

"EMPRESS OF CANADA" INQUIRY

M.O.T. Surveyors' Evidence

FIRE REGULATIONS COMPLIED



From Our Own Correspondent

LIVERPOOL, Thursday

At to-day's hearing of the Ministry of Transport Inquiry into the loss by fire of the *Empress of Canada*, Mr. Gilbert Kelly, a senior surveyor of the Ministry of Transport, said that better results would have been obtained in the early stages if certain doors had been closed as that would have delayed the spread of the fire and enabled the fire brigade to reach the seat of the fire. The ship, he said, complied with the fire regulations applicable to her equipment. The fire occurred on Jan. 25, 1953, 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, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, Jan. 6 and 7.]

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.

EXTRA WEIGHT OF WATER

Mr. R. M. BUCHANAN, a senior ship surveyor, Ministry of Transport, gave evidence of calculations concerning the stability of the vessel in relation to the volume of water pumped into the ship. He said that while the firemen were fighting the fire the water going into the vessel was not evaporating but adding to the weight in the ship and increasing the ship's draught. He calculated that when the vessel turned over 900 tons of extra weight had been added to the vessel, bearing in mind that a lot of material had been burned away inside. He believed that most of the water found its way down to D deck although probably some 100 tons went further below.

Mr. GILBERT KELLY, a senior engineer and ship surveyor, Ministry of Transport, dealt with the question of fire precautions. He said that 25 per cent. of the fire extinguishers had been taken off the vessel for testing at the time of the fire. The total number of extinguishers in the ship when all were in position was 134. Allowing for the extinguishers which had been taken away the regulations were still being complied with so far as the total was concerned. However, the regulations required two extinguishers to be in each compartment on each deck and he did not know which extinguishers had been removed.

Mr. Kelly said the loss of the ship was attributable to the fact that the fire had not been discovered near enough to its inception and, in his opinion, better results would have been attained in the early stages if certain doors had been closed as that would have prevented the spread of the fire for a sufficient time to enable the fire brigade to arrive and reach the seat of the fire.

Asked which doors he referred to, he said there were three doors on B deck, one in the vicinity of cabin B37, one near the dispensary and one in the cross alleyway leading to the pantry. He suggested that if those three doors had been closed in the early stages it would have temporarily restricted the fire to the cabins B37 to B5.

THE FIRST SMOKE

Mr. Kelly said the *Empress of Canada* complied with the fire regulations applicable to her at the time. In his opinion, the evidence of the man Hill that he saw smoke at 3.25 was substantially accurate. When the fire was effectively discovered it appeared to have been seen simultaneously by two men in the region of cabins B37 and 39 and two other men on the after side of the dispensary. That showed the extent of the fire was between these two points, covering some 10 cabins at the time for effective discovery. The fire extended from forward of B37 and the after end of B53 and also partly athwartships. "It seems therefore," Mr. Kelly said, "to have been either a very sudden vigorous conflagration or a relatively slow burning long standing fire. To have reached the size it did, in my opinion, took some time and if effective patrols had been maintained I suggest it could and should have been discovered earlier."

Asked his opinion on the extent of fire patrols Mr. Kelly said that one and a half hours to cover A and B decks was too long. He recommended half-hourly patrols. If a point was only visited once in 90 minutes it was possible for a fire to start immediately after the patrol had passed and to reach major proportions before the patrol was again in the vicinity. A reasonable frequency of patrol was half-hourly and this was supported by the action of one major shipping company which maintained half-hourly patrols.

Asked about the efficiency of patrols, Mr. Kelly said a patrol must visit every patrolable place, by which he meant not only main alleyways but all side alleyways and rooms or other places that could be entered. If rooms were locked patrols should have a master key so that a place could be entered if there was any suspicion of fire.

There were several possible causes of the fire. He considered an electrical fault unlikely as a cause because all the equipment was in a good state. He regarded sabotage as most possible with so many men going on and off the ship and so many causes of discontent in these days, but there was no evidence either for or against that. Smoking was an ever-present danger. In view of the type of fire and its progress, smoking, in his opinion, seemed to be a quite possible cause, although that was only supposition. He discounted the suggestion that pillows or bedding against an electric light might be a cause. The lights in the ship were of low wattage (40 watts) vacuum type and gave relatively low heating and were well guarded by

plastic shades. During his investigations he had inspected the log book, and the frequency of fire drill carried out on board complied with the regulations.

In reply to Mr. Naisby, witness said that in expressing his opinion about the fire he was using his commonsense plus his training as an engineer which included a study of combustion, but he agreed he had not been to the vessel after the fire.

Mr. Kelly said he had seriously considered the question of patrolmen being provided with master keys and thought that men of good integrity would be required. He did not think it was going a bit too far to give patrolmen keys to locked spaces but he agreed that they could not be given keys to rooms which contained bullion. There could be no objection to giving patrolmen keys to cabins which only contained bedding. He had also considered the human element and the possibility of a patrolman being tempted to enter a locked room for the purpose of having a smoke, but he added, "If a patrolman is going to smoke he is not suitable for the job." He had suggested smoking as the most probable cause of the fire but there was no evidence that that was, in fact, the cause. He had reached that conclusion in March, and

Dr. Firth, who had very great experience of fires, had since reached a similar conclusion.

This concluded the evidence called by the Ministry of Transport.

MARINE SUPERINTENDENT'S EVIDENCE

Captain R. V. BURNS, chief superintendent of Canadian Pacific Steamships, Ltd., in England, called by Mr. Naisby, produced correspondence emanating from the management of the company, which dealt with recommendations of the Working Party Report on Fire Precautions and Fire Fighting in ships in port.

He said that at the time of the fire he was marine superintendent in London and only responsible for the company's "Beaver" ships. However, he had heard that shortly after the Working Party's report, the strength of fire patrols in his company's passenger ships was increased up to the strength which existed at the time of the fire. So far as the ships under his control at the time were concerned the masters knew of the Working Party's report.

The hearing was adjourned until to-morrow.

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