A QUIET SEA

RMS TITANIC

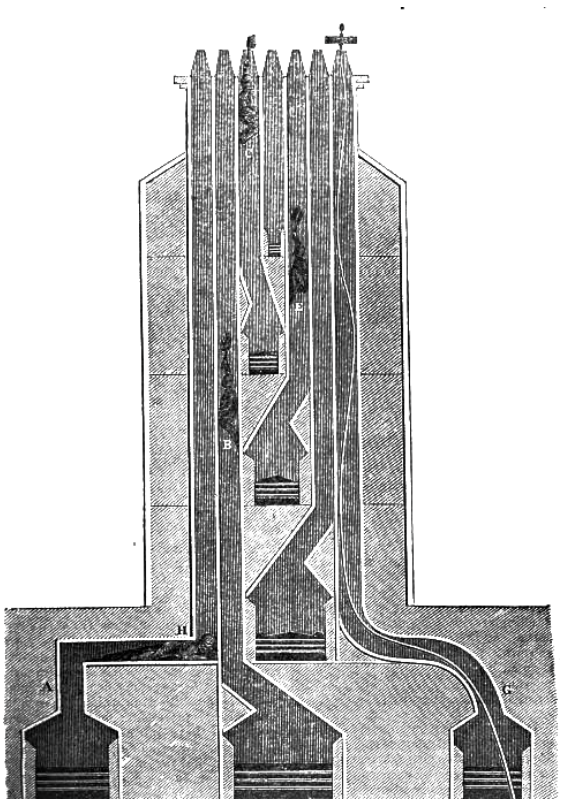
CHILD LABOR

TITANIC: CHILD LABOR

INTRODUCTION

In the late 18th century, farming, domestic work and supporting their parents' labors were the main sources of employment for children. Boys became teamsters, tending to the horses, other animals and the fields; girls did chores in the home, milked the cows and cared for the chickens. Once small factories appeared, child labor was defined by the goods and services produced by children for little or no pay. Unemployed destitute children, known as "mudlarks," waded through streets covered in mud to find lost items to sell. Others were purposefully maimed to foster pity and donations from passersby. Poor families sometimes apprenticed their children to masters in various trades, not for pay but to receive training; they were essentially free labor. Family separation, long hours and lack of education usually condemned such children to a dim future—although a boy might become a journeyman or master and, if lucky, even start a business. This route wasn't open to girls, however.

Chimney sweep and master
Credit: Humanities 101 Word Press



Factory chimneys
Credit: Wiki Commons

Boys and girls as young as 4 who were sold by their parents to master chimney sweepers were sent up the chimneys of homes and large buildings to scale and scrape off soot. It was deadly work; children became stuck and suffocated if their knees folded to their chests. The hideous environment could result in a variety of cancers. Cruel masters lit fires to get the sweep to work faster. In 1788, the Chimney Sweepers Law raised the minimum age to 8, but it was rarely enforced. Poor preadolescent girls who took on domestic work received a minimum wage (sent to their families) and board, but 16-hour days were common. Children worked chasing birds from fields; in mills, shipyards, and laundries; and as rat catchers, prostitutes and pickpockets.

Children who were apprenticed or taken from orphanages to work in rural textile mills were subjected to violence, brutality, sexual abuse and other crimes. Harsh treatment was justified by the saying, “spare the rod and spoil the child.” Children as young as 6 worked as doffers, replacing bobbins holding spun fiber with empty ones. They worked from 5am to 9pm in the din of the mechanical looms and were paid a penny an hour, with heavy deductions for various infractions and being late. With the Industrial Revolution, the number of factories increased, and the demand for child labor increased with it. Starting age depended on where the industries were located, but the average age for mill and factory workers was about 8 to 10 years old. With no bargaining power, wages depended on the good graces of the owners.

Yorkshire mill 1900
Credit: Bancroft’s of Yorkshire

The work was dangerous, requiring children to crawl under operating machinery to gather up debris that could cause damage. “Breaker boys” worked in coal mines, sorting coal from stone, making sure obstructions were kept clear of various coal chutes. They also carried picks and other tools for the miners. Pay was low, the hours long and the conditions horrific.

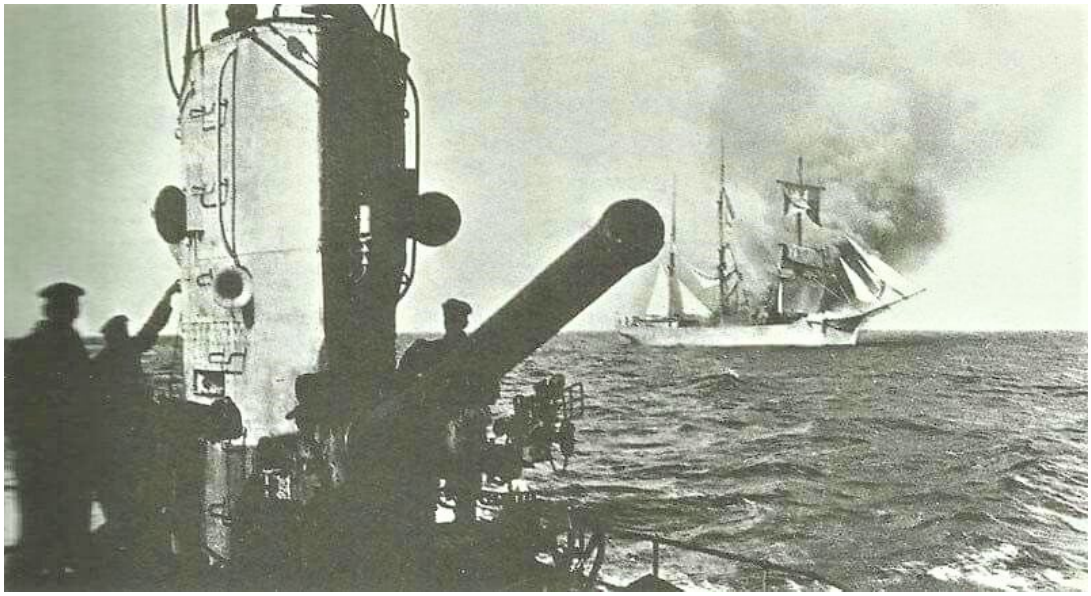
Around 1830, Britain put into place a series of Acts to begin to address the minimum age for child labor. The 1833 Factory Act was followed by the Mines Act (1842), the 1878 Factory Act and the Education Act (1880). Collectively, these acts made it illegal to hire children younger than 9. Factory owners also were required to provide basic education. The Education Act established compulsory education for children up to 12 years of age. During the class-conscious Victorian era, conditions improved slightly through the efforts of progressive reformers such as William Stead, who perished on Titanic. However, it wasn’t until the following Edwardian era (1901-1914) that for “the first time it was widely recognized that children…have different needs, sensibilities, and habits of thinking; that they cannot be educated, worked, or punished like adults; that they have rights of their own independent of their parents.”[1] Business interests, however, retarded wide-spread progress.

SEAGOING APPRENTICES

Some poor boys were brought out of the slums and sent into service at sea. The British Navy and Merchant Service had galley and cabin boys. In the mid -1700s, the Marine Society established "A plan of the Society for contributing towards a supply of Two or Three thousand Mariners for the Navy."[2] Foundling hospitals also supplied boys for seagoing service, collecting the family histories of those pressed into the program. Boys from families without fathers were labeled "friendless" and considered orphans. The system was expanded by the Merchant Shipping Act of 1823, which required vessels over 80 tons to employ one apprentice. Formal record-keeping and contracts (indentures) with apprentices were established after 1835.

Stowing the mainsail, ship Garthsnaid
Credit: Wiki Commons

The apprentice system was harsh; wages were miniscule and the work grueling. Physical abuse, bullying, accidents and suicides were common. Food was scarce and of poor quality, and vessels were infested with vermin. Parents had to pay a premium, returned upon completion of the apprenticeship, as insurance against desertion (Apprenticeships lasted about 4 years). But those who endured and stayed at sea could advance to be officers. Conditions improved somewhat by the time Titanic's officers did their apprenticeships in the latter half of the 19th century. A number of steamship companies, White Star Line included, established their own sail training vessels to ensure a steady supply of competent and able seamen. But it was a dangerous life. In the first decade of the 20th century, about 4,000 deep-water windjammers remained on the British registry, and 10,000 seamen were lost, including hundreds of young apprentices.[3] British windjammers were decimated by U-boats during the First World War, however, and vanished from the seas. The apprentice system adjusted, and the numbers of apprentices increased in steam-powered vessels, where conditions were marginally better.



U-boat sinking windjammer
Credit: Cameron Robinson

SHIPYARD APPRENTICES

For over 100 years, iron and steel ships were riveted together. Each riveting gang, or black squad, was made up of five men, including a catcher boy. An efficient team depended on teamwork, and the catcher boy was essential. His job was to catch the hot rivet with a hand-held funnel-shaped bucket tossed to him by the heater at the coke-fed brazier.

Rivet bucket
Credit: Monova

The catcher boy used tongs to place the hot rivet in holes in the structural steel sections to be joined. With the rivet in place, the holder-on secures it with a heavy bar and the riveter closes, or flattens, the rivet. Rivet gangs were competitive and paid by the rivet, so missing or dropping rivets was not tolerated. The catcher boy had to be agile and able to catch and place hundreds of rivets an hour, 12 hours a day, 6 days a week. A clumsy catcher boy would soon be out of work. Narrow areas of the hull required the skills of a contortionist to place and close rivets. Newcomers had to learn to navigate the chaotic and confusing world of shipbuilding from the first moment on the job. There were numerous ways to get hurt or killed, including falling and getting hit by hot rivets or dropped tools, and the din could lead to hearing loss. But Belfast boys who

grew up near the Harland & Wolff shipyard had the opportunity to learn a trade and, with ambition and intelligence, could advance into better, higher paying jobs.

TITANIC

Harland & Wolff laid down Titanic on March 31, 1909. From the beginning, boys worked on the hull as rivet catchers or “bellow boys,” feeding air into the rivet forges. Harland & Wolff employed 15-20,000 workers at the time, making it a major industry, and it was one of two Belfast shipyards that employed boys. They worked from 6:00 am until 5:30 pm, 5 days a week plus a half day on Saturdays. Because the Sabbath was rigidly observed, playgrounds were closed, limiting precious recreational time to Saturday afternoons.

The Black Squad rivet boys
Credit: Henry Robb’s Shipyard

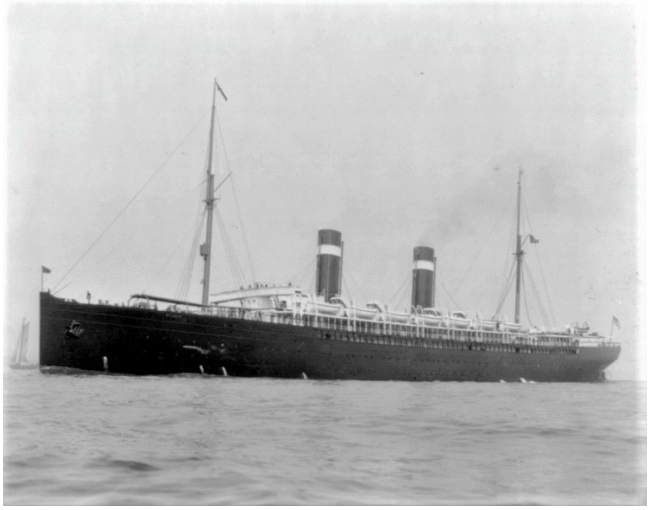
One of the catcher boys, 15-year-old Samuel Joseph Scott, lived with his mother and five siblings. Samuel secured a job with Harland and Wolff to help support his family. He was eager to work on the biggest ship in the world. On an early spring morning in 1910, Samuel reported for work, checked in with the timekeeper and headed off to hull #401, the future Titanic. Working with his rivet gang, standing on a ladder high on the ship’s side, Samuel fell to his death. An investigation was undertaken, but as no one saw him fall, it was surmised that he lost his footing. The coroner determined that the cause of death was a fractured skull. As was company policy, the family was awarded 16 shillings for their loss. (Women who lost their husbands on the job received 2 years’ wages as compensation.) The family buried Samuel but could not afford a headstone. In 2011, a group in Belfast raised funds to provide one. Descendants of the family attended the service. Samuel was the first of eight Harland & Wolff workmen to die building Titanic.

Samuel Scott grave stone
Credit: Find a Grave

BELLBOYS

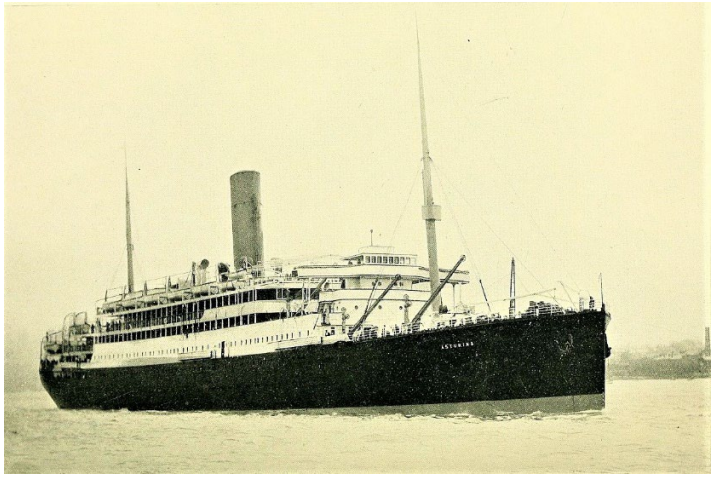
Bellboys on ships provided the same services as their shore-side brethren: helping passengers with luggage, taking messages to and from the wireless shack and being on call as required. Although some sources suggest that there were as many as 50 bellboys (also known as page boys) on Titanic, the most accurate number appears to be three, plus a fourth in the a la carte restaurant. They were: W. A, Watson, 14; Arthur Barratt (also given as Barret), 15; and Clifford Harris, 16. Fourteen-year-old Frederick Hopkins, plate steward, polished silver plate items in the dining rooms. Titanic wasn't their first ship. All appeared to have served in other vessels, notably Olympic, Titanic's sister.

Arthur Barratt
Credit: Encyclopedia Titanica


SS St. Louis
Credit: Wikipedia

Arthur Barratt was born in 1896 in Southampton, England. He had two younger sisters. His father was a marine engineer and away at sea a good part of the time. Arthur worked in a print shop in 1911 but soon went to sea as a bellboy on the liner St. Louis. He signed on Titanic on April 6, 1912.

Clifford Harris
Credit: Encyclopedia Titanica



Liner Asturias
Credit: Every Boy's Book of Railroad and Steamships

Clifford Harris was born in Southampton in 1895 to a seafaring father. In 1911, he secured work in a boarding house as a page boy. Not long after, he went to sea in the liner Asturias. On April 6, 1912, he joined the crew of Titanic, where one of his nine siblings—19-year-old brother Charles—was a Second-Class steward.

The three bellboys were assigned to the Victualling Department, in charge of Purser Hugh W. McElroy. McElroy's staff included clerks, printers, stenographers, a telephone steward and assistant pursers for the Second and Third class. He ran the largest department on the ship and was responsible for a myriad of items, including menus, payroll, ship's supplies and keeping passengers' possessions safe and secure. His three clerks took inquiries, complaints and exchanged currencies and were assisted by the bellboys, who stood at the ready at the Purser's station to follow up on passenger enquiries. Generous passengers tipped the boys, augmenting their monthly salaries.

First Class purser's station (Olympic)
Credit: Titanic, Honor and Glory

The bellboys had little to do during the sinking other than to stay out of the way, as ordered by Chief Steward Andrew Latimer. Quartermaster Sidney Humphreys last saw the bellboys (discouraged from entering a lifeboat) smoking cigarettes and joking with some stewards on the boat deck. Their lax behavior caused consternation among some First-Class passengers. Not

long after, the four boys, including Clifford's brother, vanished into the night. White Star never compensated the boys' families for their lost wages; their pay, like other crew members, stopped when Titanic sank. The Titanic Relief Fund helped the families with small payments to compensate for their loss.

EPILOGUE

Boys continued to serve as apprentices in ships and shipyards, learning the trades necessary to build a ship. After the Second World War, conditions and working hours improved, but safety equipment was still lacking.

Shipyard rivet heater, 1946
Credit: Tyne and Wear Archives

Even today, in Alang, India, Chittagong, Bangladesh, and Gadani, Pakistan, children as young as 8 years old work with gangs breaking up vessels that are run ashore on "beaching yards" for scrap metal. These child laborers make up over 10% of the work force[4] and toil in dangerous conditions, surrounded by asbestos and toxic substances; injury and death are common. Robbed by circumstances of their futures, they are casualties of the harsh economics that has long exploited poor children as cheap, compliant labor.

Sources: Springer Link; Economic History Association; Irish Echo; JSTOR; Investopedia; British Library (Emma Griffin, author); Encyclopedia Titanica; National Archives UK; The Sun; The Victorian Web; Museum of Childhood; Genealogy Jude; Historic England; Victorian Britain; Owlcation; History Crunch; Student Made History; Living in the Past; NBC You Tube video; MENU; Kinna Reads Blog; The National Archives of Ireland; Henry Robb's Shipyard; Tyne and Wear Archive Service; Ancestry Corporate (UK Apprentices); Mariners (Merchant Navy apprentices); Gunter Babler (Guide to the Crew of Titanic)

[1] Rose, Jonathan. The Edwardian Temperament, 1895–1919. 1986.
[2] Boy Sailors during the age of Nelson and Napoleon by M. M. Bennetts 2013
[3] The War with Cape Horn by Alan Villiers 1971
[4] The Sun. Published by Dean Wilkins 2019