

THE "KENTBROOK" (ex Dorset Town) Cause of Loss Unknown

FINDINGS OF COURT OF INQUIRY

Mr. Walter Hedley, K.C., who presided at the recent inquiry into the loss of the steamer *Kentbrook*, announced the findings of the Court yesterday at the Institution of Civil Engineers, Westminster, S.W. 1, and stated that the cause of the loss of the vessel remained unknown and could only be a matter of conjecture. During the inquiry Mr. Hedley had as assessors Captain A. E. Dodd, Captain A. L. Gordon and Mr. A. M. Robb. The *Kentbrook* was a single-screw steamer of 264 tons gross, which sailed from Plymouth on Dec. 26, 1935, for Portsmouth. She had a cargo of limestone and since leaving Plymouth she had not been heard of again, the crew of seven being lost.

Mr. HEDLEY, at the outset, replied to a series of questions that had been raised. In doing so, he said that the *Kentbrook* was built in 1903 and had been bought in July, 1935, by the Brook Shipping Company, Ltd., for £750. She was valued at £1250—because of the upward trend for craft of the type—and insured for £1100. The Court was satisfied that the cargo of limestone chips had been properly stowed and trimmed and that the vessel was also in a good and seaworthy condition as regards the hull and equipment. She was properly supplied with boats, life-saving equipment and distress signals. The hatch covers were sufficient and in good condition, as were the tarpaulins. The vessel was upright and had stability when she left Plymouth. The cargo had been satisfactorily loaded from the point of view of the ship's stability.

"A MATTER OF CONJECTURE"

After remarking that the cause of the loss of the vessel remained unknown and could only be a matter of conjecture, Mr. Hedley referred to the wreckage, identified as belonging to the *Kentbrook*, which had been found on the Dorset coast. It seemed probable, he said, that the steamer was lost between Start Point and Portland Bill, probably nearer the latter position than the former, on the morning of Dec. 27.

Following his detailed answers to the various questions raised, Mr. Hedley, in the annex to the findings, explained that the *Kentbrook* had one hold served by two hatches and was carrying a cargo of 260 tons. A vessel answering her description was seen from the outer breakwater of Plymouth Harbour on Dec. 26. The naval signalman at Plymouth who had seen the vessel at 10.2 p.m. provided the last observation of the vessel's movements. None of the bodies of the crew of seven had been found. The *Kentbrook* might have been expected to complete her voyage within 15 hours, and the fact that wreckage was found not far to the west of Portland Bill suggested that she was probably well on her way to Portsmouth. As he had stated earlier, as to the cause of the disaster there could only be conjecture, but before indulging in this, or discussing hypotheses, he would like to deal with certain points.

Referring to the evidence that there had been defects in the steering gear, Mr. Hedley said he wished to say that the Court was satisfied that the defects were not of such a nature as to render the gear seriously unreliable. The Court was also satisfied that the defects in the gear had no connection with the disaster. The Court desired to place on record the opinion that the owners took all proper steps to remedy any minor defects in the ship. When the real state of the steering gear was brought to their notice they took all proper steps to eradicate the defects. The condition of the steam pumps had been adversely commented upon by certain of the witnesses, but the Court was satisfied that there were no serious defects in them.

It was necessary in the course of investigation to deal with the loading of the ship and the effect of that on draught and stability. It seemed that the carrying capacity of the *Kentbrook* might have been taken to be about 320 tons. It was certain that the weight of the cargo loaded was 260 tons. After making reasonable allowances for coal, water, &c., the total weight would be less than 300 tons, and the ship was not loaded up to the maximum weight permitted by the regulations. The Court was thoroughly satisfied that the *Kentbrook* was not loaded to the full amount. Both in regard to draught and trim the condition of the ship was not open to criticism.

WEATHER CONDITIONS

Accepting the conclusion that the ship was not overloaded and had proper stability, it became necessary to enter the realms of speculation. Although the records of weather conditions prevailing at the time of the disaster did not indicate really severe weather, it was right to bear in mind that weather which might be classified as "heavy" for a big ship should be classified as "very heavy" for a small coaster, such as the *Kentbrook*. From the fact that there was nothing to indicate that any attempt was made to launch a boat, and that no flares or distress signals were seen, it was reasonable to conclude that the disaster which overtook the vessel was sudden as well as complete. This conclusion would appear to rule out the possibility of the ship having capsized as a result of the shifting of the cargo.

The other possibility was that the vessel might have foundered as a result of a large quantity of water entering both hatches. This hypothesis

had no direct evidence to support it, but there was certain indirect evidence. They had been told that it was not uncommon for the "well" of the ship to be covered with water. If the tarpaulins had been washed off by the seas washing about in the "well" it would have been quite possible for water subsequently to get into the hatchways. Such a disaster might easily have been the consequence, especially in view of the fact that in a heavy sea the steering of the ship was liable to become somewhat wild.

"One point remaining for consideration is that of the freeboard assigned to this type of vessel," Mr. Hedley concluded, "and there is no doubt that the freeboard of the *Kentbrook* when she sailed on her last voyage was greater than the minimum permitted by the regulations. The adequacy of these regulations appears to be a matter for serious consideration. No statistics affecting these were put before the Court, but in any case statistics do not completely dispose of the question of the safety of life at sea, nor do they convey any idea of the strain that may be placed upon those responsible for the safety at sea of ships of the type of the *Kentbrook*."

"Reference has also been made to the 'well' of the ship being almost continuously flooded when the weather was not much worse than moderate. Such a state of affairs appears to be common in vessels of this type when at sea with the freeboard allowed by the regulations. But it does not appear to be in any way desirable. Such a state of affairs may reasonably be taken as ground for suggesting that the adequacy of the existing regulations concerning these vessels might well be considered by the Board of Trade."

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