

"EMPRESS OF CANADA" INQUIRY

First Officer's Evidence on Fire Precautions

QUESTION OF READY SUPPLY OF WATER

From Our Own Correspondent

LIVERPOOL, Monday

The principal witness to-day at the Ministry of Transport Inquiry into the loss by fire of the *Empress of Canada* was the chief officer, Mr. F. W. S. Roberts, who was cross-examined on the arrangements for connecting the water supply so that in the event of fire no time would be lost and also on various aspects of the fire precautions. The *Empress of Canada* fire occurred on Jan. 25 last, in No. 1 branch, North Gladstone Dock, Liverpool. 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, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 14.]

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.

WATER IN "UNDER FIVE MINUTES"

When Mr. ROBERTS resumed his evidence to-day he was asked by Mr. Hewson if he knew what arrangements there were for supplying water to the ship's mains in the event of fire, and he replied that the arrangements were that on the breaking of a fire alarm the pump would be started. The officer of the watch was aware that the fire pump was off but was at immediate readiness. When the Wreck Commissioner suggested that it would take some time for the water to circulate, witness said it would take about half a minute or a minute. When Mr. Hewson repeated his words, witness said it would be a matter of minutes.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: How long? You said half a minute to a minute.—A little longer than that, something under five minutes.

Mr. HEWSON: So that in the event of fire anyone wishing to use the ship's hoses might have to wait a matter of minutes before water was coming through?—Yes.

I am sure it is realised by you that speed is the very essence of firefighting?—Yes.

And that the few minutes that may be lost when the fire is first discovered may have a very serious effect upon its spreading before firefighting becomes even possible?—Yes.

Was the matter considered by you of attaching the ship's mains to the shore mains?—It was considered but I have never known the ship's mains to be attached to the shore mains out of dry dock.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: When was it considered?—It was suggested by the fire patrol, who reported to the officer of the watch that water was not on.

Mr. ROBERTS added that that was on the Sunday morning while he was on board. Mr. Smyth, the officer of the watch, told him that the fire patrol had reported it to him.

When Mr. Hewson asked if he was aware that the water was off in the ship's mains on the Sunday, Mr. Roberts replied, "Yes. I did not consider attaching the ship to the shore connections because the fire main pump was of far greater power than the shore connections, and my experience has been that the shore connections give only 25 tons an hour, whereas the fire main pump will give 75 to 100 tons."

LONG EXPERIENCE OF DOCK

He said that 25 tons of water per hour was the actual capacity of the pump. If there were half a dozen different nozzles that would not mean they would get 25 tons from it. He had never known a fire main to be attached to the shore main while in port with the water actually turned on. He had been using Gladstone dock during the past 30 years and had never known this practice to be operated during that time. He said that they had hoses on to the fresh water supplies ashore because the carpenter had been topping up No. 5 and 6 tanks and the hose had been left on because he had told him to keep them topped up. Referring to the fire alarms in the ship he said they were of the usual type with the glass fronts and the pull buttons inside. In port they were each tested by the electrician and were spot checked by him during every fire drill. Then the chief officer would go round the ship trying the alarms at random. In reply to the Wreck Commissioner he said they could be tried by means of a key so that the bell could be operated and sounded on the bridge.

Fire drills of that nature had included the testing of fire alarms and were carried out weekly in the *Empress of Canada*. He could not say when there had last been a drill because he had not been chief officer of the vessel during the last voyage but the official log book would show the date of the drill which would have been last carried out after leaving St. John on her final voyage for England.

Asked about methods of communication between the bridge and the engine-room he said they included the engine-room telegraph and telephone communication direct to the engine-room. That telephone was also available in port.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Would it be proper to sound the klaxon as a fire warning?—The klaxon was fitted for abandon ship warnings and not fire warnings.

Was it never considered that the officer of the watch might not hear the alarm in the wheelhouse?—I had given instructions when in port for the door of the wheelhouse to be left open.

Supposing the officer of the watch was in his cabin with his door closed?—I should have thought that he would hear the alarm there.

Did you consider that it would be possible to have a temporary extension of the alarm in any other part of the ship?—That has been done since.

Mr. ROBERTS said that the alarm operated in the forward end of the engine-room. Normally, when the ship was at sea, there would be an engineer in that vicinity the whole

time. In that case a light flashed in addition to the ringing of the bell which might not be heard above the noise of the machinery. He could not say how well the bell would be heard in the engine-room in port with the generators on because he had not heard the bell in the engine-room himself.

PATROLS ADEQUATE

Asked about the appointing of the fire patrols, he said they were appointed by the investigation department of the Canadian Pacific Company. Two of the five patrols were regular ship patrols at sea. Although the patrols were appointed by the investigation department the chief officer would keep an eye on the question of adequacy of patrol, because the chief officer was responsible for the safety of the ship. He thought that five fire patrols, in addition to the master-at-arms, were adequate. That was the usual number and he had never known more patrols to be used for a ship of that size.

Mr. HEWSON: Supposing the *Empress of Canada* had been loaded with hay and gunpowder, would you have done anything about that?—Yes, I would have asked the marine superintendent for more patrols and he would have communicated with the investigation department and told them to supply extra men.

Regarding the patrolling of the ship Mr. Hewson said: At sea you have people about the ship all the time. In port, as on this occasion, there were very few stewards about, no passengers and several hundred employees of Messrs. Harland & Wolff, so that there were no people who were actually attached to the ship in every part of the ship as there would have been at sea.

Mr. ROBERTS agreed that that was the case and that for the discovery of fire in port they were relying more on the fire patrols than they did at sea.

Mr. HEWSON: With possibly greater dangers of fire starting because of the presence of workmen rather than passengers?—That is an arguable point.

At any rate, at sea there are greater chances of a fire being detected?—Yes.

Then do you think that if a patrol passes along an alleyway or a number of cabins every one and a half hours that is then enough?—No.

What would you consider a reasonable frequency?—I would say it depended a good deal upon the places and upon what work was going on there. I should say that each deck ought legitimately to be covered every half-hour, but I would not consider it necessary to patrol a deck continuously. He added that there was also the point to consider that the men were not only fire patrols, but were the ship's policemen as well, and were going round the ship guarding against thefts as well as against fire. He thought that if they were patrolling only for fire a regular patrol would be better, but from the point of view of detecting theft or sabotage or of catching men smoking, an irregular patrol would be more effective. He agreed that it was not uncommon for people employed in the ship to be smoking and to douse their cigarettes on the approach of the patrols and disappear round the corner.

"HIDE AND SEEK"

Mr. HEWSON: It becomes a game of hide and seek?—That is the position. He added that the patrols visited the unlocked cabins on their rounds, but not the locked cabins.

In reply to Mr. Naisby he said that smoking was not allowed in the ship except in the officers' quarters and in places where people were living and the only people living on board were officers and engineers. He was responsible for seeing that no smoking occurred and so was everyone in control in the ship, such as the officer of the watch, the master-at-arms and any of the fire patrols. In certain places in the ship there were "no smoking" notices painted on the bulkhead. They were permanent and applied whether the ship was in commission or in port. A shore gang kept the temporary notices in a shed ashore and were responsible for putting them about the ship.

In reply to the Wreck Commissioner he agreed that by arrangement the klaxon system could have been brought into operation and used as a fire warning in addition to a warning to abandon ship. He felt certain that there were air pipes leading through the fireproof doors in the working alleyway.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Was it ever considered what the effect would be by these pipes upon the closing of the fire doors?—I suppose that the pipes could have been cut and the doors closed.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Then it would have been desirable to have an axe at the door put there for that purpose?—Yes.

Do you regard yourself as being in control over the workmen on board?—Yes, I could stop them doing anything I considered unsafe.

Would you consider that you had the right to call upon them for fire fighting?—No, I don't think I had that right, but I have no doubt that they would have buckled to if they had been directed to do so.

BOATSWAIN'S EVIDENCE

W. C. SOMEVILLE, the boatswain, said he had been an employee of the company for 30 years. He was on board the whole day prior to the fire, and at 4 10 p.m. he went to his room forward on B deck to make up his workbook. At 4 15 the second boatswain came to him and told him there was a fire on B deck. They rushed out and picked up fire appliances and went to the working alleyway on the port side. He instructed a man to go to the boat deck and fetch some men to assist in the fire fighting. At the time there was no sign of smoke or fire. They went aft along the working alleyway to the printers' shop and there ran into thick dark brown smoke. One of the men put on a smoke helmet and he himself made a dash into the smoke to see what was going on, and in the few seconds that he was there he saw flames coming from the service pantry near the dispensary. The flames were coming out near the top of the door. With the assistance of the officer of the watch they closed two fire doors. The fireproof door near the printers' shop could not be closed fully because of air pipes passing through the doorway. He could not have cut them without an axe.

Mr. A. D. MORRISON, second officer of the *Empress of Canada*, said he was not in the ship at the time the fire broke out, but he went on board at 6 p.m. to act as guide to various fire officers.

90 MINUTES TO PATROL TWO DECKS

ARTHUR GRIFFITHS, fire patrol with the Canadian Pacific Company since September, 1949, said that he had been master-at-arms in the *Queen Elizabeth* in 1945 and had had considerable experience as a fire patrol in ships at sea and in port. On the day of the fire he had patrolled A and B decks. He made about six rounds of the decks in question during his tour and noticed nothing unusual. It took him about one and a half hours to patrol the two decks.

Mr. HEWSON: That means that you passed the dispensary that morning at intervals of more than one and a half hours?—I did not always take the same route. I staggered my routes.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Do you do anything when you walk along the alleyway?—I listen for any unusual noises and see if I can smell anything unusual. Witness added that he went into the cross alleyways and tried some of the cabin doors on each tour. In reply to Mr. Hewson he said his instructions were that if he saw anyone smoking he was to stop them immediately and if he saw any sign of smoke he was to investigate. They also had to watch for anyone breaking into shops or ship's offices, in addition to fire patrol. They were also a general security patrol.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Have you ever found anyone who should not have been there sitting down in a cabin or any other place?—No.

Have you ever caught anyone smoking?—No.

Have you seen anyone smoking?—No.

Have you ever seen any cigarette ends lying about?—I have, just an occasional one.

Have you ever seen anyone disappear round the corner as you were coming along?—No.

Have you ever asked yourself the question what you would do if you did see someone smoking?—I would go after them.

Do you mean you would run after them?—If I had to run, yes, and if they were too fast for me it would be just too bad.

Are you quite sure you have never seen anyone smoking in an unauthorised place in this ship?—Not a workman.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: What instructions have you had while you have been in the Canadian Pacific as to how detailed your fire patrol along these alleyways should be?—I was not given any instructions as to how I had

to patrol. It was left entirely to myself as to how the decks were visited.

Were you ever told to visit the cabins?—If I heard anything unusual or I smelt anything I was to try the cabins.

What sort of noise would you expect to hear that would arouse your suspicions?—If I found anyone inside who should not be there I would want to know why they were there.

Asked what he would do if he caught anyone smoking in a cabin GRIFFITHS said that he would take further proceedings. On the subject of trying cabin doors during his patrol he said that he did not try them all on each patrol but tried about six or seven on each deck each time he went round.

During the afternoon hearing a message was received for Mr. A. J. Greenslade, chief officer, Bootle fire service, who was waiting to give evidence, that his fire service had received a call to the *Mauretania*, now in Gladstone dock. Mr. Greenslade returned later and said the call had been a test call.

The hearing was adjourned until to-morrow.