

"EMPRESS OF CANADA" INQUIRY

**Locked Dispensary Door
Not Broken Open**

WORKMEN'S ACCOUNT OF THEIR ACTIONS

From Our Own Correspondent

LIVERPOOL, Wednesday

When the Ministry of Transport Inquiry 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 resumed to-day, workmen who were employed in the ship gave evidence of their experiences at the beginning of the outbreak and were questioned by Counsel as to their actions. Questions were put as to why the locked door of the dispensary was not broken open. Mr. K. S. Carpmael, Q.C., is sitting as Wreck Commissioner with Captain Lewis Parfitt and Messrs. W. J. Nutton, I. J. Gray and F. Dunn as assessors.

[The previous proceedings were reported in LLOYD'S LIST of Dec. 8 and 9.]

Mr. J. B. Hewson and Mr. Gerald Darling are representing the Ministry of Transport. Mr. George Bean is appearing for Bootle Corporation. 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.

SMELL OF BURNING

The first witness to-day, EDWARD BRIDGE, a stokehold boilermaker employed by Harland & Wolff, Ltd., said that at 3.30 p.m. on the day of the fire he and another man went into the trunk way called the cooling room to remove a ventilator plate. The room was near the dispensary and the top of the plate was on B deck. After going in they closed the steel door into the working alleyway. They were not using any fire equipment. They did not hear or smell any signs of fire, but about 20 minutes after going in caught the smell of something burning.

"We just shouted down to the engine-room to ask if there was anything burning," witness said. "We received no answer and carried on with the work. The next thing we experienced was the atmosphere started to get hazy and we saw smoke in the air. We just had a couple more bolts to take off and I thought we might get it done. The smoke began to thicken and when I turned round I could see it was thick. I called to the other chap with me, 'Come on. We will get out of here!'"

Witness said in answer to Mr. Naisby that while no instructions were given as to what to do in the case of a fire on board a ship in which they were working it was understood that they would do everything they could to help to fight it. When Mr. Naisby commented that he had not given any fire alarm by the time he left the ship although he had seen flames BRIDGE replied, "When I came from where I was working everyone knew there was a fire. They were telling." Witness

told Mr. Naisby that no instructions had been given as to what to do in the case of a fire on board a ship in which they were working, but it was understood that they would do everything they could to help to fight it.

Bridge told Mr. Naisby that he did not try to find out where the smoke was coming from. He took it that it was coming from the pantry where he had seen fire. He did not see anyone using fire extinguishers or wearing smoke helmets. In answer to Mr. Carpmael, Bridge said the smoke was very thick when he left the place where he was working.

Replying to Mr. Bean, Bridge said he did not see anyone who appeared to be looking for the origin of the smoke and after he had warned his mates he did not see anyone doing anything about dealing with the smoke. Mr. Bean asked Bridge what the men did when they got ashore. Did they just turn round and watch the ship burning? He replied that he was looking round to see where all his men were. He did not see anyone go to the direct fire telephone on the quay.

C. F. EVANS, a chargehand stokehold boilermakers' labourer, said that when he smelt smoke in the place where Bridge was working it was like the smell of brown paper burning. He had made that remark to the others working there. Later, when he was walking to the storeroom, he noticed smoke in the pantry. That was about 4.10 p.m. The smoke was more like condensation and he thought it might be steam. When he went into the pantry the smell was of smoke. He did not see any flames. "We went to Mr. Woodhouse in the storeroom and said we thought there was something wrong in the pantry." Mr. Woodhouse had told him to get back to the pantry as soon as possible and see what it was.

Evans told Mr. Carpmael that he thought the smoke was condensation and he did not know whether any of his workmates would be causing smoke. At that time he did not know there was a fire. Evans described how, after seeing the smoke, he went along to a storeroom nearby and when he returned to the place where he had been working he saw flames in the pantry. They were up towards the pipes on the deckhead. He spoke to another workman standing by, who asked him (Evans) to stay there while he went down below to see if there was anything wrong in the galley. When he came back he said there was nothing down there. At that moment the shore gang came along and took over.

NO RECOLLECTION OF A SHOUT

Evans said he could not recollect hearing anyone shout and said the next thing that happened was that there was a general movement of the men to get ashore. He had to go forward and over the boat deck because he could not get past the flames and smoke which were then coming out of the working alleyway. The fireproof door was open.

Evans, in reply to Mr. George Bean, said that when he smelt smoke in the pantry there was no smoke in the working alleyway. From what he could see the source of the trouble was limited to the pantry. He had no idea where any fire extinguishers were located in the ship. Before he left the ship he had not seen anyone using fire extinguishers.

Mr. BEAN: Why did it not occur to you to get a fire extinguisher and use it?—Because there was only smoke and I did not want to use an extinguisher on smoke because I knew I would not be able to stop the fire extinguisher afterwards.

And what about when you saw flames?—The idea didn't enter my head then.

JAMES WOODHOUSE, the next witness, said he had been employed by Harland & Wolff, Ltd., for 40 years, and had been a chargehand boilermaker since 1939. He was in charge of the stokehold boilermakers working in the *Empress of Canada*. They were using the greasers' room in the working alleyway of B deck as a store. About seven minutes to four he unlocked the door of his storeroom and entered it and started to make out time sheets. While he was doing this Evans, the last witness, came in to see him and ask for instructions about the removal of a plate in the cooler. Evans then went off to see to the job, but a couple of minutes later he came back and said, "the ship's on fire." Woodhouse said that he thought Evans had been joking and had not taken him seriously and had told Evans, "Well, go and put it out." When Evans insisted that he was serious and that the vessel was on fire he went out with him into the working alleyway where there was smoke. This would be about five past four.

In reply to the Wreck Commissioner, Woodhouse said there was no welding going on in his department although other people might have been welding. There were welding cables in places but he did not know who was using them. None of the men under his charge were working on B deck starboard side and this was a part of the ship into which they seldom went. He did not know whether any burning work was going on at the port side of the ship.

NOT CONSIDERED SERIOUS

JAMES RODDICK, a chargehand boilermaker employed by Harland & Wolff, Ltd., said that after smoke had been seen coming from near the dispensary on B deck Davies broke the fire alarm and went ashore. He said that he went below to do some work with his books because he thought that the alarm having been given the fire would be dealt with by the appropriate people, and he had not considered that it would be a serious fire. Replying to Mr. Bean, he said that he had looked about when he had seen the smoke and it was only coming out at the deck head. He said he had not gone into any of the rooms. He thought that the smoke had been coming from the dispensary and he assumed that, as usual, the dispensary would be locked.

Mr. BEAN: If there was no one there when you left the place where the fire was, did you think it would take care of itself?

RODDICK said that he had seen Halliday, one of the fire patrol, running with a hose. He said he had seen no men with fire extinguishers and had not thought of going for one himself.

Mr. BEAN: Did anyone think of breaking open the door of the dispensary if you thought the fire was in there?—I am not there to break open locked doors. It was up to the ship's people to open the door.

But who would notify them?—They were notified through Davies breaking the fire alarm glass.

In answer to further questions, RODDICK said that before going below he had not at any time seen any flames.

D. A. DAVIES, boilermakers' labourer, said that prior to the fire being discovered he had been working on an oil tank in the bottom of the ship. He came up through the engine-room and made his way into the working alleyway of B deck. On his way forward he saw Roddick standing gazing up at a deckhead and he asked him what he

was looking at. Roddick replied: "Look at that" and he then saw light smoke. As they stood there, in a matter of seconds, this light smoke was followed by thick clouds of smoke.

"A MATTER OF SECONDS"

Mr. HEWSON: Are you sure it was only a matter of seconds?—That's all.

DAVIES said that he immediately went to a fire alarm in the working alleyway. The time he gave the alarm would be about 4. He went and told the man on the gangway that he had seen smoke near the dispensary and that man immediately, without even replying, rushed off towards the dispensary. He did not know who this man was but took him to be a watchman. He said that he then went ashore and ran to the shed where the C.P.R. had their office. He told the watchman there to dial 999 and waited while he did so. Although he knew now that there had been a direct alarm on the quay to the Boatie fire brigade he had not known then. He thought the length of time that elapsed between putting his call through to the fire brigade and telling the man on the gangway of the fire would not be more than two or three minutes.

Replying to Mr. Naisby, Davies said he thought perhaps four or five minutes would have elapsed between breaking the fire alarm in the ship and telephoning the fire brigade. After the watchman had put the telephone call through he went back to the gangway, but had not gone in the ship again because people were already coming off.

Mr. Bean told Davies that the one time that the Court would have accurately would be the time of the telephone call, at 4 17, when the fire brigade had been summoned. Using that as an accurate time, could he work backwards to say the time he gave the fire alarm in the ship? Davies replied that he thought the time would be about 4 10. Further questioned by Mr. Hewson about the light smoke changing in a matter of seconds to black smoke, Davies said that this was so, and that the smoke came rolling over and over under the deckhead. It was coming from the direction of an alleyway in the centre-line of the ship. He could see clearly along the alleyway under the smoke, which was above the level of his head. There was very little smell of smoke.

J. F. WALLACE, employed by Harland & Wolff, Ltd., as a charge hand boilermakers' labourer, said he went along the working alleyway on B deck at 4 on his way to the engine-room. He saw no sign of any fire. He passed the dispensary at a minute or two after 4. He came out of the engine-room and saw Mr. Davies rushing past and he shouted that the ship was on fire. That was about five or six minutes past 4. He saw very light smoke at the deckhead of the working alleyway corner of the dispensary. He tried the door of the dispensary and found it locked. He tried to locate the origin of the fire, but after about five minutes black smoke came and they could not do anything more about

it. He saw no smoke coming from the passenger cabins. When the smoke began to get thick he tried to get forward along the working alleyway to get his coat, but the smoke was too thick and he went ashore. Witness added that he put his hand on the bulkheads at the dispensary but could not feel any heat. He never saw any flames. In reply to Mr. Bean, he said it did not occur to him to force the dispensary door.

RICHARD GURNELL, marine fitter, employed by Harland & Wolff, Ltd., said that he was working on a valve in the engine-room. There was no welding and they finished their job at 4 p.m. He was just packing his tools when a labourer said, "I wouldn't bother about your tools. I'd get ashore. It's on fire!" He noticed then that the engine-room was rather more deserted than usual. The atmosphere was growing thick with blue smoke. He thought this was from the exhaust of the engine-room generator so he did not take much notice. He finished packing his tools and then saw black smoke coming through the vents in the engine-room. It had a distinct smell about it of burning wood.

"LIKE A FLAME-THROWER"

He went up the main engine-room ladder and got as far as the working alleyway. He tried to go aft towards the gangway, but he could not get more than 10 or 12 yards because of a flame which shot across the alleyway from the forward end of B 72 from the port side to inboard. The flame reminded him of one that would have come from a flame-thrower and it stopped his progress. He retraced his steps and went ashore. Questioned by Mr. Naisby, witness said that he had seen flame-throwers in action and this flame was just like one. It came suddenly in a puff, like a small improvised chemical bomb bursting. In reply to Mr. Bean, he said the flame shot across at a height of about 7 ft. from the deck.

The hearing was adjourned until to-morrow.



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