

"EMPRESS OF CANADA" INQUIRY

Marine Superintendent and Cause of Fire

"PATROLS WOULD HAVE DETECTED ANY SMOULDERING"

From Our Own Correspondent

LIVERPOOL, Thursday

The Liverpool marine superintendent for the owners of the *Empress of Canada* was questioned to-day in regard to fire precautions and the cause of the outbreak, at the Ministry of Transport Inquiry into the loss of the ship by fire. When asked whether he thought it possible for a fire to have been smouldering for some hours, and then to have burst into flames, he said the patrols would have been bound to have detected the smouldering. The 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, 15, 16 and 17.]

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-CONSCIOUS"

Questioning Captain A. S. PHILLIPS, marine superintendent of the Canadian Pacific Steamships Company, Ltd., in Liverpool, Mr. Bean said: You've used the phrase in evidence when speaking of the company, "We are so fire-conscious." Having regard to the condition of the *Empress of Canada* on that Sunday afternoon, do you still think that to be the case?

"Absolutely," witness replied.

Mr. Bean then said that while he appreciated the fact that it might have been some time since witness had read the Ministry of Transport Working Party's report on firefighting and the prevention of fire in ships in port, was he aware of the fact that there were five recommendations which the company did not observe? The first one, Mr. Bean said, was clock patrols.

Mr. NAISBY: Clock patrol is not a recommendation of the Working Party.

Mr. BEAN: Perhaps it is not a recommendation but it is mentioned in the report. Your explanation for not using clock patrols is that there were lots of people in the ship during the day and walking around the ship and you did not think it necessary.

Captain PHILLIPS said there were about 44, including the shore gang, in the ship as well as officers.

Mr. BEAN: Is not the main purpose of the clock patrol that a record is kept of the parts visited by the patrol?—It is a permanent record, it is true.

Captain PHILLIPS added in reply to further questions that there was no reason why it should not be operated in the ship during the day.

Mr. BEAN said that the second point dealt with the frequency of the patrols, which should have been every hour, but certainly in one respect it was one-and-a-half hours between the patrols. The third point was in connection with patrolmen's equipment. It had been stated in Court that since the fire the men had been furnished with personal alarms. He asked if the men had personal alarms at the time of the fire. Witness said they had them at one time during the war but there were complaints from the men about taking whistles, with which they had been issued, from their reliefs and it meant that every man had to be issued with a separate whistle.

Another point which the company had not observed, Mr. Bean said, was the replacement of extinguishers taken ashore for overhaul. It was recommended in the report that the extinguishers should be replaced.

Captain PHILLIPS replied that there were 25 per cent. only of the extinguishers ashore which meant that there was not one compartment left on board the ship completely devoid of fire extinguishers.

Mr. BEAN: But they should be replaced.

The fifth point was that when fire mains in the ship were out of use it was recommended that hoses should be connected to shore mains and led into the ship and laid at strategic points in various parts of the ship.

Captain PHILLIPS stated that it would be very difficult to get them down into the interior of the ship.

Mr. BEAN: I have mentioned five of the points in the report which were not being done on this day. Would you consider that you cannot improve on that?—Nothing is perfect.

Mr. BEAN: I don't think anyone would consider that the fire precautions on that day were perfect. What I am suggesting is that they were far from perfect.

In answer to the Wreck Commissioner, Captain PHILLIPS said that fire patrols had been increased since the fire in all the company's ships. A lot more notices had also been put up.

Mr. HEWSON: In answer to one question put by Mr. Naisby you said you were not in favour of the suggestion that a cigarette started this fire?—It is very seldom I have seen a cigarette go through an open port when a ship is stationary and with no wind. At sea, yes, a cigarette could be drawn in through the open port.

It is not that you discourage the theory of the fire starting by a cigarette. You say it could not have started that way?—What I really tried to say was that I could not imagine that it started from a cigarette and got that hold before being detected by the people who were on board.

Is it your opinion that if there had been an efficient patrol and this fire had started from a cigarette it would have been discovered before it was?—I don't think the number of the patrol would have made any difference.

Do you think it is possible that a cigarette or electric wire started smouldering, which went on for some hours, say two or three hours, then suddenly burst into flames?—I cannot imagine it because they would have been bound to have detected it.

CLOCK PATROL TIMES

W. J. BURGESS, a clerk in the investigation department of the company, described the system of clock patrols which was in operation at night for fire patrols in the *Empress of Canada* but which was not in operation in the day time. He said the management had decided after 1951 not to use clock patrols during the day except in special circumstances. A clock patrol had been used in the *Empress of Scotland* during the day because they had reason to suspect that they would have trouble with the ship during overhaul. On patrol at night a man carrying a clock should complete his visit to all the 28 clock points in the ship in 50 minutes and return to the gangway. The patrol would take a man to every part of the ship. In the meantime six other men were each patrolling their decks.

Mr. HEWSON suggested it would be rather a scamper for a man to get round in 50 minutes. Witness replied that if a man scampered he could get round possibly in 20 minutes. On one occasion he had examined a clock disc and found that a man had gone round in 35 minutes and he was told to take longer. He considered that 50 minutes allowed a man time to patrol round and go down at least 20 side or cross alleyways.

Regarding smoking, Mr. Burgess said that all the men were continually being given orders not to smoke. When the *Empress of Canada* came in after her last voyage special orders were given that no one, whatever their business on board the ship, should be allowed to smoke.

Asked by Mr. Hewson if he had ever received reports from Mr. Jennings, master-at-arms, or any of the patrolmen about smoking, witness replied that he had heard that people had been seen smoking but that the patrolmen had not been able to get hold of them. He said that he knew that smoking was going on. He had had only two reports at the outside upon this question. When it was known that people had been smoking but had not been caught the matter was taken no further.

Mr. HEWSON then asked if witness had received similar reports before and added, I see you shake your head with an indication of disgust. Is that your feeling?—It is.

Mr. BURGESS added that the smoking position had improved since the war and even since 1948. He said that there was a company notice on the gangway prohibiting smoking.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Were there any such notices put throughout the ship?—I cannot say.

Are there any put up now?—Yes, the marine department puts them up.

In reply to questions by Mr. Hewson witness said that the patrols were not given written instructions in port as to how they were to carry out their patrols. It was expected that port-als would be kept closed and that if a man going round found one open he would close it, but there had been no specific instructions on what men were to do if they found open portholes.

Mr. BEAN: At what level are such decisions made as, for example, that there should be six fire patrols on duty during the day?—The management.

That is rather an embracing statement.

The Wreck Commissioner intervened to say that he thought the witness could not give evidence as to who of the management had made that decision.

SIZE OF PATROLS

Mr. BEAN: You said it was impossible to visit each cabin on each round. Surely you mean that it is impossible if you only have six men? Do you not agree that it would be possible if you had more men? Are you aware that with a boat of equivalent size the Cunard have 90 men working in three shifts of 30?—They have now.

If that number of men are available every part of the ship can be looked to during every round?—Yes.

So it is not impossible. It is only a question of the number of men allocated to the job?—Yes.

You say 50 minutes was a fair figure for a patrolman to do his round of the ship?—Yes.

Why would it take an hour for a patrol man to do one deck?—It would take him an hour to do a round of his particular deck if he were to make the intermittent visits to cabins and alleyways during his round.

Even if it only takes a man 50 minutes to do 28 points all over the ship?—Correct.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Were the fire patrols given any course of fire training?—No.

Is that done now?—No.

Mr. BEAN: I appreciate that you are not responsible for policy so I will not pursue that question.

Asked where fire patrols came from **Mr. BURGESS** replied that most of them came to the company from the seamen's pool. For some reason or other they did not want to go back to sea and took on fire patrol work.

Mr. HEWSON: Don't you think that a patrol should be told to visit all cabins?—Not with the men available.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Is that done now?—They are told to do so now.

Mr. BURGESS agreed in reply to **Mr. Hewson** that an examination of each locked cabin on each patrol would result in a greater chance of detecting fire at its early stages than if a patrolman picked out a side alleyway willy-nilly on his round.

Asked by the Wreck Commissioner if he had any opinions as to whether a patrol should consist of two men instead of one, he replied that this arrangement might be a hindrance because the men might get engrossed in conversation together.

JOSEPH OLSEN said he was in charge of 18 shore gang workmen washing paintwork on the day of the fire. He and other men smelt the smoke but could not find the fire. When they were in one of the alleyways some men called to them and said that the fire was further along and they went towards the dispensary on B deck and saw smoke billowing along the starboard alleyway. He saw the master-at-arms using a fire extinguisher there. He went back to his men and told them to stand by at the gangway.

H. W. KNIGHT, a chargehand employed by the Canadian Pacific Company, said he was in charge of eight men who were on the captain's bridge washing paintwork. Somebody called to him at about 3 55 p.m. to tell the officer of the watch that there was a

fire on B deck. When in the officers' quarters he heard a bell ringing which he thought was a fire alarm. When the officer (**Mr. Smythe**) left him he returned to the bridge and ordered the men to go aft in case they could be of assistance. He went with them round the starboard side of the boat deck and at that time saw smoke coming from a door on the fore part of the boat deck.

FLAMES FROM VENTILATORS

He went as far as the mainmast on the promenade deck, where he saw flames coming from the two ventilators near the contractors' house. At that time the hosepipe was being used to fill fresh water tanks and they put it down one of the ventilators and let it run for a short time before putting it down the other ventilator. Two police officers then came and told them to leave the ship.

In answer to the Wreck Commissioner witness said that if there was an extractor it might be drawing the flame along from the site of the fire.

J. D. S. SMYTHE said that at the time of the fire he was port relieving officer. He had been in Canadian Pacific ships since 1950. He came on duty at 10 a.m. and took over as officer of the watch. He was told by the engineers that the pumps were stopped for some small repair in the engine-room, but that they could have water at a few seconds' notice. He was satisfied with that position and went to inform the chief officer. He never remembered being in similar circumstances before in a ship in port where the pumps had been stopped and where he was told he could have water at a few seconds' notice.

He was in his cabin when he first heard of the fire. The ship's patrolman, **Baxter**, told him the ship was on fire by the dispensary at about 4 15. He sent the man along to tell the engineers to start the fire pumps immediately and then go and call the fire brigade. He then went up to the wheelhouse and turned on the klaxon to give the general warning. All he heard was a light noise or grunt from the klaxon and then nothing more. He turned the rotary switch several times but without result. He could not account for the fact that the klaxon did not work. He could not remember at any time in the wheelhouse hearing a fire alarm bell ringing.

In reply to the Wreck Commissioner witness said that his light had not failed in his quarters that afternoon. After trying the klaxon he came straight down to the scene of the fire and met the last witness, who told him the fire was in the vicinity of the dispensary but that he should not try to go down to it inside the ship because of the smoke. He made his way down to B deck and remembered seeing the boatswain's mate connecting up a smoke helmet.

"I had practically to fight my way through Harland's workmen," he said. "I ordered them off the ship to keep the decks clear for the fire brigade." He then ordered the fire doors to be closed at the after end of B deck. They led directly into the passenger accommodation. Both the port starboard doors were closed in a few moments. Later he saw flames that had come from the top of the door near the children's playroom.

He said that shortly after the fire doors were closed the fire brigade arrived and he made his way with one of the brigade officers to the forward end of the ship. He had to go aft and up to A deck to get forward and they came down in the region of No. 4 hatch, where he met the boatswain. They went aft on the port side down the working alleyway to close as many fire doors as possible. The smoke was very heavy. When they left the printers' shop the lights were out and did not come on again. He saw a glow in the vicinity of the service pantry. They could not quite close the fire door because of the air pipes that went through and they had nothing with which to cut them. They went forward and closed the next fire door forward from the printers' shop.

The hearing was adjourned until to-morrow.

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