

"EMPRESS OF CANADA" INQUIRY

Patrolman on Why He Did Not Close Door

"MEN WOULD HAVE BEEN TRAPPED"

From Our Own Correspondent

LIVERPOOL, Tuesday

A patrolman described at the Ministry of Transport Inquiry to-day into the loss by fire of the *Empress of Canada* how he led a party of workmen through dense smoke and in darkness. He did not close a fire door because if he had men behind him would have been trapped. The *Empress of Canada* fire occurred on Jan. 25 last, in No. 1 branch, North Gladstone Dock, Liverpool. 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, 11, 12, 14 and 15.]

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.

"FIRE ALARMS IN ORDER"

To-day, J. O. O'DONNELL, second electrician of the *Empress of Canada* at the time of the fire, said he was last in the ship on the Saturday morning before the fire and at that time, so far as he was aware, the alarm system was in perfect working order.

ARTHUR GRIFFITHS, a fire patrolman and a former master-at-arms of the *Queen Elizabeth*, was questioned about a statement he made on oath to a Ministry of Transport surveyor. Griffiths told Mr. Hewson that until the inquiry began he had no doubt about the time of the day he heard the noises in cabin B 71. He agreed he found the door of the cabin locked, whereas if men were working inside it should have been open.

When the Wreck Commissioner asked Griffiths why he did not investigate further he said he could not give any explanation about the procedure for examining cabins. "You cannot try every cabin on every patrol," he said. If he had opened a cabin door and seen a porthole open he would not have closed the porthole himself but would have told the section steward about it.

Mr. Hewson referred to a statement made by Griffiths on Feb. 2 which stated that he went along the port side of a deck as far as the most forward cross alleyway where he smelt smoke. While there he met Mr. Lovelady, a foreman of the shore gang, who had told him that the ship was on fire and all hands were to go ashore. It was about 4 p.m. when he first smelt smoke.

Mr. Hewson went on to deal with the second statement which Griffiths had made. Griffiths said after he had seen the smoke he heard one short blast from the klaxon. He had received training in fire fighting while in the *Queen Elizabeth*. Instructions about fire fighting were in the log book issued to fire patrolmen.

MANY CABINS LOCKED

J. W. BAXTER said that he had served in the *Empress of Canada* since 1948 as a patrolman, and he had been on patrol in port. At the time of the fire, between three and four o'clock, he had patrolled D deck and after four o'clock his duty had been at the gangway. When he heard of the fire he went at once to inform Mr. Smyth, the officer on duty, and to tell the engineer to start the pumps. He had not seen any sign of a fire when he had been on patrol on D deck and had seen nothing to arouse his suspicions. During his patrol he had looked into a number of cabins, but the majority had been locked and he had not visited those. The unlocked cabins were usually the ones in which workmen were engaged. During his patrol he paid particular attention to the after part of the ship because in that part there had been stores, the lock-up shop, equipment, the wine room and the tobacco issue room. His patrol required him to be concerned with the security of locked apartments as much as anything else.

Mr. HEWSON: You were conscious that you were a fire patrol as well?—Yes, but I was not employed as a fire patrol.

What were you supposed to be doing?—Fire and patrol. Baxter added that only part of his duty was that of fire patrol.

Mr. HEWSON: Was not one of your duties to do your best to keep down fires? If you saw smoking, for instance, in unauthorised places, were you required to do anything about it?—Yes.

Had you any instructions about that?—We were told smoking was not allowed in any part of the ship.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Was there no exception at all?—No exception.

Did you see any smoking during your patrols that day?—There were a few men smoking in the stewards' messroom. Baxter said it had not surprised him to see men smoking there because this was more or less a recognised place for smoking although there had never been any permission for men to smoke there.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Did you see any smoking anywhere else?—Not on that particular day.

What about other days before the day of the fire?—Oh, yes, I have seen men smoking, but not many.

Mr. Hewson asked where he had seen the men smoking and Baxter replied that he had seen them, perhaps, in alleyways or in a cabin. The men had been employed by contractors and there had been company's men as well. Asked what he had done when he saw them smoking he said that if it had been a member of the crew it was probably a genuine mistake the man had made. When he was spoken to he would admit that it was wrong.

Mr. HEWSON: What about the contractors' men?—We tell them in no uncertain manner to put their cigarettes out. They know that no smoking is allowed and they usually take notice of us. Baxter added that enforcing this regulation usually had the effect of driving the offence underground.

MEN REPORTED FOR SMOKING

Replying to the Wreck Commissioner Baxter said that he had reported men for smoking to the second steward or to the master-at-arms, but he had never taken the matter further.

Mr. HEWSON: Did anything result from your complaints?—Not as a rule.

Asked by Mr. Hewson what instructions he had concerning fires Baxter said that if he found a minor fire which he could deal with himself he was to do so, but if it was too big for that they had to inform the officer of the watch immediately, and that he would do by ship's telephone.

Mr. BEAN: If there were a fire would you regard yourself actually as a member of the fire-fighting party that would be formed?—No, but I would regard it as my duty to assist.

After you had reported to the officer on-duty would you not regard it as your duty to go to the fire rather than return to the gangway?—No, I would regard it as my duty to go and keep the gangway clear until the fire brigade arrived.

WILLIAM LOVELADY said he was employed by the Canadian Pacific Company as a fire and patrolman. He was patrolling the boat and promenade decks. He started his patrol about 4.5 p.m. and as he passed the engineers' quarters amidships on the boat deck he smelt smoke. He looked into the engineers' pantry and found nothing burning. The time was then about 4.8. In the engineers' mess lifebelts were stored and he had the idea that someone had been in there smoking, and had heard him coming and had thrown a cigarette behind the lifebelts. He had a good look for a burning cigarette but could find nothing. He then opened the elevator door and was almost suffocated by smoke coming up the elevator shaft from the engine-room.

Shortly after this he heard Baxter shouting and when he went down to B deck the lights had gone out. The smoke was very thick. A number of Harland & Wolff's men started to faint. He put his handkerchief over his mouth and went along B deck on the starboard side towards the gangway. There were some men following him and he was acting as their guide through the smoke and they had almost reached the service room on B deck when they had to turn back because of the flames. They retraced their steps.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Did you ever think of closing the fire door?—No. If I had attempted to close that door there would have been men behind me who would have been trapped.

Mr. HEWSON: They were the men you had told to put handkerchiefs round their mouth?—Yes. There were about four or five of them.

Could you not have let them go through the door and then closed it?—No. They did not know the ship and because of the smoke and the fact that there were no lights I had to leave them.

"AS IN A FOG"

Lovelady said that they had been walking as in a fog through the smoke and the darkness. He returned to the main staircase and went down to C deck where it was quite clear and the daylight was coming through the portholes. He guided the men to a shell hole in the ship's side and they went ashore across a plank.

He then returned and met some more men and they all collected fire extinguishers and tried to fight the fire, which was now spreading from

B deck down to C deck. Two Harland & Wolff men took an extinguisher to the port side and emptied it on the flames, but it got too hot for him to finish using his extinguisher on the starboard side and he had to drop his. They went back to the shell hole and shouted to the fire brigade to pass hoses through. This was done and they carried the hoses through to the scene of the fire. One of the Harland & Wolff men, named Robinson, and another man played a hose on the fire until the firemen came through with smoke helmets and took over the hoses.

C. J. HARBORNE said he was employed as a fireman and patrolman. On the day of the fire he was alternately patrolling D deck and doing gangway duty with Baxter. At 4 o'clock he was relieved at the gangway by Baxter and went down to D deck by way of the after companionway. He did not at that time smell any burning. On arriving at D deck he examined some Customs seals and found them to be correct. He went through the passenger accommodation on the port side and then went to his own room on D deck aft. While he was there washing his hands he heard someone shout "Fire!" He went to B deck and saw smoke billowing along the passage way. He told a man to break the alarm and he himself ran off the ship and along to the *Empress of France*.

Asked by the Wreck Commissioner if he knew that there was a direct alarm from the quay to the Bootle fire brigade, he said that he knew there was a fire alarm but did not know that it was direct.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Did it strike you to use that alarm?—I thought it was nearest to go to the *Empress of France*.

But the *Empress of France* would not have a direct communication to the fire brigade?—No. The *Empress of France* was connected up to the shore by telephone.

Was not the *Empress of Canada* so connected?—Either it was not working or it had not been put on. That was why I ran to the *Empress of France*. When I reached her I spoke to the man at the head of the gangway who caused the fire brigade to be called. Harborne said he returned to the *Empress of Canada* and arrived there just about the time that the fire brigade did so. He had no idea how the fire started.

Replying to Mr. Hewson he said he had had considerable experience as a fire and patrol man, having been employed in that capacity since 1941. He had worked in that job in the *Empress of Canada* for eight months prior to the fire.

NO WRITTEN INSTRUCTIONS

Replying to Mr. Bean, Harborne said that he had no written instructions about his duties as a fire patrol, and had not seen any written document outlining his duties. All his instructions had been given to him verbally, and he had received them many times, and had heard others told their instructions many times. He was not aware that any written instructions defining his duties were in force. He had not seen any printed standing orders in the log book of the master-at-arms for their duties when in port. If there were such instructions he had never seen them.

Replying to Mr. Naisby he said that his duties included paying special attention to locked property and to stopping smoking. He had never been told to try cabin doors to see if they

were locked or to close ports if he found them open. Asked if he had received instructions to report men if he found them smoking Harborne said: "I think it was left to us to deal with the men ourselves and not cause friction." Asked by the Wreck Commissioner if he had ever been told that Harborne said: "It doesn't take much to start a strike these days."

WRECK COMMISSIONER: You mean you had to be tactful?—Yes, that is the word.

Mr. NAISBY: One or more of the men from the ship have told us that they have had some difficulty in catching people smoking even though they knew it was going on. Do you know the counter-sign which was passed along when the patrolman was coming?—I have heard many of them ask how far it was from the gangway of the *Empress of Canada* to the *Empress of France*, and the reply was: "A very short distance."

Mr. HEWSON said that this concluded the control side of the evidence.

The hearing was adjourned until to-morrow.



© 2021

Lloyd's Register
Foundation