

## THE "LADY COMBE."

### B.O.T. Inquiry into Loss of Dredger.

A Board of Trade inquiry was opened in Glasgow yesterday into the loss of the dredger *Lady Combe*, which was never heard of again after passing Greenock last December. Mr. G. W. Wilton, K.C., presided, and the Assessors were Captain Francis Herbert Alexander, Captain D. F. McDonald and Mr. A. Scott Younger on behalf of the Board of Trade.

Mr. T. W. Donald opened the inquiry and gave the specifications of the *Lady Combe*. She was a single-screw bucket dredger, 509 tons gross. Her length was 150 ft., her depth 12 ft. 6 in., and her breadth 34 ft. 2 in., and she was built under Lloyd's special survey. She was an unregistered Government ship within the meaning of Sect. 80 of the Merchant Shipping Act, 1906, and she was owned by the Crown Agents for the Colonies who had not taken delivery when she started on her first and last voyage. At that time, she was still in the possession of her builders, Lobnitz & Co., Ltd., of Renfrew, who were sending her from the Clyde to Lagos, Nigeria. The vessel left the Clyde on Dec. 19 last with a crew on board of 18, and she was never heard of again. The inquiry was, to a large extent, in the hope that some recommendation might be made by the Court which might render a similar disaster less likely to happen in the future. He and other representatives extended the sympathy of the Board of Trade and other organisations with the relatives and friends of the officers and crew who now mourn their loss.

Mr. A. R. HARPER, for the builders, said they had sent out dredgers for 56 years in all seasons, and a similar thing had never happened.

Mr. JACOB CLARK GOURLAY, a Clyde pilot, was called as witness as having taken the *Lady Combe* from Renfrew to Gourock on Dec. 9. He said Captain Flett, who was in charge, told him that two or three of the crew had not joined the vessel, and he had engaged substitutes. Witness had no recollection of anything unusual, and the vessel behaved quite normally. Had there been anything troublesome he would have remembered it.

Mr. JOHN FINDLAY, a director of Messrs. Lobnitz, the builders, spoke at length on the specifications of the ship, and added that there was considerable delay in building the vessel owing to the various strikes, but no damages were claimed for the delay in delivery. He agreed with Mr. Donald that a dredger was not a sea-going vessel in any sense, and that it was intended for harbours principally. It was not an abnormal ship for them to send to sea.

Mr. DONALD: Is it not an unusual type of ship to send to sea?

Mr. FINDLAY: I don't think so. A dredger does not necessarily require to be a bad sea boat.

#### TECHNICAL POINTS.

Mr. Findlay, who was examined at length on technical points, said the superstructure in connection with the dredging apparatus weighed in all about 140 tons. It was not usual to plot statical curves unless the vessel was abnormal in construction. He thought it was satisfactory that the vessel's deck submerged if inclined at an angle of ten and a half degrees, with a range of stability of 38½ deg.

Mr. DONALD made it clear that this was not a prosecution. "We are," he said, "not blaming you for this disaster in any way. We are here to learn what is the best course in future cases of this kind."

Witness subsequently agreed that it would be advisable to have the statical curves plotted. It was originally intended to send out the *Lady Combe* in June. The well was plated in and battened so as to make it weather tight and 15 buckets removed from the dredging chain were stored in it. All hatches were battened and doubly protected, and doors and casings were strengthened with wood. There was no reason why, with care, the vessel should not go sea in winter, although it would be preferable to send such vessels out in summer.

#### UTILITY OF WIRELESS.

Proceeding, he said immediately after the ship left there was bad weather, and it was his opinion that she was overwhelmed in a hurricane south and to the west of Ireland. A second *Lady Combe* was built this year to replace the lost vessel. In deference to the Board of Trade and the owners all her buckets were shipped separately. It had never been suggested that their dredgers should have wireless, although it would be a good thing if it were possible to arrange it. The *Lady Combe* was a small vessel, however, with hardly accommodation for the officers and crew. Dredgers had been sent out in all seasons to Singapore, Bermuda, Japan, &c., and one had gone 16,000 miles to South America with the buckets up and the well open all the time. On the day the *Lady Combe* left, the firm sent out a rock cutter, and she encountered stormy weather breaking away twice from the tug.

Answering Mr. Boyd Auld, for the Imperial Merchant Service Guild, Mr. JOHN MACINTYRE ROSE, chief draughtsman for Messrs. Lobnitz, said it would make for a safer boat if the buckets had been taken down, but out of 14 dredgers the firm had sent out, 11 had their buckets up without mishap.

Mr. WILTON: Dredgers are not for the high seas, that is quite clear. It is impracticable, I suppose, to construct the ships in parts and send them out to be assembled at the place of delivery, as they would not have workmen at the other end, and that is why vessels must take risks.

WITNESS agreed.

Captain WILLIAM RODDICK who engaged Captain Flett to take the *Lady Combe* out to Lagos said he did not know him intimately. Generally speaking it would be safer at sea with the buckets of dredgers down. It was no good trying to force a dredger against a headwind of gale force. He usually turned the stern round to the gale, but the only danger was in turning. It was his opinion that the *Lady Combe* was caught by the sea and wind when trying to force her way into shelter, and that the vessel capsized. It was very stormy weather at the time as he was out in it.

Just before the Court adjourned for the night, Mrs. Veitch, of Renfrew, widow of the lost third engineer, handed a letter to his Lordship, in concluding her testimony, which was to the effect that while holidaying at Rothesay last August a pair of her husband's trousers were washed ashore a few feet from where she was sitting on the esplanade. She identified the garment positively as a spare pair belonging to her husband, because she recognised certain patches she herself had stitched in. Her belief was unshaken in the ownership of the trousers.

His Lordship's comment, on reading the letter which Mrs. Veitch handed up, was, "This is the most sensible thing we have got yet." He read a letter out which was from a sailor written to Mrs. Veitch on Oct. 17 of this year sympathising with the widow in her loss. The letter went on: "I have a brother for years at sea and now a light keeper at Chickens Rock, Isle of Man. He takes a keen interest in shipping, and seeing from the papers what was said about the *Lady Combe*, he wrote me saying that the *Lady Combe* was taking shelter for 24 hours at the Calf of Man. He states in his letter that on leaving, she was at the lighthouse at Chickens Rock at about 2 p.m. He cannot recall the date, but he read the vessel's name with the telescope. She was steering a south-easterly course. During the night it came on to blow again."

The Court decided to seek confirmation of the statement from the lighthouseman, John Henderson, at Lighthouse Buildings, Port St. Mary, Isle of Man.

The inquiry was adjourned until to-day.