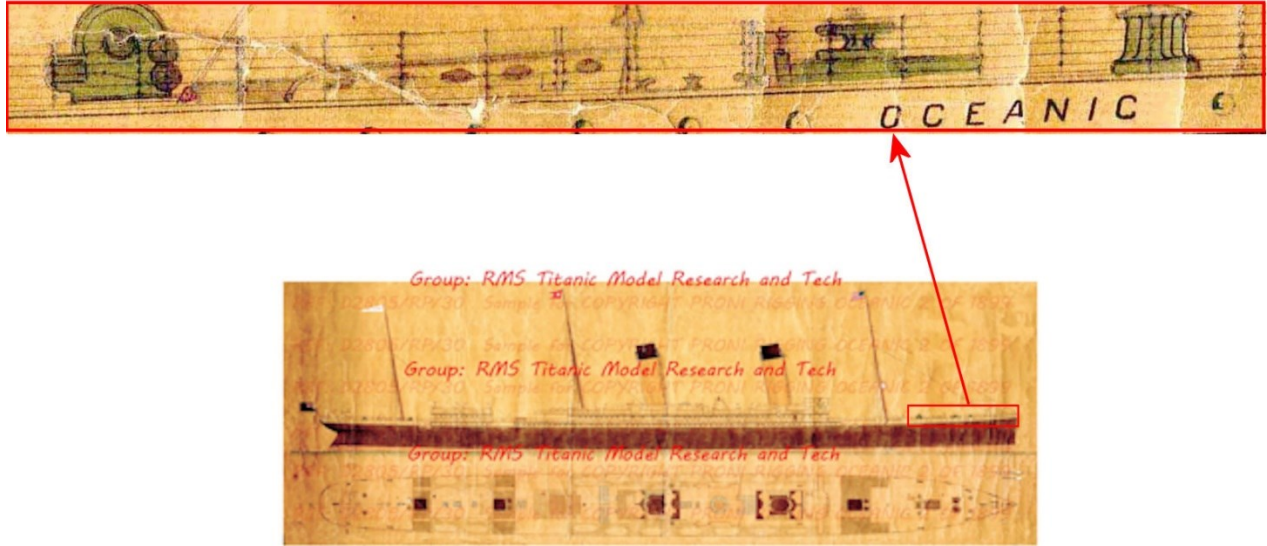


Figure 1

Cropped area of SS *Oceanic* portrait showing green capstans and windlasses

It can be seen that the capstans, windlasses and winches are all painted green in this portrait. It is interesting to note that all three pieces of green painted equipment are powered equipment used for hauling cables and ropes unlike the non-powered equipment like bollards and fairleads which are painted dark gray. Powered equipment paint colors in Britain during the late Victorian period through the early years of the 20th century were characteristically green. I believe that it is not unreasonable to assume that this style of green paint for power equipment used for handling cables and rope was used on White Star Line ships from at least the time of *Oceanic* up until the start of WWI in 1914. After the war, we see numerous changes in how powered equipment was painted. This painting convention does not appear to extend to the engine room, ventilation devices, or cargo handling equipment. **Since the winches still used the style of green paint up through *Britannic* (RMS), I believe that it is reasonable to assume that the style seen on *Oceanic* was still in effect on *Titanic*.**

Paintings and Postcards

In examining paintings and postcards of ships from this era, we see evidence of both green and black equipment present. There is no way to determine the reliability of these paintings and postcards. We know of many errors in this medium and we have examples of both colors in them so showing these examples won't bring us any nearer to the truth.

Black and White Photos

It is axiomatic that you can't determine unknown colors from black and white photos. This is particularly true of black and white film of this period which was blue-sensitive. If you look at black and white photos, it is nearly impossible to tell the difference in grayscale between

equipment which we know is dark gray and that which is green. Consequently, we can't use black and white photos for evidence in this investigation. An example is shown in Figure 2 where the capstans and windlasses on the forecastle of *Oceanic* are painted green.



Figure 2

Capstans and windlasses on forecastle deck of SS *Oceanic*

Color Photos

Some have pointed to color styles used for equipment seen in color photos of ships in the 1950s and 1960s as evidence. The problem is that styles of paint colors for equipment for *Titanic's* sister ship *Olympic* changed in the 1920s and 1930s. **If styles of painting equipment had changed even within the lifetime of one of the ships of the *Olympic* class, how could we possible derive reliable evidence from the styles seen on ships 30-40 years later?** This is especially true since these ships are nearly all from other shipping companies.

Style of Function?

It has been asked if somehow green paint served some function other than just a style. All evidence points to the conclusion that green paint applied to this equipment was merely a matter of style. We know this because the paint applied to this equipment was substantially altered later in *Olympic's* career.

Other Evidence

Since I am relying fairly heavily on the *Oceanic* portrait evidence, I must disclose that there is an *Olympic* class drawing that has some limited coloring. This plan is currently confidential because it will be used in a future publication. The holder of this confidential plan has graciously allowed me to view it. This plan is a proposed arrangement of anchor handling equipment on the forecastle and the shelter deck below the forecastle. This is a very early plan relating to the *Olympic* class. In this proposed plan there is no anchor well and the center anchor sits on the forecastle deck aft of the anchor crane rather than forward of it. Most of the associated equipment such as bollards, capstans, windlasses and the engines which powered

them are painted a medium gray. The equipment is drawn with what appears to be black ink then is given a thin overcoat of a black watercolor which allows the ink detail to show through but makes the equipment appear a medium gray color.

How should this drawing be interpreted? Is the gray color on the equipment shown in this plan proposal an accurate indication of the actual color of the capstans and windlasses on Titanic? My opinion is that it is not. The *Oceanic* plan was a ship's portrait of the finished ship. In that portrait we see a fairly wide variety of colors. The *Olympic* class equipment proposal plan has very few colors. Its purpose was just to make the relevant equipment appear more prominent. If this plan were an accurate portrayal of final paint colors seen on the *Olympic* class, then there are some problems. The anchor crane is painted a sky-blue color unlike the white seen on Titanic. The auxiliary equipment such as the steam engines used to power the capstans and windlasses were painted with light mast paint according to the Britannic Specification Book. However, we only see gray in the drawing of these steam engines. My conclusion is that the purpose of the *Olympic* class plan proposal was not to be an accurate representation of the final paint colors which would be applied to the equipment. That was not its purpose.

Therefore, I don't believe that this plan is accurate or useful evidence for paint colors used on Titanic's capstans and windlasses.

Evidence Supporting Dark Gray Capstans and Windlasses

The problem with the conventional "wisdom" regarding the dark gray color of the capstans and windlasses is that it has no more support than the green color and I would argue *less*. The problems with the varying types of evidence have already been discussed. At least there is some alternative circumstantial evidence within roughly a decade of *Titanic* pointing to green capstans and windlasses.

Game Changer?

Recently I discovered a painting of *Olympic* done by esteemed marine artist Norman Wilkinson. It was used for a picture postcard. I managed to find a higher resolution copy of this particular painting which shows green painted equipment on the forward forecastle. Earlier in this article I expressed my opinion that we should view paintings and postcards skeptically. For the vast majority of cases that caution still applies. I believe that Norman Wilkinson has a reputation as a marine artist which exceeds almost any other of his time. Living in Britain, we know he was intimately familiar with these ships. I will leave what weight the Titanic community should give this evidence up to each individual. When I first wrote this article without this section, there was much ambivalence about the notion of green capstans and windlasses. I have published this Wilkinson painting evidence in Titanic discussion forums and the majority of researchers and modelers there appear to consider this evidence as something which takes the green equipment discussion from mere theory to historical fact. Figure 3 shows the original Wilkinson

painting of Olympic in low resolution. Figure 4 shows the forecastle in higher resolution where the green equipment on the forward forecastle can be seen.



Figure 3

Full Norman Wilkinson painting of R.M.S. *Olympic*



Figure 4

Cropped forecastle of Wilkinson painting showing green equipment on forward forecastle

The Drawings

Figures 3 and 4 show elevation views of the windlasses painted green. It will be noted that the troughs for the anchor cable and the cable compressors are not painted green. They were not a part of the windlass and were not powered equipment. Additionally there is no evidence of any green coloring where these pieces of equipment would be on the Oceanic portrait.

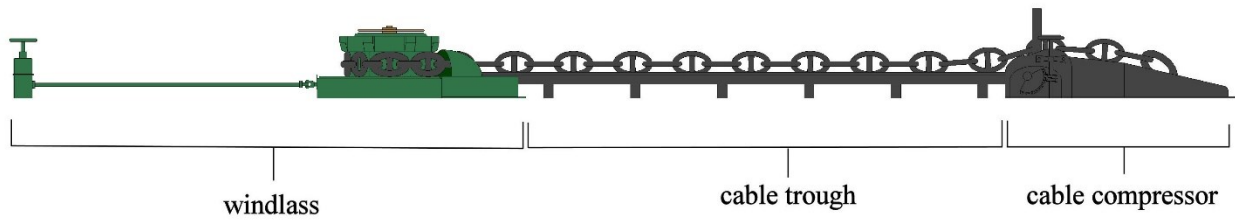


Figure 5

Elevation view of *Titanic* windlass

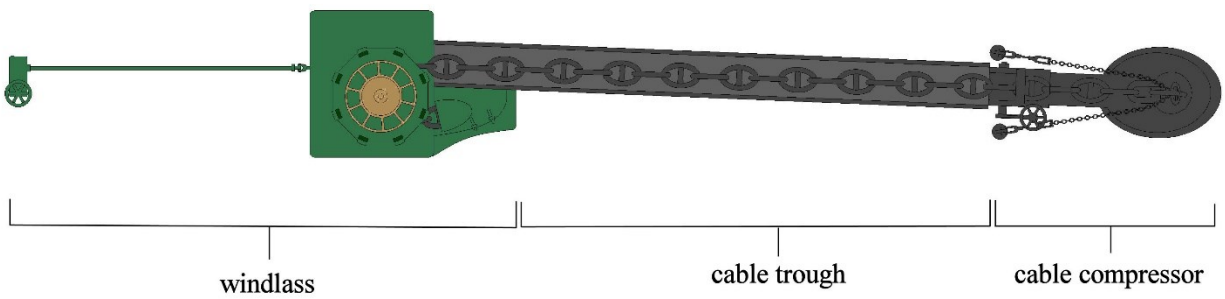
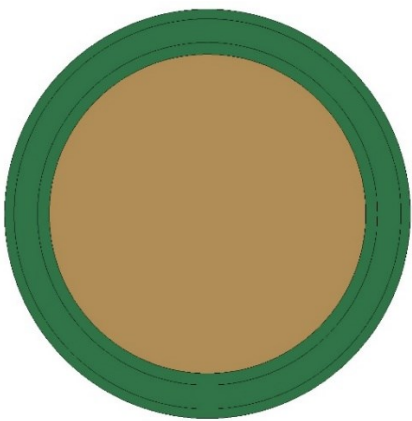


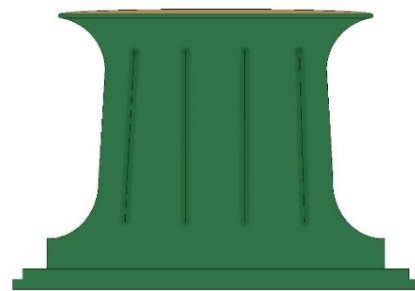
Figure 6

Plan view of *Titanic* windlass

Figure 5 shows elevation and plan views of one of *Titanic's* capstans.



plan view of capstan



elevation view of capstan

Figure 7

Plan and elevation view of *Titanic* capstan

Conclusion

This article has made a case for the capstans and windlasses aboard *Titanic* being painted green. I realize that this article will meet with some initial resistance. Those who are resistant to this change should ask themselves the question: “How do we know *Titanic’s* capstans and windlasses were painted dark gray?” I believe that as they look into the matter that they will reach the conclusion that *we don’t*. Though circumstantial, I believe the case for green capstans and windlasses on *Titanic* is stronger than for dark gray.