

"EMPRESS OF CANADA" INQUIRY

Stewards Questioned About Unclosed Fire Doors

"SMOKE WAS TOO THICK"

From Our Own Correspondent

LIVERPOOL, Friday

Stewards gave evidence to-day at the Ministry of Transport Inquiry into the loss by fire of the *Empress of Canada* on Jan. 25 last, in No. 1 branch, North Gladstone Dock, Liverpool. They were questioned about the non-closing of fire doors, fire drill and whether they had seen anyone smoking on board. One steward said the smoke was too thick to get to a fire door. Mr. K. S. Carpmal, 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, 9, 10 and 11.]

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. E. Broadhead (instructed by Messrs. Ingledeu, 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.

NO WATER FOR SHIP'S HOSE

The first witness to-day was an employee of Harland & Wolff, Ltd. ALBERT ROBINSON, a fire patrolman, who said he heard people shouting fire at 3.50 p.m. When he reached the spot he saw huge flames coming round the tops of the staircase. He soon realised that there was no point in tackling the blaze with a fire extinguisher, and he connected the ship's fire hose and turned the valve on at the top of the staircase on C deck. This was of no use as there was no water. At about that time the lights went out. Thick smoke was coming through the dining room.

In reply to Mr. Naisby, Robinson said that the times he had given were pure estimates, but he had a good idea of the time. In the parts of the ship for which he had been responsible as a patrol for fire dousing there had been no fires used. When he broke a fire alarm glass he heard no bell ringing. Replying to Mr. Bean, Robinson said that he had no routine fire patrol duties to carry out except for standing by tradesmen who were using burners. If he saw a fire of course it was essential that he should take action.

MATTHEW BROWNBILL, a Canadian Pacific bedroom steward for eight years, said he joined the *Empress of Canada* after her reconditioning in 1947, and was responsible for cabins A 46 to A 66 on the port side. On the Sunday of the fire the only key that he remembered being asked for during the morning and afternoon was for cabins C 23 and C 25. In reply to Mr. Naisby he said that some cabins were already open for workmen who would not therefore require keys.

FRANK MEDLICOTT said he had been employed by the Canadian Pacific for 45 years, latterly as a bedroom steward. His duties on the day of the fire were to look after the key room and to be

responsible for keys issued to workmen on board. On the afternoon of the fire he did not have to issue any keys, but he remained by the key room. At 4.10 p.m. he was standing in the alleyway by the key room on the starboard side of the ship when another steward came to him and said he had not issued any extra keys. While they were talking they saw some smoke issuing from the centre doors. They opened the doors and found the alley was thick with smoke. The key room was situated in the stewardesses' sitting room. Then they went along the alleyway about 15 yards through the smoke to cabin B 39 alleyway.

FLAMES IN ALLEYWAY

They saw flames coming from that alleyway which was near to the ship's side. The smoke was so black they could not see whether the doors were open or shut, but they were supposed to have been closed. He said he did not know whether the rooms were used as storerooms for bedding. The flames seemed to be a little higher than his head. They retraced their steps along the passenger alleyway to B deck forward fire alarm and he broke the glass of the alarm. The other steward, Mr. Jillings, then left him and he went on to C deck to warn the men there. He returned to B deck and locked the door of the key room and went ashore.

Medlicott said he had no idea how the fire started. In reply to Mr. Hewson he said that he had been a bedroom steward for many years but he had never before seen a fire alarm glass broken. When he broke this one he saw nothing happen but had heard a click which made him feel quite sure that the fire alarm button had come out. He did not push the button with his finger at all but just left it. He had taken part in many fire patrol practices during the 30 years that he had been a bedroom steward. These were carried out twice each trip in the *Empress of Canada*, once when they sailed at Liverpool and once when they arrived at Montreal. Usually his fire station during the fire practices was at the hydrant in the bedroom section. He said that some men were told off to close fire doors in the vicinity of the fire and during fire practices the fire doors were closed.

Mr. HEWSON: Do you understand the importance of closing the fire doors?—Yes, to stop all the draughts.

Did it occur to you to close the fire door forward of the cross alleyway when you saw the fire?—The smoke was too thick to get down to that fire door.

MEDLICOTT, continuing his evidence, said that when he reached the gangway to leave the ship the fire brigade was already there. He did not know what the time was then. Replying to Mr. Bean, he agreed that the crew had a fire routine to follow when the ship was at sea and everyone had their instructions as to what position they were to take up during a fire drill. When the ship was in dock he thought they were expected to carry out the normal instructions followed when at sea.

Mr. BEAN: But not many of the crew were on board with you then. You cannot carry out your normal routine and go to your normal appointed place when there are so few people to go there?—We would make an attempt to go to our own places.

When you broke the fire alarm what did you expect would happen?—I thought some of the fire patrol would come down with their fire helmets and equipment.

There was no noise of a fire alarm sounded throughout the ship, was there? When you broke this fire alarm glass did you expect to hear anything?—I understood that it rang on the ship's bridge and they came down immediately.

MEDLICOTT said that he had not expected to hear a bell ringing in the ship. There would be no reason for an alarm bell to sound all over the ship. He anticipated that when they had sounded the alarm they would get assistance from patrols after ringing it.

Mr. BEAN: It is important to distinguish between a ship in commission and a ship as she was then in dock. Normally when people receive a warning the whole routine of the ship comes into operation, but how far does it come into operation with only a skeleton crew on board?

MEDLICOTT replied that he expected to see fire patrols come down to where he had pressed the button and he stood there in case anyone came down to him. Replying to the Wreck Commissioner, he said that he thought the officer on the bridge would hear the fire alarm when he sounded it.

NO SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS

Mr. BEAN: Please understand that what you did was what you would have been expected to do. What the Court wanted to know was whether there would be any special arrangement or instruction as to what to do in the event of fire with a skeleton crew?—There was no special arrangement.

And in fact no one came to where you were up to the time you left?—No.

I take it there had been no sort of fire drill in the ship during the short time that she had been in Gladstone Dock?—No.

Replying to Mr. Naisby, MEDLICOTT said that the first time they saw smoke coming through the centre doors it looked like steam and that when he and Mr. Jillings went aft they found thick smoke in the starboard alleyway. He was quite sure it came from the alcove where cabins 37 and 39 were situated.

F. F. JILLINGS, junior second steward, said he had worked for the company for 29 years. He was supervising five stewards who were relieving in the ship on the Sunday. They had a very small catering staff on board on that day. At 4.10 p.m. he went to the last witness and while speaking to him saw smoke issuing from the double doors in the alleyway. On going through the doors they were met by thick smoke. He saw a flame coming from cabin B 39 in the alleyway off the main starboard alleyway. Because of the smoke they had to turn back and he and Medlicott went to the fire alarm which the other man broke. Witness then went through the first-class dining room to be the end of B deck. As far as he was aware no workmen were engaged on B deck where he saw the flames.

Mr. HEWSON: Did you have in mind the closing of any fire doors and did you consider closing the fire door by cabin B 37?—Yes, I did, but all the alleyway lights went out and I could not find the door. It became completely black.

You know it is the regular drill in the event of fire in passenger accommodation?—Yes.

You follow that one of the questions about which we are concerned is why that door was not closed being so near to the fire?—Yes.

At any rate you did not close it?—No.

NO FIRE POST

Replying to Mr. Bean, JILLINGS said that he had been in the ship since Jan. 10. He had received no instructions as to what to do in the event of fire. He had had no fire position given to him. Asked about the position of the fire door in the cross alleyway he said he went through a fire door in that vicinity. Asked what he would have done if he had heard the alarm bells ringing he said he would have gone to his fire station.

Mr. BEAN: But you did not have one?—In port my idea was that if nothing else was done we should leave it to the fire brigade.

Do you appreciate that when you reached the cross alleyway you were literally within a foot or two of the fire door?—I knew there was one in the vicinity but the place was in darkness.

Do you realise there was a fire door in the cross alleyway down which you looked?—No. I did not.

Jillings was then asked by the Wreck Commissioner if he could tell him anything about smoking on board and he replied that there were painted notices around the ship saying that no smoking was permitted.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: I want to know from your experience whether those notices were observed.—From our department we always impressed it, I cannot speak for others.

I rather gather from the way you gave that answer that smoking was carried on?—No, I would not say it was.

Would you say there was any smoking on board?—I cannot give an answer to that.

The way you answer these questions gives me the impression that you know there was smoking on board. Is that right?—I cannot say there was smoking on board.

Asked by Mr. Hewson if he had seen anyone with a pipe or cigarette who was not in his department, JILLINGS replied: "I suppose I have."

Mr. HEWSON: I suppose you mean that if you saw someone smoking it would be someone outside your control?—Yes.

If it had been one of your stewards, what would you have done?—I would have told him to put it out.

ALBERT McCONVILLE, a bedroom steward employed by the Canadian Pacific for 30 years, said cabins B 37 and 39 were both used for storing mattresses. He was satisfied that the mattresses were not in contact with any electric lights.

Mr. HEWSON: What would you have done if you had seen any sign of water in the cabins?—If it was near an electric fitting I would have notified the fact to the chief electrician.

Witness said all the cabins used for storing mattresses and pillows were always kept locked.

JOHN RODGERS, a bedroom steward, said that he helped to stack mattresses in cabins on the lower and upper berths. The closest that any mattress was stacked to an electric light shade would be about two or three inches.

SHORT CIRCUIT SUGGESTION

JAMES DEERING, a bedroom steward, said that on the day of the fire he was not on duty but he had come to give evidence by relating an incident which had occurred four days before the fire. On that day he had been called to cabin A 66 on A deck where a bath was overflowing and the water running through the deckheads into cabin B 62. The water would be soaking the electric wiring system because it was pouring into the cabin below from the point on the ceiling

round the electric light. The flooded cabin was cleared and everything was left in order. He had two previous experiences where cabins had been flooded and short circuits had taken place when the wires were drying out and had caused fires. He had not made a report on the incident on Jan. 21 because there had been several superior officers who had seen it also.

DANIEL JENNINGS said he was master-at-arms and was in charge of the fire patrol of six men in the *Empress of Canada*. He had been in the ship for ten years. Five men patrolled a deck each and one man on the gangway changed every hour with another patrol. Instructions in the case of fire were to notify the duty officer and master-at-arms. The men came on at 7 a.m. and were on duty till 5 p.m., except for a meal break between 11 45 and 1 45 when they relieved each other for meals and he himself took the place of a man who was having his lunch and patrolled his deck. Their duty was to patrol their deck continuously and they all knew their instructions. They were all expected to visit all cabins during their patrol but they had a certain discretion as to whether they visited each cabin on every patrol.

Mr. HEWSON: Do you mean that during the ten hours that a man is on duty his instructions are that in the course of that time he must visit each cabin once on his patrol?—No. They should have visited them regularly every hour, but whether they did or not I do not know.

Apart from patrolling their decks you do not know what they did in that patrol?—No, I do not know.

But they were instructed to visit cabins during their patrol?—That is correct. But there was no hard and fast rule that they should visit every cabin on every patrol.

Jennings said that at 3 30 p.m. on the day of the fire he made a patrol of B deck and found that everything was in order. He had a roving commission and went on any deck he wished. He came down from A deck by the main companion near the lifts on to B deck. He went along the starboard alleyway of B deck towards aft and crossed over to the port side round the tourist purser's office. In the course of that patrol he did not look into any cabins, but all was quiet on that deck. He had not heard, seen or smelt anything to arouse his suspicions to suggest a fire. The alleyway had been clear and he had seen nobody. He made his return journey along the port side passenger alleyway and the working alleyway and again saw nothing to arouse his suspicions. At about 4 15 he was on the gangway when Mr. Davies informed him that there was smoke on the starboard side on B deck in the vicinity of the dispensary.

ACTION WITH EXTINGUISHERS

He ordered Baxter, a patrolman, to notify the duty officer and he took a fire extinguisher from the tourist purser's office and walked forward and saw heavy smoke coming from the cabin on the starboard side of the passenger alleyway. When he got there the starboard alleyway was dense with smoke. He went inside the alleyway to use the extinguisher near the dispensary door and played it on the wall of cabin B 73. While he was playing the first extinguisher he saw no flames, but when he brought a second, which he had taken from a workman, into action the flames suddenly burst across the alleyway from somewhere near B 53. He shouted that someone go ashore and connect a hose.

When he first saw the smoke he passed word back to the gangway to call the fire brigade. He managed to get into cabins C 57, 59 and 61 and they were clear of fire and their ports were shut. There was no smoke in that part of the alleyway. When the fire brigade came on board shortly afterwards he ordered the workmen who had been engaged in the fire to go ashore and he went with them and took no further part in the proceedings.

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