

"EMPRESS OF CANADA" INQUIRY

Questions on Ship's Stopped Pumps

THE TIME AND PRESSURE FACTORS

From Our Own Correspondent

LIVERPOOL, Friday

The officer of the watch and the assistant chief engineer of the *Empress of Canada* gave evidence to-day at the Ministry of Transport Inquiry into the loss of the ship by fire. Both officers were questioned as to the time required to get the pressure of water in the ship's pumps essential for fighting fire. 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, 17 and 18.]

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.

WATCH OFFICER'S EVIDENCE

Mr. J. D. S. SMYTHE, who was officer of the watch at the time of the fire, continuing his evidence to-day, said that after he had climbed down a rope hanging over the ship's side to get ashore he met Mr. R. K. Barlow, assistant chief of Bootle fire brigade, who asked him for details of the stability of the ship. He could not give them so he went back on board to try to get them. He tried to get forward but the smoke was too heavy. Shortly afterwards he went ashore but later found his way back on board the ship with some of the fire brigade. He took the firemen down the port side alleyway on B deck but they found that they could not get very far because they had no breathing apparatus. It was at that time that he saw a glow from the service pantry. He went ashore again for a breath of fresh air.

He went back on board and assisted in bringing the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board salvage vessel *Salvor* alongside the ship. At 6 p.m. he went back on board again to try to get the double-bottom tank logbook so that the firefighters could have details of the stability of the ship. He took two firemen with him to the officers' quarters and they opened the locked portside cabin doors with an axe. The smoke in the cabins was thick so they went to the starboard side and he put a handkerchief around his mouth and nose and crawled on his hands and knees into the chief officer's cabin. There he found some books and among them a document giving the details of the stability of the ship.

Replying to the Wreck Commissioner, Mr. Smythe said there were no arrangements in force for organising fire parties.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Fire is a thing that can occur in a ship at any time. I want to know whether the officer in charge had made any preparation for that. You had a boatswain and an assistant boatswain on board. Were any orders given to them as to what was to be done in the event of fire?—So far as I know they did not have any instructions.

Mr. Smythe added that he would expect these men to go to their respective stations and collect the fire gear until he, or another officer, arrived there to give further orders. Asked by the Wreck Commissioner what the position was so far as he knew it with regard to the water supply for fire fighting he said that the pumps were stopped.

CAPACITY OF PUMPS

WRECK COMMISSIONER: What did you know about the water supply?—The pumps on these ships have a big capacity. I think they will deliver several hundred tons an hour and a pump at full capacity would not be long in giving the full force.

Was there any alternative water supply to your knowledge?—No.

What about connecting up to the shore?—I know it can be done but I don't think they will get sufficient force of water to reach an upper deck.

Did you consider the matter of getting water from ashore?—I thought the ship's pumps would give better service than the shore supply.

Asked about an answer he had given the previous day that it would only take a few seconds to start the pumps and get the water supply and whether this included the time taken to get the message to the engineer to start the pumps witness said that he did not think it would take more than two minutes for a man to go down to the engine-room to give the message. He could have done it himself in that time.

Mr. J. C. DANIEL, assistant chief engineer, said that on the day of the fire the chief engineer, two superintendents and two senior second engineers were on board in addition to himself. There were two engineers on watch. There were seven pumps in the ship that could supply water to the fire mains. These included general service, sanitary and bilge pumps on the port side and on the starboard side one emergency bilge pump. The pumps all had a capacity of 240 tons an hour or 900 gallons a minute. The starboard side pumps and the emergency bilge pump were available that morning for pumping through the fire mains. The port side were undergoing overhaul. None of the pumps was pumping that morning, but within three minutes, at the most, of getting orders to start the fire pumps they could get the necessary pressure. At 900 gallons a minute it did not take long to get up pressure in a three-and-a-half-inch pipe line.

WRECK COMMISSIONER: Do you think that it is desirable to have three minutes' delay in getting water to the fire?—I don't think three minutes would make much difference in the present case. It looks as if 30 minutes had been lost before there was any word of the fire.

Witness said that it would take about 10 minutes after the fire had been discovered and it had been found that there was no water in the hydrants for word to be sent to the engine-room and for water to be pumped through.

On the day of the fire he left ship at about 12.30. He was recalled after the fire had broken out and when he arrived back at the ship at about 6.45 p.m. she had a 15 deg. list. Most of the senior engineers were told of the fire and they stood by. About 10 p.m. the chief engineer told them that their services would not be wanted. He did not notice any trouble with the lights going out during the day and felt sure that they did not go out.

Replying to questions by Mr. Bean, witness said that it was expected that the pumps would be off for about two days in all. No special watch was placed in the engine-room for that period.

Mr. BEAN: You said quite frankly that there might be a delay of anywhere between three and eight minutes. That delay would be like an eternity at the other end would it not?—I suppose so.

Were there any standing orders for any special arrangements if the pump was not in use?—Only that if the pump was out of commission it would be normal routine to fix up the shore mains, but in this case the pump was ready for instant use and any loss of time would only be due to the time taken to get the signal to start the pumps.

Replying to Mr. Naisby witness said that he had been to sea for 30 years as an engineer.

Mr. W. A. JOUGHIN, third engineer, said he was in his own room when he was first informed of the fire. At about 4.10 he heard a man shouting in the engineers' alleyway that there was a fire. He came out of his room and saw smoke coming up the engineers' port alleyway. There was smoke low down on the deck.

HYDRANT TESTED

Asked about the ship's lights going off during the fire witness said that the generator had been stopped because there was danger of fire spreading and burning through live wires in the ship. There was also the danger of electric shocks if water got into the wires. The smoke was getting too thick to look after the generator. He said that the lights had dipped once or twice during the morning and he thought that was because when the winches had been started they put an extra load on the generator. He went to stand by the emergency generator on B deck aft. As he was going to switch off the generator a man said there was no water in the hydrants and witness tried one and water gushed out.

Mr. Hewson: You never said anything about trying a hydrant when you made your statement after the fire?—No.

Are you quite sure you did try the hydrant?—Yes.

Replying to further questions by Mr. Hewson witness said he had seen people smoking in the engine-room and the boiler room at sea against instructions, but in port he never saw ship's people smoking in either of those places.

Mr. Hewson: Did you ever try to stop it?—No.

Did anyone else try?—I don't know.

Witness added that if a superintendent went into the engine-room the word was at once passed around by the workmen to stop smoking. He said he had seen Harland & Wolff workmen smoking in the engine-room and this did not surprise him. He knew they were always careful with their cigarettes, and if there had been any possibility of danger he would have stopped them himself.

Mr. Hewson: You never thought there was any possibility of danger?—No.

Did you think it a bit hard that they could smoke when you did not?—I could always go to my own cabin and have a smoke and a cup of coffee.

Asked by the Wreck Commissioner if he had ever taken part in a fire drill on board ship, witness replied that he had done so in other ships but not in the *Empress of Canada*. He said he had never heard the alarm bell ring in the engine-room.

The hearing was adjourned until to-morrow.



© 2021

Lloyd's Register
Foundation