

LOSS OF "WILLODALE"

M.O.T. Inquiry Opened

SHIFTING OF DECK CARGO

A Ministry of Transport Court of Inquiry into the loss of the British steamer *Willodale*, in the Bay of Biscay on Apr. 4, 1947, was opened yesterday at the Royal Courts of Justice, Strand, London. The inquiry is being conducted by Mr. John Naisby, K.C., as Wreck Commissioner, assisted by three assessors, Mr. H. A. Lyndsay, Captain J. P. Thomson and Commander D. V. Setton. The vessel, which was owned by the Bromage Shipping Company, Ltd., Cardiff, was on a voyage from Bordeaux to Cardiff with pitprops, including a deck cargo, and in bad weather developed a list. Six of her crew were killed by an avalanche of pitprops, and six others, including the master, were not found, there being 10 survivors. Counsel for the Ministry of Transport suggested that there were three points for consideration, the weather, the vessel's stability and reasons for failure of boiler pressure.

Mr. Peter Bucknill represented the Ministry of Transport, and Mr. David Meurig Evans appeared for the Bromage Shipping Company, Ltd. The dependants of the master and chief officer were represented by Mr. P. F. Broadhead (instructed by the Mercantile Marine Service Association and the Navigators and Engineer Officers' Union). Mr. Neil Maclean (instructed by the National Union of Seamen) appeared for the dependants of the deceased members of the crew.

In his opening statement for the Ministry of Transport, Mr. BUCKNILL said the *Willodale* had a cargo of pit-wood. There was some evidence that the cargo might have been 2175 English tons. The ship was bound for Cardiff, and there was no evidence of overloading. After leaving Bordeaux the pilot was dropped at 5.30 p.m. on Apr. 3, and the vessel then had a list to starboard; she previously had had a list to port. After the pilot had been dropped, the weather worsened, and some time in the evening the deck cargo by No. 2 hatch shifted to starboard. A little time after 9 o'clock, the lashings were cut to release the cargo by this hold, and a little later the deck cargo was swept overboard by the sea. When this deck cargo went overboard certain damage was done to No. 2 hatch. The tarpaulins were torn, and there was evidence that the hatch covers were broken. One witness would speak of a hole six inches by one foot being made.

VESSEL'S DISTRESS CALLS

As the deck cargo went overboard, Counsel continued, it took away the starboard bulwarks, and the pumps were ordered to start working and put on No. 2 hold. This provided evidence that water was in No. 2 hold, and at 9.45 or 9.53 p.m. an S O S message was sent out. This message asked for immediate assistance and reported that the bulwarks had been carried away and that the vessel had a serious list. The list, which had improved a little after the deck cargo went over, began to increase again. At 10.6 p.m. a message from the *Willodale* to a French pilot boat was picked up at Land's End. At 10.9 Land's End sent a message to the *Willodale*: "Pilot boat coming to your assistance."

A message from the *Willodale* at 10.39 stated: "Pilot boat expects to arrive at position in 2½ hours." More cargo was jettisoned, and there would be evidence that the deck cargo in way

of Nos. 1, 3 and 4 holds went overboard. After mentioning further messages from the *Willodale*, Mr. Bucknill said she fired distress rockets at 4.30 a.m. on Apr. 4. At 5.10 a.m. the watertight doors in the bulkhead between No. 2 hold and the stokehold gave way and the list became very serious. At 5.11 a.m. the order "abandon ship" was given and there was no time to swing out the starboard lifeboat. "The sea swept the boat out," Counsel said. "Some of the crew jumped in the boat and some were swept over by the sea. The ship went down by her head with the stern out of the water, still listing to starboard. Ten men were picked up in the water by the French pilot boat. There is evidence that six men already dead were also picked up." Mr. Bucknill also referred to the reduction of the ship's boiler pressure on which evidence would be called.

After stating that a considerable amount of money was spent in repairs and keeping the vessel in condition, Mr. Bucknill suggested that the Court would have to consider the following points: (1) If the weather was exceptional: On this issue there would be evidence of a conversation between the master and the pilot as to the wisdom of sailing having regard to the conditions. (2) The question of the vessel's stability. This would involve the question of the list and the height of the deck cargo. (3) The reasons for the failure of the ship's boiler pressure. This might be a major point.

Captain FREDERICK RIDLEY, a Ministry of Transport official at Newcastle, gave evidence of a survey of the vessel in July, 1946. He said he was satisfied that the number of life-jackets in the vessel was in order. When he saw the vessel all defects had been remedied.

Mr. SIDNEY TURNER BRYDEN, a principal ship's surveyor, Lloyd's Register of Shipping, said the vessel's free-board certificate was issued in 1941 and extended in 1946 and 1947.

NONIKOS CAPETANIS, boatswain and acting second officer of the *Willodale*, described the disposition of the deck cargo, and said the holds had been battened down under the supervision of the chief officer. He thought this was the third or fourth occasion on which he had sailed in the *Willodale* from Bordeaux with a similar cargo.

Mr. BUCKNILL: What did you think about the loading this time? Was it good or bad?—It was the same as before. When she left Bordeaux the vessel was listing to port between 5 to 7 deg.

CAPETANIS said the chief officer told him that No. 1 and No. 2 tanks were full. The vessel was manned by a crew of 22. He added that after the pilot had been dropped the westerly wind started to increase. The master was on the bridge and stayed there. During the evening the deck cargo at No. 2 hold started to shift to the starboard side. When the weather came up, the vessel's list increased.

The COMMISSIONER: Did you notice if the list increased before the shifting of the deck cargo?—No. I think we have to before the cargo shifted.

WITNESS added that after this the list was very bad. He also described how some of the cargo was carried away by the heavy seas. The hatch covers on No. 2 hold started to come off and the master gave orders to start pumping.

UNABLE TO TURN ROUND

Asked if the master decided to continue the voyage to Cardiff, Capetanis replied, "No." He turned the ship round and tried to make La Pallice. The vessel was better for a while after the cargo went over the side, but later the list became worse. Witness was relieved of his watch at midnight. The ship was then heading to the west and the sea was very high. The French pilot boat which came to their aid was to try to escort them to La Pallice. They tried to alter course, but the vessel turned to the north and would not go further.

"A message from the engine-room reported that the ship was flooding. I was sent with a message from the master to the wireless operator to abandon ship. The list by this time was very bad."

Witness was closely questioned as to why it was not possible to get the lifeboat out. He replied that the ship was still listing very badly and it was impossible to do so.

He added: "I jumped over the side with the wireless officer. He could not swim at all. I tried to push him clear of the ship and gave him two pitprops to hold on to and then pushed him clear. I had been in the water about five minutes when the ship went down. I was in the water two hours before I was picked up by the pilot boat, which had also picked up six bodies.

COUNSEL: In your opinion what caused the vessel to sink?—The bad weather.

Do you think it could have been avoided?—I don't quite understand.

Do you think anything could have been done to save her?—We did all we could and tried to make for La Pallice.

The hearing was adjourned until to-day.



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