

H.M.H.S. *Britannic's* Midship Lifeboats: A Theory About Their Equipment and Operation

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Introduction

With the very few onboard photos of HMHS *Britannic*, it is evident that her midship lifeboats under Welin quadrant davits were unique in the way the boats were stowed and in the auxiliary equipment that is seen in the photos. This article will look at the boats and equipment in the photos to develop a theory about the operation of these boats.

Location and Types of Midship Boats

The midship Welin davit-borne boats of HMHS *Britannic* are shown in the plan view drawing of her boat deck shown in Figure 1 (boats shown in red).

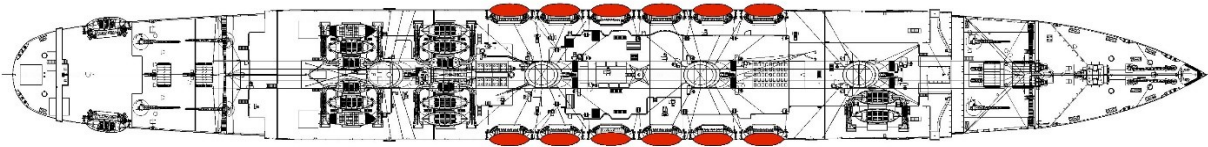


Figure 1

HMHS *Britannic's* midship boats (in red)

The only documentation of the specific dimensions of these boats is shown on the HMHS *Britannic* rigging plan. The notation on the plan for these midship boats only lists the wooden boats as "30'-0" Wood Lifeboat". The collapsible boats are only listed as "30'-0" Decked Lifeboat". There are more specific measurements given for the two boats shown on the rigging plan of the shade deck. The dimensions given for these wooden boats is 30 ft. Length, 9 ft. 6 in. breadth, and 4 ft. depth. The dimensions given for the collapsible boats on the shade deck is 30 ft. Length and 9 ft. 6 in. breadth. The cropped area of the shade deck boats on the HMHS *Britannic* rigging plan is shown in Figure 2.

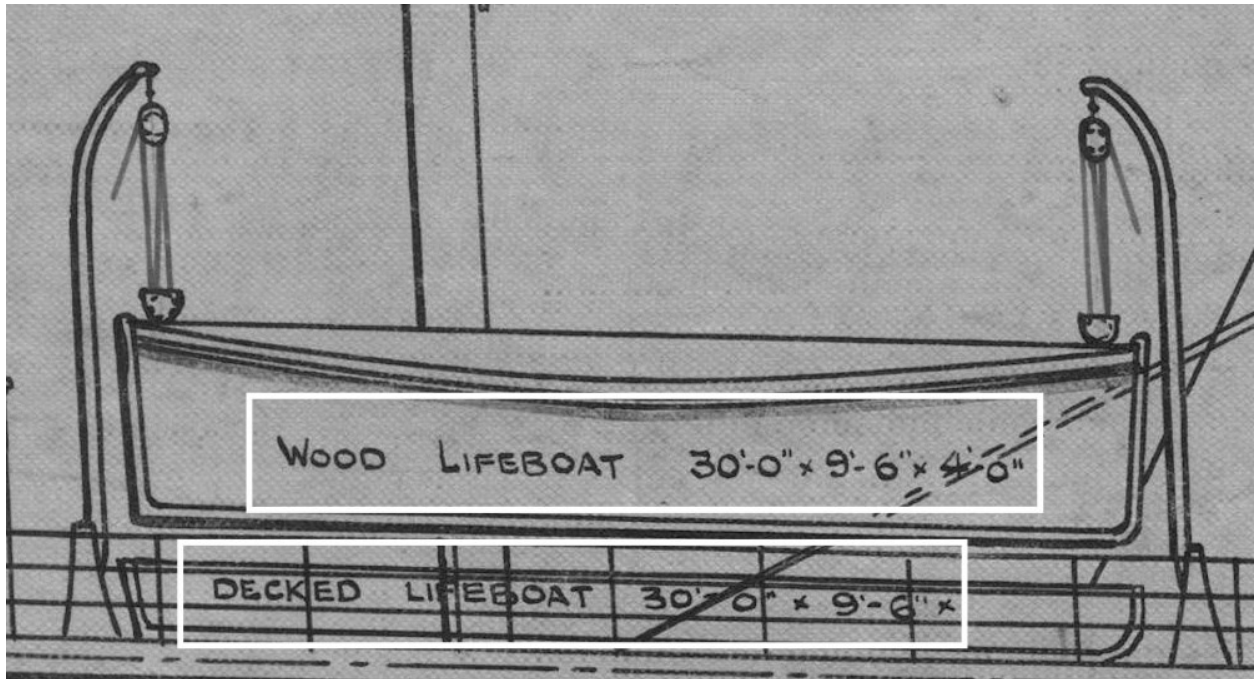


Figure 2

Dimensions of HMHS *Britannic's* shade deck boats

I believe that the more complete dimensions are given for the shade deck boats because they represent the same dimensions of the midship boats.

The midship wooden boats are very similar to *Titanic's* wooden boats. The only difference is that these boats on *Britannic* were 6 inches greater in breadth. Otherwise, they have the same basic construction as *Titanic's* wooden main lifeboats.

The collapsible boats in the *Britannic* photos appear to have been McLean patent collapsible boats. Figure 3 shows McLean collapsible boats stowed on the deck of RMS *Mauretania*. The boat chocks and keel supports would likely have been the same on *Britannic*.

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Figure 3

McLean collapsible boats

Who Would Use the Midship Boats?

The set-up of the midship boats was considerably different than what we see on other types of wartime ships such as troop transports. *Britannic* would have been occupied by large numbers of sick and wounded soldiers when operating at capacity. They would have had large numbers of medical staff consisting of nurses and doctors. In addition, they would have had officers and seamen to operate the ship.

Non-ambulatory patients would most likely have been accommodated during an evacuation by the boats served by the large gantry davits. These davits would bring boats right down to the deck surface for loading them more easily.

I believe the medical staff would most likely use the midship boats. The medical staff would not have special abilities like able-bodied seamen. Their capabilities would be similar to the passengers on a civilian liner. The equipment we see in photos and the set-up of the midship boats appears to be more complex than was seen during the evacuation on passengers during the *Titanic* disaster. With medical staff not possessing the special skills of able-bodied seamen or the strength of healthy troops, the loading of the midship boats would have to accommodate their limitations.

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The Set-Up and Equipment Supporting the Midship Boats

Davits – The davits used to deploy the midship boats were Welin single frame, single acting davits. These davits could only accommodate boats directly between the frames. The wooden boats were kept at-the-ready by keeping them suspended from the falls. Figure 4 shows a drawing of one of the single frame, single acting davits.

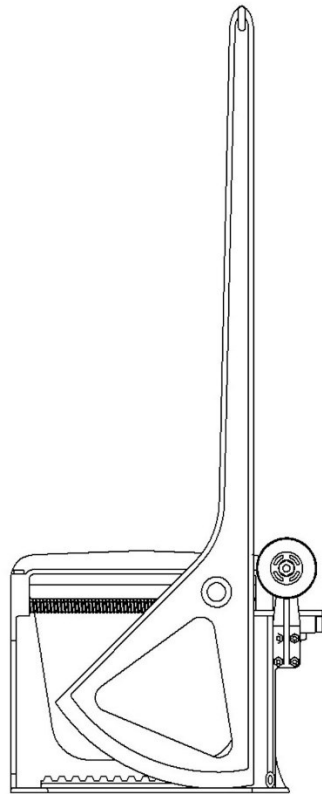


Figure 4

Welin single frame, single acting davit

Stabilization frame – The midship wood boats were kept from swinging in their stowed position by outboard gripes which held the boat against a stabilization frame which was mounted against the inboard face of the outboard bulwark and which extended above it. I believe this stabilization frame had a secondary function. I believe that it was the outboard support for a temporary gangway over the collapsible boat. Figure 5 shows how one of the wooden boats would be lowered so that its keel rested on a ledge at the top of the stabilization frame.

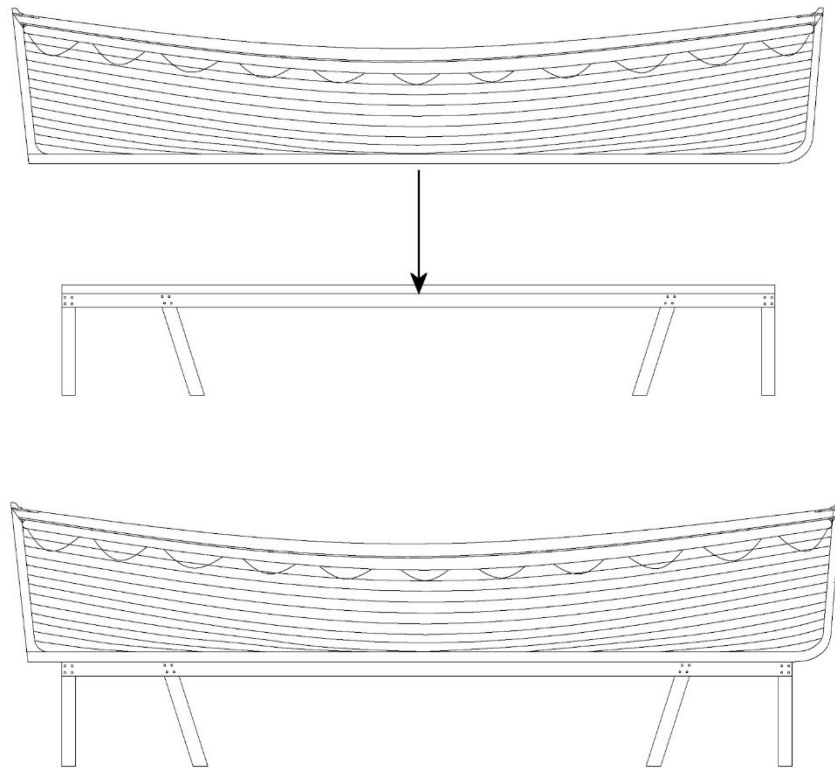


Figure 5

Wooden boat lowered onto stabilization frame

I believe that this stabilization frame had a secondary function. I believe that it was the outboard support for a gangway between it and the inboard gangway support frame (to be discussed later). This gangway would be above the collapsible boat. I believe that support beams for the gangway were rigged between this inboard gangway support frame and the outboard boat stabilization frame. In Figure 6 we can see what I believe are support beams for a gangway to sit atop.

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Figure 6

Equipment for use with midship wooden boats

Ladder – There is no photo evidence of a portable ladder to climb up to the proposed gangway. Despite this lack of evidence, it is logical to assume that there was a means to reach the gangway when rigged.

Frapping tackle – In Figure 6 we see a rope loop over the ends of the gangway support frame. I believe that this rigging was used to hold blocks to rig frapping lines. Frapping lines were belayed to bee blocks at either end of the interior the wooden boats. These lines were run through the block belayed to the gangway support frame. The boat was pulled tight against the ship to keep it from swinging and the ends were belayed to the boat bitts. Figure 7 shows the bee blocks on the interior of one of *Titanic's* lifeboats.

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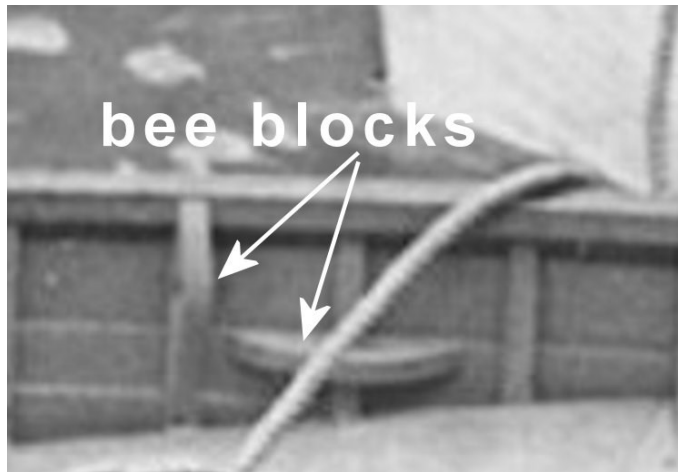


Figure 7

Bee blocks on the interior of one of *Titanic's* lifeboats

Gangway support frame – The gangway support frame can be seen in Figure 6. I believe portable brackets were placed over this frame and the outboard boat stabilization frame. The gangway support beams were then attached to the brackets on both frames and a gangway was attached to the support beams. Figure 8 shows an inboard elevation drawing of one of the gangway support frames.

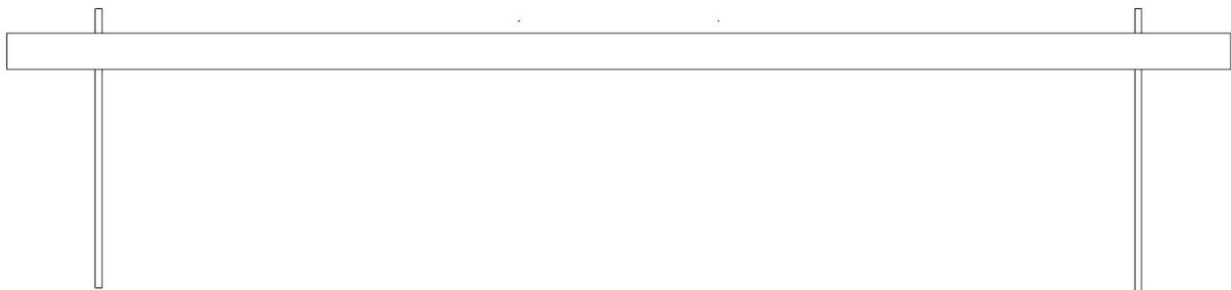
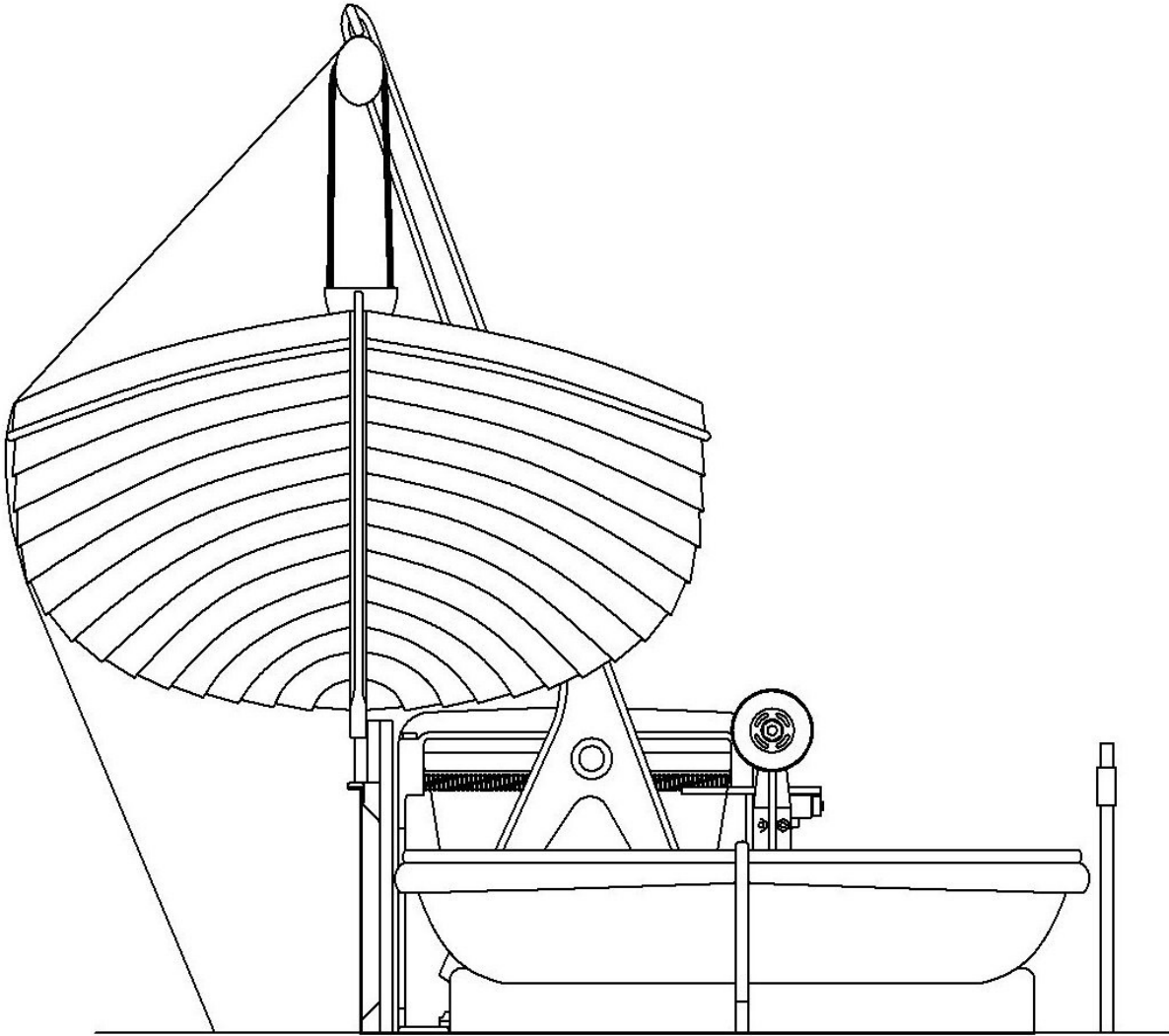


Figure 8

Inboard elevation of a gangway support frame

Preparation of Equipment for Loading Midship Boats

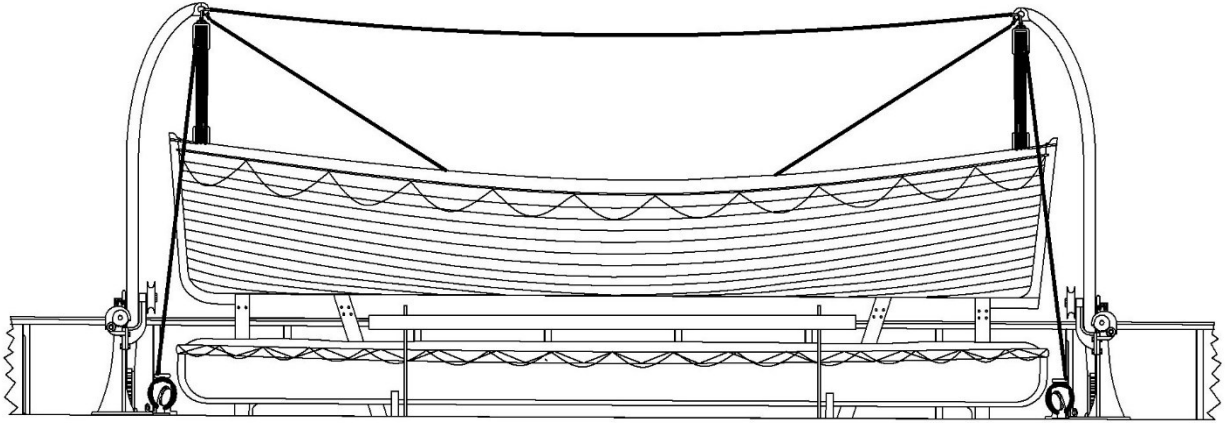
Rather than giving a lengthy textual explanation of preparation of equipment for loading of the midship boats I will accomplish this primarily by drawings. In drawings 9a, 9b, and 9c the midship boats are shown in their stowed positions.



**boat secured to
stabilization frame
(forward elevation)**

Figure 9a

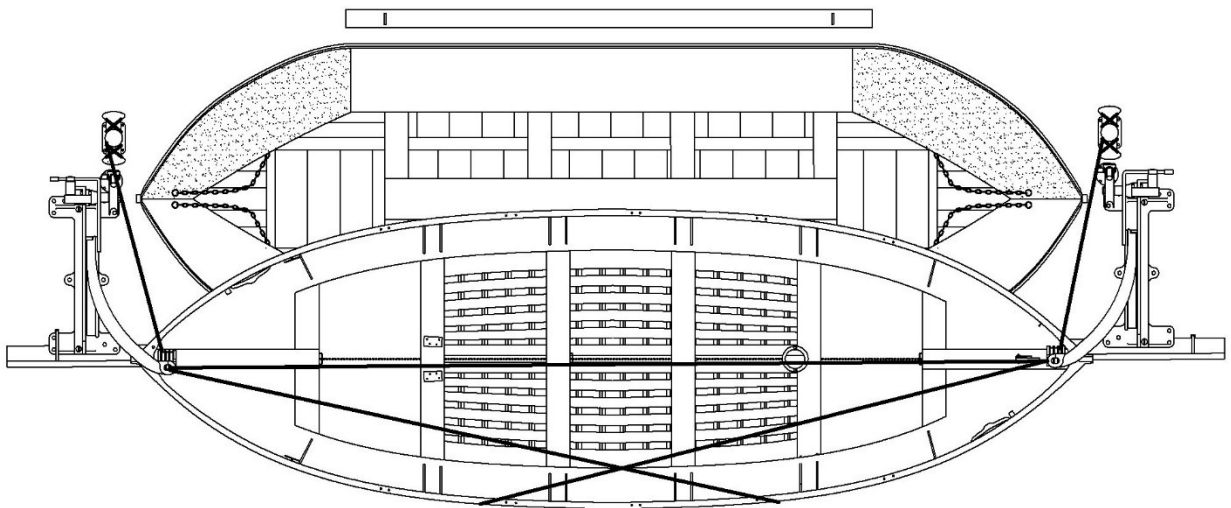
Forward elevation of midship boat



**boat secured to stabilization frame
(inboard elevation)**

Figure 9b

Inboard elevation

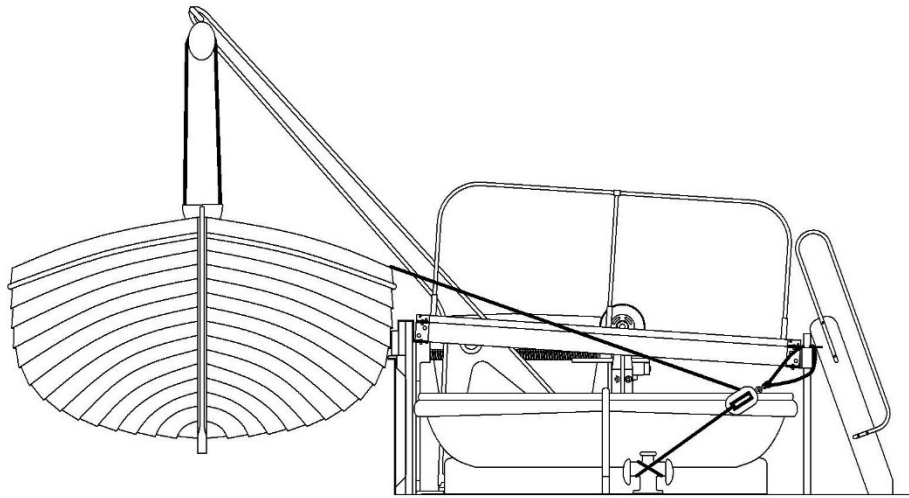


**boat secured to stabilization frame
(plan view)**

Figure 9c

Plan view

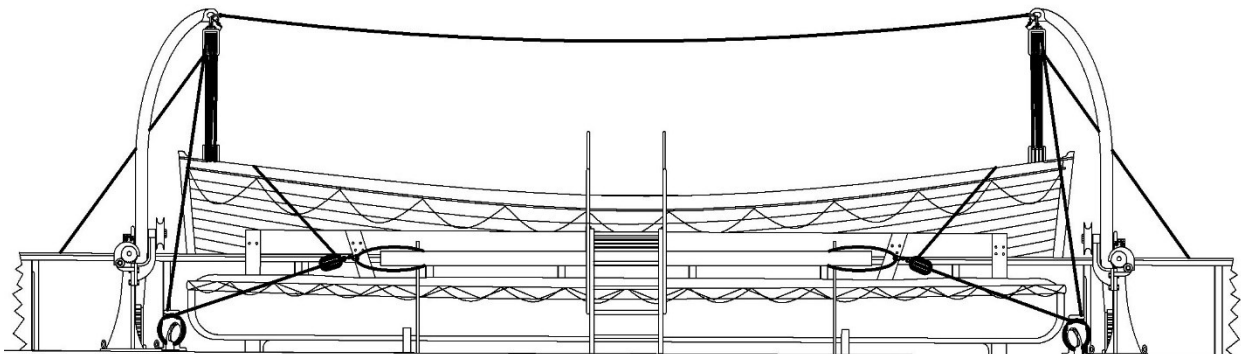
Figures 10a, 10b, and 10c show various views of the midship boats ready for loading of passengers.



boat moved outboard for loading and secured to bulwark by frapping tackle belayed to gangway support gangway rigged between stabilization frame and gangway support frame access ladder to gangway put in place (fwd. elevation)

Figure 10a

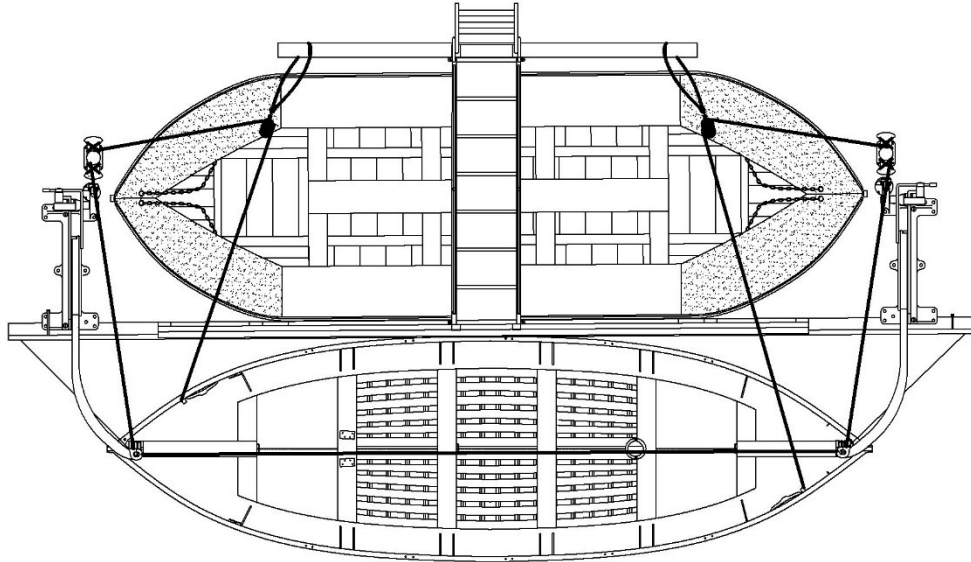
Forward elevation



boat moved outboard for loading and secured to bulwark by frapping tackle belayed to bulwark support gangway rigged between stabilization frame and gangway support frame access ladder to gangway put in place (inboard elevation)

Figure 10b

Inboard elevation



boat moved outboard for loading and secured to bulwark by frapping tackle belayed to gangway support gangway rigged between stabilization frame and gangway support frame access ladder to gangway put in place (plan view)

Figure 10c

Plan view

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to try to explain the purpose of equipment we see associated with HMHS *Britannic's* midship boats. There are no sources which explain how passengers were loaded onto the boats. Evaluating the set-up of the boats and the equipment around them a theory was developed to try to explain how the boats in this midship section were loaded. In the absence of solid photo or written sources which would explain the procedures, I did my best to formulate logical procedures and equipment. This theory may not be definitive but it may be a start toward further research which might reveal more answers.

