

"WILLODALE" INQUIRY

Evidence on Vessel's Repairs and Maintenance

OWNERS "KEEN" TO PAY EVERY ATTENTION

When the Court of Inquiry into the foundering of the British steamer *Willodale* was resumed yesterday, the fourth day of the hearing, evidence was given by the owners' superintendent on repairs and maintenance of the vessel. It was stated that the owners were keen that every attention should be paid to her. The vessel sank during bad weather in the Bay of Biscay on Apr. 4, 1947, while on a voyage from Bordeaux to Cardiff with pitprops. 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, 22 and 23.

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.

Mr. THOMAS GRAHAM BULLEN, a director of T. A. Reed Limited, Cardiff, consultant marine engineers and ship surveyors, said his firm acted as full superintendents to the *Willodale*. He last saw the vessel in March, 1947, when she was at Newport. Witness accepted full responsibility for the maintenance and upkeep of the vessel. He also attended to the engagement of the engineers in particular, and attended to all the technical requirements of the vessel. The owners were keen that he should pay every attention to her.

BILL FOR £19,000

Mr. Bullen added that repairs were carried out to the vessel from time to time in 1941. Repairs to the hull and machinery in November of that year amounted to £465. One of the biggest repair bills was in 1944. This was for over £19,000, and the repair and survey at that time was tantamount to a special survey with one or two exceptions. One of the principal repairs was the renewal of a tank top. The whole cargo space was stripped out and this revealed a certain number of necessary repairs. A number of shell plates and deck plates were renewed, and the major items amounted to over £12,000. Larger lifeboats were also fitted, but the cost of this was not included in the total figure of £19,000.

In 1945 another £7000 was spent on repairs after the vessel had been involved in a rather serious collision. Repairs were also carried out on Tyne-side in July, 1946, and there was a severe examination of the ship on that occasion. These were the last general repairs to keep her in classification, but minor repairs were also carried out in 1947.

Mr. Bullen was questioned about the upkeep of the vessel's water-tight doors. He said they were examined after the removal of the bulkhead, and were tested. Rather a point was made to maintain them in good order,

apart from its being necessary from the regulations' point of view. There was always the possibility that No. 2 hold would be required for extra bunkers, in which case it would be necessary to have ready use of these doors. They were maintained and kept in first-class condition.

Mr. Bullen said that generally speaking the boilers were in good condition for a vessel of the *Willodale*'s age. The only complaint he had received was that they were liable to scale up rather badly; apart from that they were in perfectly efficient order, and were regularly surveyed annually by Lloyd's Register. As to the boiler pressure, witness said the safety valves were set at a full working pressure of 180 lb. "I was rather amazed to hear the engineer say that they were set at a reduced pressure of 165 lb." he added.

STABILITY EXPERIMENTS

Mr. Bullen also said that the Ministry carried out experiments to test the ship's stability in 1944. As a result of those experiments he formed the opinion that after the removal of her armaments the vessel would be in a stable condition under normal condition of loading. He also said that the vessel's life-saving jackets were renewed from time to time and were maintained in first-class order.

Mr. EVANS: When the vessel was handed back to you in 1946 was she in a different condition from that when the Ministry took her over from you?—Yes.

I think that during the war years the owners had been concerned to point out to the Ministry that the responsibility of putting a top weight on the vessel was the Ministry's, as she had been taken out of the owners' hands?—That is correct.

Witness added that the information he received in documents showed quite definitely that the vessel was perfectly stable. From calculations he made he deduced that the stability was good.

Mr. EVANS: On the last voyage but one you found that the ship had some difficulty in dragging through the mud?—Yes.

And the master had been told when loading at Bordeaux to take it easy with the cargo and not to risk damaging the vessel?—Yes.

The docks there were in a pretty bad way from wartime bombing?—Yes.

And from your own knowledge it had been emphasised to the master that he was not to take more cargo than would enable him to get out of harbour safely?—Yes. That is so.

Asked by the COMMISSIONER if he regarded it as part of his duty to see that the master and officers were provided with equipment for securing deck cargo, Mr. BULLEN replied: "I assumed it was one of my responsibilities."

The COMMISSIONER: Did you take any steps to see if the equipment on board the vessel could comply with the regulations relating to deck cargo?—I knew the ship was equipped for the loading of deck cargo.

In what respect was she equipped?—She had adequate deck lashings, that is all.

Mr. Bullen added that on many occasions he had satisfied himself with the condition of the vessel. He suggested that the *Willodale* had not accumulated a great deal of extra weight. So far as the repair work was concerned, he always found the owners very co-operative.

The COMMISSIONER referred to the repairs done to the ship in 1944 and commented, "£19,000 is a lot of money to spend on a ship, especially at a time

when ships were in short supply and the powers-that-be were, in the national interest, anxious that ships should not be laid up for repairs."

Mr. BULLEN explained that owing to the prevailing restrictions during those times the vessel had probably accumulated a number of deferred repairs. Had it been possible to carry out repairs as they became necessary, it would have made a big difference.

The witness was also questioned about the condition of the watertight doors, and the COMMISSIONER asked: "Why should the cleats give way on a door which you say was in first-class condition?"

Mr. BULLEN said he had a theory that when the vessel began to pitch and list some of the cargo moved and that part of it might have battered against the door.

The COMMISSIONER: Did you take steps as superintendent of this ship to see that the master was not habitually overloading her?—Not directly, sir.

As superintendent of the vessel did you consider it your business to do so (I am not suggesting that the master did habitually overload)?—I worked in close co-operation with the owners, and they dealt with the major part of the handling of the cargo.

Mr. Bullen agreed that apart from general discussions he had on board the vessel he did not take any steps to see that the master carried out lifeboat drill.

"LITTLE OR NO STABILITY"

Mr. HAWKINS, chief surveyor to the Ministry of Transport, gave evidence of calculations and deductions he had arrived at. One of his conclusions was that Nos. 1 and 2 tanks were filled before the vessel left Bordeaux. He added: "I can't say more, but I think I can say that the ship sailed with little or no stability, or with slight negative stability."

In reply to Mr. MACLEAN, the WITNESS said that he gathered the impression through reading the specifications of repairs for 1944 and 1946 that considerable work had been done to maintain the condition of the ship.

Mr. MACLEAN: Did it seem an extensive amount to spend on her?—No, I attached more importance to the specification of the work done than to the actual £. s. d. I gathered that much had been done to maintain her condition.

Mr. BROADHEAD: With the information the master had available, he could not arrive at the ship's stability?—The evidence I have heard does not enable me to answer the question.

There are indications that he would have been in difficulty?—I would answer that question definitely if I knew what information the master was supplied with. Without that information, it would be unfair to the Court for me to express an opinion.

Mr. Hawkins was also asked by Mr. Maclean if he considered the regulations relative to the loading of timber required clarification and amplification.

He replied that as a result of a number of ships having a list due to the shift of the cargo, the Ministry had asked its surveyors to report on the carriage of timber in ships. The reports of the surveyors were now at the Ministry and were being considered; but he did not suggest that further instructions would be issued.

The hearing was adjourned until to-day.