

A QUIET SEA

RMS TITANIC



VICTUALLING CREW

THE VICTUALLING CREW

The needs of a transatlantic liner are similar to those of a small town—but one that is being steered and driven through the sea at over 25 miles per hour. To function efficiently, the crew must be skilled in a variety of professions and trades. Navigation and engineering may be most obvious. But the health and contentment of the ship's passengers are also important, and this is the responsibility of the victualling crew. Before a ship sails, it must be fully stocked and, in the case of coal burning ships like Titanic, thoroughly cleaned after refueling.

Titanic's victualling crew of more than 500 was the largest department aboard ship. It took care of the crew and all three classes of passengers. There were about 330 stewards and 20 stewardesses including two restaurant cashiers and one Third Class Matron. (Some passengers had their own maids and valets.) These individuals were overseen by the purser, who on the Titanic was Herbert McElroy.



Titanic Purser, Herbert W. McElroy
Photo Credit: Peggy Wirgau

McElroy had to ensure that the crew was accurately paid, passengers' valuables securely protected, and the ship well supplied with provisions. Only he had the keys to the alcohol. Each class had its own assistant purser. Not long after the collision, McElroy distributed possessions held in the safe to the frightened and demanding First-Class passengers.

The victualling department also included the ship's band, cooks, waiters, barbers, post office clerks, printers, wireless operators and bellboys. (There were 50 bellboys on Titanic; the youngest was 14.) Bellboys helped passengers with their luggage, ran messages and performed other duties upon request. During the evacuation of Titanic, they were initially told to stand by. When it became apparent that the ship was going to sink, they were told to save themselves. However, they also were told to stay away from the lifeboats. None survived. Several were last seen joking with passengers and smoking on the boat deck, a clear violation of the rules while on duty.



Titanic Bellboys
Photo Credit: Pinterest

With Titanic's total capacity of more than 3500 persons, the victualling crew faced the formidable daily task of getting food prepared and distributed and tending to passengers. With this in mind, the ship was designed to provide smooth and rapid culinary service. In some areas, Titanic was fitted with small lifts connecting the various kitchens and pantries to the dining areas, making food delivery efficient. First Class passengers also had, for an additional fee, a separate restaurant that was operated as a concession by an Italian restaurateur. The only task not done on board was washing laundry. This was collected and placed in drying rooms, then washed in a facility ashore when the ship was in Southampton. Of the 500 service personnel on board, fewer than 20% survived the sinking.



Stewards F. D. Ray (left), W. Burke (right) with
unidentified surviving crew member
Library of Congress



Surviving stewardesses
Photo Credit: Fandom

Violet Jessop was one of 14 First Class stewardesses on Titanic. There were four Second Class stewardesses and two restaurant cashiers. Third Class was provided with one matron, Catherine "Cissie" Jane Wallis. Her duties were more varied than those of the other stewardesses. She familiarized Third-Class passengers with the sanitary facilities (many had never operated a flushing toilet), brought food to the cabins of those unable to attend dinner in the dining room, kept an eye out for illnesses and protected single women from the advances of male passengers and crew. Catherine's husband, James, had died the previous year, so she provided for their four young children. Matron Wallis was one of seven women in the victualling department that did not survive. It was reported that she refused to leave the passengers in her care.



Catherine Wallis and husband James
Photo Credit: julia&keld

Sources: A night to Remember by Walter Lord
Crew of Titanic by Gunter Babler
Memoirs of Violet Jessop