

"WILLODALE" INQUIRY**Condition of Life-Saving
Equipment****SURVIVORS QUESTIONED**

Members of the crew continued their evidence when the Ministry of Transport Court of Inquiry into the foundering of the British steamer *Willodale* in the Bay of Biscay on Apr. 4, 1947, while on a voyage with pitprops from Bordeaux to Cardiff was resumed at the Royal Courts of Justice, Strand, London, yesterday. Many of the questions asked concerned the condition of the ship's life-saving equipment. The inquiry is being conducted by Mr. J. V. Naisby, K.C., as Wreck Commissioner, assisted by three assessors, Mr. H. A. Lyndsay, Captain J. P. Thomson, and Commander D. V. Setton. The previous proceedings were reported in LLOYD'S LIST of Sept. 21 and 22.

Mr. Peter Bucknill represented the Ministry of Transport, and Mr. David Meurig Evans appeared for the owners, the Bromage Shipping Company, Ltd. The dependants of the master (Captain Hill) and chief officer (who lost their lives) 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 10 members of the crew who lost their lives.

RAYMOND THOMAS HUMPHREYS, a deck hand in the *Willodale* said the deck cargo was loaded in "a reasonably close manner." The wire used was in good condition and the rope lashings were new. The vessel had a list to port which righted itself, but before the sea pilot was dropped there was a list to starboard. As the vessel crossed the bar the weather was a bit choppy but she rode it well. While witness was at the wheel he heard the pilot tell the master "the weather will definitely get worse, I advise you to make for La Pallice." The master said he knew the weather report as well as the pilot, but thanked him for the advice.

Witness later described seeing the master go forward as if to cut the deck cargo lashings. The lashings were eventually cut by Able Seaman Fitzhugh and some of the cargo went over the side. After that Fitzhugh and witness man-handled some of the cargo over. Later an order was given to abandon ship and witness had orders to prepare the starboard lifeboat for launching.

"As I thought the waves would smash the boat I jumped back on board the ship," Humphreys continued. "I had been back about half a minute when I was washed into the water. I was picked up about two hours later."

A TORN LIFE-JACKET

Mr. BUCKNILL: Have you any opinion to offer as to the cause of the loss?—The bad weather, and I don't think the ship was up to standard. For one thing, I don't think the ship's life-saving apparatus was up to standard. The life-jacket which was given to me had the stuffing coming out of it and rather than wear it, I left it. The life-jackets were issued between 10 and 11 p.m.

What were you wearing when you were swept into the sea?—Nothing. I had no life-jacket.

How did you manage to remain afloat?—By placing a pit prop under each arm.

What about the appearance of the lifeboats?—In appearance they were all right.

In reply to Mr. BROADHEAD, WITNESS said that he never saw the life-saving apparatus being inspected.

Asked if he had any intention of leaving the ship when she reached Cardiff, witness replied "No, we had a good master and good officers. We were a happy ship, it was just the vessel herself."

Mr. BROADHEAD: You have complained that your life-jacket was wet. Do you think it would have remained dry anywhere on that ship in view of the weather?—My life-jacket was torn, and the inside was coming out.

Mr. EVANS: You are not really suggesting that the condition of the life-jackets or boats had anything to do with these casualties?—All I am saying is that my own life-jacket was torn.

WITNESS added that he had heard other members of the crew complain about the life-jackets. He thought the matter had been reported to the boatswain, but he himself did not report it.

BONBAKER CAMARA, a coloured fireman-trimmer, said he was issued with a life-jacket but found it too heavy to wear when he was working. When he was told that the vessel was sinking he had nothing on except his working clothes. The life-jacket issued to him was a perfectly new one.

Camara added that he had never seen water coming through the water-tight doors of the vessel before this voyage. He was told to leave the stokehold when the water reached his knees.

Mr. BUCKNILL said there were no other members of the crew present in Court; but there were two other survivors, the boatswain and a fireman-trimmer.

Counsel said he proposed to put in a deposition from the boatswain. Mr. Evans and Mr. Broadhead withdrew their objections to this course when an adjournment of the hearing was suggested to enable the boatswain to attend.

Mr. BUCKNILL recalled Nonikos Capetanis, acting second mate, on the issue of the condition of the life-saving appliances. He (Capetanis) said he recalled an incident mentioned by Humphreys, when an unsuccessful attempt was made on a previous voyage to move one of the lifeboats. Capetanis did not know why the lifeboat would not come off the chocks.

Mr. BUCKNILL: Did anybody try to knock away the chocks?—I can't remember.

Referring to the life-jackets, witness said that those issued in the *Willodale* were of the "Victory" type used during the war. His own jacket was new and Humphreys never told him that his had a hole in it. Capetanis said it was usual to keep the lifebelts in a convenient place on the ship, this prevented them from being lost or becoming dirty. On the evening of Apr. 3 he personally saw that each man had a life-jacket.

Mr. Bucknill then produced affidavits taken from the stevedore at Bordeaux, the French pilots and the harbour master, which, the Commissioner said, would be accepted as evidence.

"PROPERLY LOADED"

The stevedore's statement showed that the ship was properly loaded in the normal way under the constant supervision and instructions of the master and officers of the vessel.

The river pilot stated that on leaving Bordeaux the *Willodale* had a list to port which suddenly changed to starboard and then changed again. He estimated that the list reach 10 deg., but noticed nothing unusual in the loading of the vessel, except that she

was carrying a summer cargo on deck, which was normal at that time of the year.

The harbour master stated that the ship had a list to port, and the second river pilot expressed the opinion that the cargo was made fast normally.

The sea pilot's statement showed that he took over the *Willodale* on Apr. 3. The vessel had a list of approximately 3 deg. and the deck cargo seemed to be in good order.

Captain WALTER ALFRED HAND, nautical surveyor, Ministry of Transport, produced a warning of a gale transmitted by the B.B.C. on Apr. 3. This stated that the gale in North Biscay might be severe. Witness also produced the messages received from the *Willodale* at Land's End Radio station after she had called for immediate assistance. The last message picked up at Land's End was at 4.12 a.m.

Captain Hand said that a vessel of the *Willodale's* size with a crew of 22 would be required to carry a lifeboat of Class I type on each side. These boats should be capable of accommodating all persons on board. She would also be required to be equipped with eight lifebuoys, four with lights, and at least 22 life-jackets.

Mr. JOHN MACALLAN, ship surveyor, Lloyd's Register of Shipping, said that the vessel had received an annual general survey since 1941. Witness carried out such a survey in July, 1946. The ship was 36 years old and showing some signs of age. Some of the shell and deck plating had come down, but most of these plates were true. Repairs were carried out and in his view the vessel was definitely seaworthy when he last saw her.

The COMMISSIONER asked Mr. Macallan about the water-tight doors mentioned earlier. Witness said he could not remember looking at these doors. He would look at them in a general way, but would not examine them particularly.

The COMMISSIONER: They may not have been examined particularly since 1946?—They may not have been.

Mr. Macallan also said that the vessel had some repairs done to her after his inspection, but he could not say whether the repairs were necessary owing to wear and tear or to damage.

REPAIRS TO SHIP'S SIDE

Evidence concerning the repairs referred to was given by another Lloyd's Register surveyor, Mr. JAMES MITCHELL SCULLY. After a request from the owners of the ship, he visited the ship at Barry on Feb. 6, 1947. His examination revealed a fracture on the port side in No. 1 hold and a fracture on the starboard side in No. 2 hold. His personal view was that the fractures were probably caused by heavy weather. The repairs were carried out and in his report witness stated that the vessel should remain as she was then classed without a fresh survey.

Mr. MACLEAN: I suppose you were not impressed by the condition of the vessel?—I saw nothing except Nos. 1 and 2 holds.

Mr. BROADHEAD: Did you find the margin plate in a worn condition?—I did not hammer test it. I went down and found the leakage and had it repaired.

The hearing was adjourned until to-day.

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