

"EMPRESS OF CANADA" FIRE

M.O.T. Inquiry Opened

QUESTION OF OPEN FIREPROOF DOORS

From Our Own Correspondent

LIVERPOOL, Monday

The Ministry of Transport formal investigation into the loss by fire of the Canadian Pacific liner *Empress of Canada* on Jan. 25 last, in No. 1 branch, North Gladstone Dock, Liverpool, was opened at the Royal Institution, Colquhoun Street, to-day. Mr. K. S. Carmichael, Q.C., is sitting as Wreck Commissioner with Captain Lewis Parfitt and Messrs. W. J. Nuttall, I. J. Gray and F. Dunn as assessors. Counsel for the Ministry of Transport said that a question arose why two members of the ship's company had not closed fireproof doors.

The Ministry of Transport are represented by Mr. J. B. Hewson and Mr. Gerald Darling. Bootle Corporation is represented by Mr. George Bean, Mr. J. V. Naisby, Q.C., and Mr. R. J. H. Collinson are representing Canadian Pacific Steamships, Ltd. Mr. Glyn Burrell and Mr. Norman Sellers are appearing for the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board. Mr. Trevor Davies is appearing for Harland & Wolff, Ltd. Mr. P. F. Broadhead (instructed by Messrs. Ingledew, Brown, Bennison & Garrett, London) is instructed to watch the interests of the members of the Mercantile Marine Service Association and the Navigators and Engineer Officers' Union.

Mr. HEWSON said, in an outline of events previous to the fire, that the *Empress of Canada* arrived in Liverpool on Jan. 10 at the end of a normal voyage. After discharging her cargo she was fumigated and during that fumigation on Jan. 17, among other things the klaxon alarm system was used and was found to be in order. From Jan. 19 to 24 the vessel was in Gladstone graving dock and at 10 15 on Jan. 26 she was moored port side to the quay at North No. 1 berth, Gladstone Dock. Workmen employed by Messrs. Harland & Wolff were variously engaged in the ship mainly on work in the engine-room and on riveting outside the ship. They were not, so far as had been discovered, employed in work in the part of the ship where the fire was presumed later to have broken out, namely on B deck on the starboard side.

In reply to a query from the Wreck Commissioner about the position in regard to the ship's crew, Mr. Hewson said the ship had been paid off but a total of about 35 men employed by the Canadian Pacific Company in various capacities were on duty concerned with painting and with work in the engine-room. Mr. Smyth was the duty officer in charge at the time and there were three engineers on duty in addition to the skeleton crew.

THE FIRE PATROLS

Among the men engaged by the Canadian Pacific Company that day were the fire patrols. Five patrol men were under the master-at-arms, one man was responsible for the boat and promenade deck, one man for A and B decks, one man was responsible each for C and D decks, one man was on the gangway and he worked reliefs with the others, and over them all and in charge was the master-at-arms. The report centre in the ship was on the

gangway at B deck aft on the port side where, among other things, was kept a smoke helmet, axe and portable equipment for use by any fire party. It did not appear that the patrol men were trained firemen, but several were men who had served in ships for a considerable time and knew the position and use of the fire fighting apparatus.

Continuing, Mr. Hewson said that the duties of the fire patrol men were to close fireproof doors and ports, operate fire alarms and to use fire fighting appliances immediately available for the extinction of fire if they discovered it. Their duty also was to inform the officer of the watch and the master-at-arms if they discovered an outbreak of fire. There were also three other general duty watchmen on board who had described themselves as fire watchmen but who, he thought, were general duty watchmen and there for general duties.

On Sunday, Jan. 25, the *Empress of Canada* was berthed port side to the quay in 50 ft. of water. At 3 35 p.m. a Mr. Hill, who would be called to give evidence and who was a watchman on a grain elevator which was moored on the starboard side of the *Empress of Canada*, saw smoke coming from the portholes immediately forward of the steel door on the port side of B deck at the end of the first alleyway and next to the dispensary.

SMOKE SEEN

He said he shouted to some men working on the boat deck, several decks above, that the ship was on fire. "It is a little doubtful whether his actual words were heard," Mr. Hewson said, "and he is not really certain himself whether he was heard or not, but at any rate someone looked over the side. Whatever the truth may be, it does not appear that Mr. Hill did anything more than the shouting. I think the evidence will be that there was a tea break during which a turks-head fell on the elevator and that the men on the boat deck were under the impression that any movements of the mouth by Mr. Hill were remonstrations against skylarking."

Mr. Hewson said that about 3 35-3 40 p.m., two men who were washing paint on board the ship noticed smoke on the starboard side, but as it appeared to pass away they took no notice. Other men observed smoke in the alleyway near the dispensary and took action. A boilerman who was working removing a plate on B deck would say that at about 3 55 p.m. he smelt smoke and shouted below down the shaft, "What's burning?" The answer was that nothing was burning. Shortly afterwards the smell and the smoke became stronger and thicker. One of the patrol men on the upper promenade deck at the time was patrolling in the engineers' quarters at about 4 08 and he smelt smoke in the engineers' quarters. How accurate that time would be, as indeed all the times he was mentioning would be, was a matter for the Court to decide, after the evidence had been heard.

Referring to the patrol of the master-at-arms, Mr. Hewson said that this man, who had a sort of roving commission as well as being in charge of the patrol men, began to carry out his own patrol at about 3 30. In the course of it he went on to A deck and came down to B deck, passing along the starboard passenger alleyway. There he smelt nothing and saw nothing suspicious. At about 3 45 Mr. Olsen, the boatswain, walked from aft forward along the starboard alleyway on B deck and he saw nothing that aroused his suspicions. Referring to the actual discovery of the fire Mr.

Hewson said that again he would like to draw the Court's attention to his proviso about times being only approximate.

DISCOVERY OF FIRE

Mr. Hewson said that, turning to the actual discovery of the fire, Mr. Roddick, a chargehand boiler maker employed by Messrs. Harland & Wolff, was on his way up from the engine-room in the working alleyway on B deck. This alleyway was on the port side and ran from the forward square on B deck in the neighbourhood of No. 3 hatch. At 4 10 p.m. Mr. Roddick saw what he thought at first looked like steam. That was in the cross alleyway immediately abaft the dispensary. He was joined at that time by another employee of Messrs. Harland & Wolff, a Mr. Davies, and they discovered that this steam was like smoke and they took action. Mr. Davies broke the fire alarm which was practically outside the plumbers' shop. The officer of the watch was in the officers' accommodation at the time that the alarm was given and heard nothing, but a man who was washing paintwork near the bridge did hear the bell ringing. It was extremely doubtful whether the bell could be heard ringing in the officers' accommodation.

Mr. Davies, having broken the fire alarm, went aft and informed the master-at-arms as near as could be judged between 4 10 and 4 15. Mr. Davies informed those on the gangway and then ran ashore to the Canadian Pacific offices and told the watchman there to dial 999 for fire and the evidence would be that the fire brigade was called at 4 17. "Mr. Davies seems to have done much in a very short time," Mr. Hewson said. Two minutes later, at 4 19, two pumps arrived from Bootle fire brigade and within a matter of minutes two more pumps arrived and later even more pumps. There was certainly no delay by the fire brigade in answering the alarm, said Mr. Hewson.

Questioned by the Wreck Commissioner as to how far the fire brigade had to come to answer the call, Mr. Hewson said they came from just outside the dock gates, but from however short a distance two minutes had been very quick indeed.

When Mr. Davies had gone ashore to give the alarm the master-at-arms and the patrolmen were told of the fire in the ship and the master-at-arms went forward and used a fire extinguisher on the bulkhead of cabin B 53 which was hot, although there was no smoke or flame coming from it. Several other men by now had turned out. They examined cabins B 57, 59 and 61 and found that they were clear of fire and that the portholes of the cabins were closed. The after limit of the fire was not at that time abaft the cross alleyway.

DOOR NOT CLOSED

There was a modified fireproof door between the dispensary and cabin B 53. The master-at-arms did not close that door but if he had done so it may have prevented the later spread of the smoke and the fire.

In reply to a question by the WRECK COMMISSIONER as to what type of door he referred to when he said a door was fireproof, Mr. Hewson said he was referring to steel doors.

Mr. NAISBY at this point interrupted to say that his information was that the door referred to was not a steel door but a wooden one.

Mr. Hewson said the accurate description of the door would be given in evidence. Continuing, he said that Mr. Baxter, who had been with the master-at-arms was sent to inform the officer of the watch and as he went

along the working alleyway on B deck he was met by bursts of flames across the alleyway from the service pantry on the starboard side. Mr. Baxter made his way to the bridge and met Mr. Smyth, the duty officer, who told him to tell the engineer to start the pumps. At 4 10 p.m. Mr. Medlicroft, a bedroom steward, saw smoke issuing from double wing doors in the alleyway aft of B 33. He went to the fire door just outside B 37, which was a recognised part of the fire bulkhead of the ship and there he saw flames at the ship's side at the end of the cross alleyway. This fire door was open then and did not appear to have been closed. The query arose at this point, said Mr. Hewson, as to why two members of a ship's crew who were regular members of the ship's company had not closed these fireproof doors. Mr. Medlicroft, as soon as he saw the fire, ran forward and broke the fire alarm, but the bell was already ringing from the other alarm which had been given in the engine-room.

Mr. Moffatt, one of the ship's engineers, saw smoke at about 4 10 to 4 15 in the engine-room trunk and was told there was a fire. He immediately started up the starboard sanitary pump, which was the pump he had been ordered to use in the event of fire. The power for the pumps was from a diesel generator in the engine-room, which was in operation. The smoke was becoming very thick in the engine-room, so he went aft along the tunnel and there met one of the other engineers at the after end of B deck. When he got up there this engineer had come down from quarters on the promenade deck. It was at about that time that the fire brigade arrived. Mr. Moffatt and the other engineer had turned on one of the hydrants and water had come through. At about the same time, however, two other ship's hydrants had been tried, but water had come from neither. This was just at about the time that the fire pump was started up and the water had presumably not got through.

AVAILABILITY OF WATER

Mr. Hewson said that while on the question of fire pumps and of water being ready instantly, the Court might wish to consider the advisability of having water constantly in the mains without the delay which must come if there was no constant supply running through. "In other words, you will get some delay if you have to start up a pump and then after that there must be still further delay while the water circulates and pushes out the air before it provides a stream of water."

Mr. Hewson said the master-at-arms would say that they did try a hydrant but that there was no water. "It is a matter to be considered whether it is not better to have a supply constantly available, because if one man is in the vicinity of a fire he may wish to use the nearest hydrant or hose long before the officer of the watch knows that there is a fire at all and valuable minutes will be lost."

SHIP'S GENERATOR STOPPED

The fire brigade when they arrived said that the ship's machinery would not be required as they would take over. The two engineers went into the engine-room and stopped the generator, which stopped the pump and very shortly afterwards allowed all the lights to go out in the ship. They judged that the time would be 4 25. The ship's engineers went aft to the emergency generator on D deck and stood by there in case it was required.

When Mr. Smyth, the officer in charge, was informed of the fire by Mr. Baxter the patrol man at about 4 15 he sounded the klaxon fire alarm. He went aft to the gangway, where he found some of the Canadian Pacific men there all ready rigging up smoke helmets and the fire fighting equipment provided. Mr. Smyth found it was impossible to penetrate the alleyways on B deck because of the smoke and he closed the fire doors. He went forward and down on to B deck to get at the forward doors and then worked his way aft on the working alleyway and was able partially to close the fireproof doors outside the painters' (joiners') shop. He could not close them completely because of a workman's air hose which passed through the doorway. He then went forward and closed the wooden sliding doors outside No. 4 hatch trunkway and on the starboard side he closed another fire door outside B 11 cabin near the service pantry.

"There is no doubt that, although late, nevertheless as soon as he could Mr. Smyth appreciated the importance of containing the fire so far as he was able to do so and carried out the instructions," Mr. Hewson continued.

Mr. Smyth then made his way ashore by the fire escape put up by the fire brigade and made contact with Mr. Barlow, the deputy fire brigade officer, and returned on board with him. At later stages in the fire Mr. Smyth went on board, and, aided by fire brigade breathing apparatus, was able to recover the drydocking and tank statements of the ship.

When the question of the stability of the ship was to be considered there would be evidence to show that after the fire was discovered by those in the ship its progress aft was rapid, because within 10 minutes or so it ran along the deckhead in an aft direction and not very long after the arrival of the fire brigade was in fact attacking the tourist stairs which led down from B deck.

Mr. Carpmal then asked Mr. Hewson about the paint on the bulkheads and Mr. Hewson replied that it was not cellulose paint but ordinary paint. It was not fire resisting. There was a false ceiling on the deckhead. The actual deckhead itself was steel and then there was a space of some 16 inches which was covered in wood. This caused an air space in between where various pipes were fixed. There were no electricity leads in the space.

NO CRITICISM OF FIRE BRIGADE

Mr. Hewson then came to the stage where, he said, Bootle Fire Brigade took control. Within a few minutes of receiving the call two fire engines had arrived. Within a few more minutes there were four fire engines and within half an hour at five o'clock they had ordered 20 fire pumps. By that time high officials of the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company and Mersey Docks and Harbour Board were in attendance. "There is no criticism of the way in which the Bootle Brigade attacked this fire," said Mr. Hewson. "They did all they could."

"Not long after 5 o'clock the fire chiefs and officials of the dock board and the Canadian Pacific Company began to concern themselves with the stability of the *Empress of Canada* if they continued pumping in water at the rate in which the fire brigade were doing in their endeavours to bring the fire under control. There is no criticism at all so far as the Ministry

is concerned of the way in which the fire was tackled or of the way in which all interested parties attempted and did their best to prevent the ultimate capsizing of the ship."

Mr. Hewson stated that Captain Colbeck of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board and other important officials came to the conclusion that by the time the ship had listed 17½ deg. it would be time seriously to consider whether they had to keep on pumping in water or stop. By 8 30 p.m. it was reckoned that the fire brigade had pumped in about 2400 tons of water, and the ship had then listed to about 17½ deg. All hoses were stopped putting water into the ship because the sills of the side scuttles on B deck were touching the water and there was great danger. A fair assumption made at that time was that the fire had got down to D deck and that the heat inside the ship and the cold water outside would in all probability have cracked and broken some of the ports on D deck and let in more water.

HOLES BURNED IN SHIP'S SIDE

Between 7 and 7 30 p.m., with the aid of Messrs. Harland & Wolff's workmen, holes were burned in the ship's side to allow water which had been pumped in to run out on the port side. Counter-flooding was both considered and tried and about 9 o'clock six hoses were put down the starboard side of No. 3 hold, but they had to be withdrawn shortly afterwards, because it was found that water was making its way to the other side of the ship. Sixty-five tons of water was pumped into the starboard side of the ship, but it did not materially assist the counter flooding. At 8 30 p.m. when the fire brigade ceased to play water into the ship they devoted their attention to the outside of the ship and the warehouses on the quay. By 11 45 p.m. the list was 21 deg. The ship remained fairly static for an hour or so, but about 1 a.m. began to list fairly rapidly and at 1 15 her masts and funnels were touching the warehouses on the quay. At 1 30 she settled down quietly and turned over.

"The causes of the fire have not been traced and there are several possibilities to be considered, none of which can be established as being the cause of the fire," Mr. Hewson said. He then gave technical details of the electrical apparatus and wiring of the ship and said no electrical work was being carried out that day in the passenger accommodation nor was there any temporary lighting from the shore being used in the passenger accommodation on B deck. There had been occasional faults in the ship by the short circuiting of electricity wires caused by water and thus resulting in small fires but there had not been such cases for some months before the fire. Pillows, mattresses and lifebelts were stored in cabins B 35, 37, 39 and 40. Those cabins were locked but the other cabins on the starboard side were, as far as he knew, left open. It was a rule that these pillows and mattresses should not be stowed near any electric lights. If a light was left on by accident and, say, pillows were pressed against the globe of the light in time there would be enough heat generated to cause fire eventually. He only mentioned that point as a possibility because the evidence which had been taken showed that no mattresses or pillows were stowed in a manner which could cause this.

As to smoking, although there were notices about the ship and although there was a special mess-room for those employed by Messrs. Harland & Wolff, which was on D deck on the port side, it could be possible that a cigarette thrown over the side from the upper deck could have blown in to one of the cabins on B deck on the starboard side.

Mr. Hewson mentioned that he had only a few further details to discuss in his opening and he suggested that the Court should proceed with their visit to the *Empress of France*.

The chairman announced that the further hearing would be adjourned until 10 a.m. to-morrow. The Wreck Commissioner and the assessors then visited the *Empress of France*, sister-ship to the *Empress of Canada*, which is in dock at Liverpool.



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