

W. J. Lyons

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## LOSS OF "WILLODALE"

### Caused by Combination of Circumstances

#### COURT OF INQUIRY FINDINGS

The findings of the Court of Inquiry into the loss of the British steamer *Willodale* were delivered at the Royal Courts of Justice in London yesterday by Mr. J. V. Naisby, K.C., Wreck Commissioner, who stated: "In this inquiry my assessors and myself have been unable to come to a unanimous conclusion."

The *Willodale*, a vessel of 1777 tons gross, sank in the Bay of Biscay on the morning of Apr. 4, 1947, with a loss of 12 lives (including the master, Captain Hill, of Swansea, the chief officer and chief engineer) on a voyage from Bordeaux to Cardiff with pitwood.

The Commissioner read a report signed by himself and Mr. H. A. Lyndsay, an assessor, while a separate report, signed by the two nautical assessors, Captain J. P. Thomson and Commander D. V. Setton, was read by the former.

The report signed by the Commissioner and Mr. Lyndsay stated: "The Court, having inquired into the circumstances, finds for the reasons stated that the loss of the *Willodale* and those on board was caused by a combination of circumstances: (1) An insufficient margin of stability; (2) bad weather; (3) the tearing of the tarpaulins by the deck cargo, either when it shifted or when the lashings were cut away in order that the cargo could be jettisoned, and the admission of water to the cargo space forward or amidships; (4) an error of judgment on the part of the master in failing to appreciate the unstable condition of the vessel."

Captain Thomson and Commander Setton, in their report, stated: "We concur in the above report, except that in our opinion a further contributing factor was the failure properly to secure the deck cargo."

The previous proceedings were reported in *LOYD'S LIST* of Sept. 21, 22, 23, 24 and 25.

#### EQUIPMENT SATISFACTORY

The Commissioner then read the Court's answers to the questions submitted by the Ministry of Transport. In reply to these the Court found that all the equipment of the vessel was satisfactory, and that she was equipped with lifesaving appliances in accordance with the regulations. The vessel was carrying a cargo of about 2175 tons of pitwood when she was lost. Some of the cargo was carried on deck.

In answering the question: "What was the cause of the loss of the *Willodale*?" the Court reiterated its earlier findings, with this addition: "There was an error of judgment on the part of the master in continuing the voyage after he had indications provided by the changing of list on Apr. 2. The nautical assessors are also of the opinion that failure properly to secure the deck cargo was also a contributing factor."

Another vital question was: "Whether the loss was caused, or contributed to by the wrongful act or default of the ship's owners, master or officers?" The Court's reply was: "No, but the master was guilty of an error of judgment in continuing the voyage after the vessel had twice changed her list appreciably, without any apparent reason. The nautical assessors are also of the opinion that the master was at fault in failing properly to secure the deck cargo."

The findings added: "The Court has given careful and anxious consideration as to whether the method adopted to secure the deck cargo was in accordance with the regulations, but cannot agree on the answer to the question. We agree that we cannot feel it would be proper for us to blame the master or the officers for the method adopted in this case. It was not the best possible method, but we cannot find it was negligent, or in breach of the regulations."

An annex to the report, signed by the Commissioner and Mr. H. A. Lyndsay, stated that at the time of her loss the *Willodale* was on a summer voyage, and the draught corresponding to the summer loadline was 17 ft. 10 in. The vessel carried statutory life-saving appliances and had lifeboats capable of carrying more than the whole of the crew of the vessel. The vessel carried sufficient life jackets for her crew, and the ship was equipped with wireless telegraphy. After a ballast voyage from Newport (Mon.) the vessel loaded with a cargo of pitwood at Bordeaux at the end of March and the beginning of April, 1947, and sailed from Bordeaux about 5 p.m. on Apr. 2. The cargo was stowed in the holds and on the deck. The total quantity was about 2175 English tons, of which nearly 600 tons was carried on the deck. The vessel loaded in an enclosed dock at Bordeaux, and it seemed probable that at the later stages of her loading the vessel was not holding water.

The best evidence of her draught was that of the harbour master, who said it was 18 ft. forward and 18 ft. 3 in. aft, giving a mean fresh water draught of 18 ft. 1 1/2 in., corresponding to a salt water draught of 17 ft. 8 in. The vessel started with a list to port variously estimated at from three to 10 degrees, but the Court felt that it was nearer the lower, rather than the higher, figure. After leaving Bordeaux the vessel proceeded down the river in charge of a pilot, and anchored for the night. On Apr. 3 the vessel proceeded in charge of a sea pilot, who was dropped at a buoy in the mouth of the river about 5 20 p.m.

During the passage down the river on Apr. 2 the port list changed to a starboard list. The master sent for the second engineer and inquired if any pumping of tanks had taken place. No such pumping had occurred. When the sea pilot was dropped the wind was a fresh, westerly breeze, there was some swell, and visibility was good. Wind and sea, however, increased, and the list to starboard increased rapidly. The list appeared to have continued to increase, and about 8 45 p.m. the cargo on No. 2 hatch shifted a little to starboard, thereby still further increasing the list. In an endeavour to reduce it, some cargo was jettisoned by hand. The list still increased and, as the position became alarming, the lashings on No. 2 hatch were cut and most of that deck cargo went overboard. The immediate consequence was a temporary decrease in the starboard list.

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#### HATCH COVERS DISPLACED

Either when the deck cargo shifted or when it was jettisoned the tarpaulins on that hatch were torn and the hatch covers displaced. To minimise the entry of water, pumping of the No. 2 bilge was ordered, but it was not effective, and the master decided to alter course and bring the weather astern. At 9 49 an S O S was dispatched and a French pilot cutter went to the assistance of the vessel. Later, difficulty was experienced in steering; seas were washing over the deck and the cargo on the after deck was moving. The wind increased and the master decided to heave-to and await the assistance. During this period, probably due to the difficulty in stoking, boiler pressure dropped. Rockets were sent up about the time the arrival of the pilot cutter was expected. At some undefined time the remaining deck cargo was released or washed overboard. About 4 30 a.m. on Apr. 4 the pilot cutter arrived and repeated attempts were made to get the vessel on an easterly course. About 5 15 a.m. water began to enter the stokehold through watertight doors, which gave way. Order was given to stop engines and abandon ship. Some difficulty was experienced in preparing the starboard lifeboat for lowering owing to the list of the ship, and it was carried overboard by the heavy seas. Before anything further could be done, the vessel sank by the head. Lifejackets had been issued prior to the order to abandon ship, and, as a result of the casualty, 12 lives were lost, including those of the master, the chief officer and the chief engineer. Survivors were rescued by the French pilot boat under difficult conditions and in the best traditions of the sea.

#### STABILITY TESTS

The annex gave details of ownership and management since 1929 and went on to state that the results of stability tests in 1944 were passed on to the master. The tests did not deal with the effect of deck cargo. No permanent guidance was issued to the master. The information available to the supervisors was insufficient to enable sufficiently reliable calculations to be made, but they were making calculations as to stability based on a voyage from Hamburg to London in December, 1946.

"The Court is satisfied," stated the annex, "that with the deck cargo with which the vessel was in fact loaded there was an insufficient margin of stability to meet the perils reasonably to be anticipated on the voyage. The opinion we have formed as to the stability of the vessel is, in our view, confirmed by the changes of list, and it would appear that the master himself was suspicious as to her stability on the afternoon of Apr. 3. It seems to the Court that the changes of list on Apr. 2 should have given an indication of her dangerous condition."

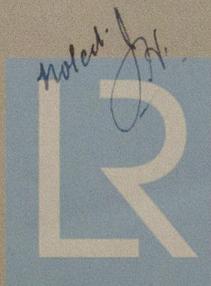
The annex added: "In our opinion it would have been better if the master had been provided with information upon which to base a reliable estimate of the stability of the vessel when loaded with a deck cargo, or upon which to estimate the height of deck cargo he could carry with a reasonable amount of safety, but after consideration we feel that, helpful as the provision of such information would have been, we are unable to say that the failure on the part of the owners to provide this information was, in the circumstances, blameworthy. Having regard to the doubt as to what information as to stability was supplied to the master, the Court feels that it would be unfair to blame him for the initial lack thereon."

Two assessors, of nautical experience, felt that the cargo was insufficiently secured, but the Court felt it would not be proper to condemn the master or officers of the vessel for the method of securing the cover, and could not find there was negligence or any breach of the regulation.

The evidence had established that no lifeboat drill had recently been carried out on board the *Willodate* and while there was no suggestion that the failure to carry it out was responsible for any loss of life, the Court felt that the importance of that statutory requirement could not be too strongly impressed upon owners, managers and masters.

The report of Captain J. P. Thomson and Commander D. V. Setton was read

by the former, as follows: "We concur with the above report, with the exception of paragraph 7. In our opinion, the deck cargo was not properly secured, inasmuch as only four lots of wire were provided on each side of the forward and after decks. The attachment of these wires to the bulwark stays must have been approximately 20 ft. apart. The lengths of the pitwood were 4½ ft., 6½ ft. and 9 ft. Even if the 9-ft. lengths were selected for the outer piers, the wire could not have adequately secured the cargo. Efficient means for securing the uprights were not adopted."



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