

ZETTE, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER

LOSS OF THE "STANCREST"

Board of Trade Inquiry Opened

FORMER MASTER'S EVIDENCE

The Board of Trade Inquiry into the loss of the British steamer *Stancrest*, which occurred somewhere off the south coast of the British Isles, presumably on Mar. 1 last, was opened at the Institution of Civil Engineers yesterday. The inquiry is being held before Mr. G. St. C. Pilcher, K.C., who is sitting with Captain Peirs de Legh, Commodore H. Stockwell and Mr. E. S. Spanner as assessors.

Mr. H. G. Willmer represented the Board of Trade; Mr. O. L. Bateson appeared for the owners, the Stanhope Steamship Company; Mr. Norman V. Craig, for the General Steam Navigation Company, Ltd., the former owners; Mr. R. F. Hayward, K.C., and Mr. Harold Griffin, for the representatives of the late Captain J. T. Jones, and the Navigators & Engineer Officers Union; and Mr. Powell for the time charterers of the vessel, J. W. Huelin, Ltd., of Jersey.

Mr. Bateson, Mr. Craig and Mr. Powell intimated that they did not wish to be made parties to the inquiry at this stage, but they reserved their rights to become parties.

Mr. WILLMER said that the ship was lost with all hands, in circumstances which, at the moment, were completely mysterious. The loss was presumed to have taken place on or about Mar. 1 of this year, somewhere off the south coast of England. The *Stancrest* was in the course of a voyage from Northfleet, on the River Thames, with a cargo of cement for Bridgwater, Somerset. The last that was known of her was that she passed St. Catherine's Signal Station at 11.30 p.m. on Feb. 28. She exchanged a message with the signal station, passed on and nothing had been heard of her since. Some wreckage, including a boat which had been identified as having belonged to the *Stancrest*, was subsequently washed up on the Dorsetshire coast.

BUILT IN 1920

The *Stancrest* was a single-screw transversely framed steel steamer, of the three island type, with a single deck, and with propelling machinery fitted aft. A vessel of 462 tons gross, she was built in 1920 by Culby Bros., Ltd., at Lowestoft, and the engines and boilers were built by MacColl & Pollock, Ltd., at Sunderland. She had triple-expansion engines, and the nominal horse-power was 65.38, and the indicated horse-power 450. The vessel was sub-divided by three steel transverse watertight bulkheads, separating the following four main compartments: forepeak tank and store; cargo hold; engine and boiler-room and coal bunkers, and after peak. She had one hold and two hatchways. She had a double bottom divided into two ballast tanks, running for most of the length of the hold.

The vessel was originally called the *Glanmor*, but in 1922 she was acquired by the General Steam Navigation Company, Ltd., and renamed *Sheldrake*. Since 1922 she had been sailing for the General Steam Navigation Company until only a day or two before her loss. In the early part of 1937 she was sold to the Stanhope Steamship Company, who renamed her *Stancrest*. The new owners actually only got delivery of the vessel under sale contract on Feb. 26, and she sailed on Feb. 27 on her last voyage. The position so far as the new owners were concerned was that she was lost on her first voyage for them. She had replaced another ship which was on time charter to J. W. Huelin, Ltd., of Jersey.

Having regard to the fact that two days before her last voyage she was being taken over by new owners and at the same time being delivered by the new owners to the time charterers, it so happened that several surveyors had had an opportunity of looking at her. They were perhaps fortunate in that respect that they had got some information about her condition immediately prior to her loss. At the same time she was looked at by Lloyd's experts.

VESSEL WELL MAINTAINED

"I should say at once," said Mr. Willmer, "that so far as the Board of Trade are aware there are no grounds for complaint as to the manner in which this vessel had been maintained and kept up. She was classed 100 A1 in Lloyd's Register. She had a winter load line of 1 ft. 3½ in., with a draught of 12 ft. 1½ in. Since 1932 the General Steam Navigation Company had spent £3400 on ordinary upkeep and maintenance of the vessel apart from the expense of repairing damages.

The *Stancrest* left Northfleet carrying a crew of nine—the master, Captain Jones, a certificated officer of very considerable experience; a mate, three A.B.s, two engineers and two firemen—and her cargo consisted of 540 tons 17 cwt. of cement in 1 cwt. bags. The paper bags weighed about 3 tons, making the total gross tonnage of the cargo about 544 tons. It appeared that she sailed about three tons short of her full winter capacity. There was no suggestion that she was loaded beyond her winter marks. The *Stancrest* had gone 176 miles when last seen, giving an average speed of 5.2 knots—as against her ordinary speed of eight knots—and if she had continued at that speed she would have passed Portland Bill about 7.30 a.m. on Mar. 1. The

speed gave some indication of the adverse weather she had met.

He had evidence that the *Goldfinch* (327 tons gross) took shelter in the Solent on the night of Feb. 27, but left at noon on Feb. 28 as the weather was better; and passed Portland at 5.30 p.m. The *Cornerake* (1171 tons gross) turned about at 7 p.m. on Feb. 28, at St. Catherine's, and ran into the Solent for shelter, leaving at 7 a.m. on Mar. 1. He was not calling that evidence with the idea of criticising what the master of the *Stancrest* did. He had no reason to suppose that he made any rash decision. He was only giving that evidence to show what the weather was at the time.



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In October, 1932, when this vessel—then known as the *Sheldrake*—was on a voyage from Goole to Poole laden with coal she was overtaken by bad weather at the entrance to the Humber; her cargo shifted; she had a very heavy and dangerous list; was abandoned by her crew, and drifted on to the sands. She was subsequently salvaged, and in consequence a correspondence took place between the then owners and the Board of Trade with regard to the stability of the *Sheldrake*. The Board of Trade made investigations and forwarded the results to the General Steam Navigation Company with a request that the calculations should be checked and suitable instructions issued to the master of the vessel.

In January, 1934, the owners gave instructions to the master of the *Sheldrake* that her double bottom tanks were always to be filled in every circumstance—whether loaded or light—and that under no circumstances was cargo to be carried in the poop space. This rather rigid rule was adhered to until some time in 1936 when, after experiments with cargoes of iron ore and general cargo, the owners undertook to the Board of Trade that the vessel in future would have a certificated master and that it should be left to his discretion as to whether or not the ballast tanks were to be filled and whether or not cargo would be carried in the poop space. At the same time they issued a booklet containing diagrams of the vessel under various conditions of loading. A copy of that book was handed on to Captain Jones.

Mr. WILLIAM NUTTON, a Board of Trade surveyor, answering Mr. Hayward, said that Board of Trade surveyors had no duty imposed upon them to see about the stability when a cargo vessel was being built. Shipbuilders and shipowners had now agreed to carry out experiments on cargo vessels to ascertain their stability.

Mr. PERCY ROBERT PRIVETT, secretary, General Steam Navigation Company, said the ship was sold for £3250.

Mr. JACK ALBERT BILLMEIR, managing director of J. A. Billmeir & Co., managers to the Stanhope Steamship Company, said there was nothing of which he was aware that could account for what had happened. The master was an excellent man, and the chief engineer was very capable. He did not know anything about the booklet on the loading of the vessel until after the accident.

Mr. WILLIAM WATT, principal surveyor, Lloyd's Register, gave particulars of various surveys of the ship. In practically all respects the hatches fitted in the ship were in excess of the regulations.

"VERY NICE LITTLE SHIP"

Captain JACK LEWIN WIGHTING, the former master of the vessel, said he handed the ship over to Captain Jones, and took him all over the vessel. Captain Jones said: "It is a very nice little ship." He handed over the booklet of instructions regarding the loading of the vessel and got a receipt for it. He was master when the experimental voyage was made and he regarded the ship as "a very good sea boat." She was a little bit wet.

Cross-examined by Mr. Hayward, he said he wrote that when crossing with a cargo of 480 tons in a gale there was "a lot of water" on deck. The mate and he shared the watch, which meant that they had 12 hours a day. His duties did not end with his watch, as he had other duties such as writing up the log, &c. There were two A.B. seamen and a boy seaman who cooked for the master and mate.

Mr. HAYWARD, replying to the Chairman, said the point he was to make was that the Board of Trade were not concerned as to whether there were any people on board the ship or not, subject to a section of the Merchant Shipping Act which mentioned that they could detain a ship if she was unseaworthy. "Although a foreign-going ship of 700 tons must carry six A.B. seamen," said Mr. Hayward, "a home-going ship of 699 tons need not carry any seamen at all, subject to this provision in the Merchant Shipping Act. When you have these little vessels popping in and out of a thousand little ports you cannot have Board of Trade officials there to see if they are seaworthy and you have opportunities for ships going to sea undermanned." He added that if the *Stancress* had met with bad weather, it might be that had she had more hands there would have been more opportunity to do something.

Replying to Mr. Hayward, Captain WIGHTING said it would be more satisfactory from the point of view of safety that there should be at least two men on watch instead of one.

Captain ANDREW HOLMES HUTTON, marine superintendent, General Steam Navigation Company, said that when the vessel was being sold he gave Captain Wighting instructions to tell the new master about the question of stability.

The inquiry was adjourned until to-day. It was stated that it would probably last until to-morrow.

The Board of Trade Inquiry into the loss of the British steamer *Stancress*, which occurred off the south coast of the British Isles presumably on Mar. 1 last, was continued at the Institution of Civil Engineers yesterday when the taking of evidence, which dealt with the condition of the vessel's hatches, her loading trim, and the condition of the lifeboat and hatches washed ashore, was concluded. Counsel will address the Court to-day. The inquiry is being held before Mr. G. St. C. Pilcher, K.C., who is sitting with Captain Peirs de Legh, Commodore H. Stockwell, and Mr. E. F. Spanner as assessors.

Mr. H. G. Willmer and Mr. J. B. Hewson represented the Board of Trade; Mr. O. L. Bateson appeared for the owners, the Stanhope Steamship Company; Mr. Norman V. Craig, for the General Steam Navigation Company, Ltd., the former owners; Mr. R. F. Hayward, K.C., and Mr. Harold Griffin, for the representatives of the late Captain J. T. Jones, and the Navigators & Engineer Officers Union; and Mr. Powell for the time charterers of the vessel, J. W. Huelin, Ltd., of Jersey.

HENRY COOPER, foreman blacksmith, employed by the General Steam Navigation Company, Ltd., said they changed the steering chains on the vessels every twelve months. Vessels always carried a spare set of steering chains. The last occasion on which the *Sheldrake's* (the former name of the *Stancress*) steering chains were tested was on Nov. 10 and 13, 1936. When Lloyd's Register survey was being made they removed the steering rods to the works where they were annealed. The last survey was in 1932.

Cross-examined by Mr. Hayward he said he never had to repair or refit the rods with the vessel at sea. He did not know how many men would be required to handle the chains if they went wrong at sea. They were not heavy chains.

THE VESSEL'S HATCHES

ARTHUR JOHN MANSFIELD, superintendent engineer of the General Steam Navigation Company, said that white wood or spruce was used for making hatches. They would not make a hatch with timber that was not suitable.

Cross-examined by Mr. Hayward, he said he appreciated that hatches were the danger spot in a ship. On this vessel, with a little over a foot freeboard, the hatches would be subjected to severe strain in severe weather.

WILLIAM JAMES CLARK, foreman shipwright to the General Steam Navigation Company, said he overhauled the hatches and renewed what was bad prior to the survey. He saw the hatches being made and saw that they were not made from inferior wood. The last time that hatches were made for the *Sheldrake* was in December, 1936.

By Mr. Hayward: He had seen one of the hatches that were washed up on the coast of Dorset. He could not definitely say that it belonged to the *Stancrest*, but it had the appearance of being one of her hatches.

By the Chairman: The ends of the hatches were not shod with steel. On a survey he made his own examination and did not rely on ship's officers calling attention to hatches.

HERBERT MAWDSLEY HARTE, consulting engineer and marine surveyor of Harte, Ltd., said he examined the hull of the *Stancrest* in dry dock. A very careful survey was made, and the bottom was in very good condition.

Mr. HAYWARD: From what you saw of the exterior of the vessel, can you form any view as to whether she would be likely to sustain serious leakage through her hull if, within a day or two, she met severe weather?—I saw no reason to think that she would leak at all.

EDWARD HOWARD RYDER, surveyor, of Mitchell & Ryder, said that on behalf of the charterers he surveyed the hull and the bunkers. There was a small indentation on the hull but it did not affect the seaworthiness of the vessel. "I noticed a point which I, personally, don't approve, and that is that the ends of the steering chains were secured by comparatively long screws. My objection to that is because of the possibility of bending of the screws when the rudder is hard over."

ALFRED LITTLEJOHN, chartering clerk employed by Messrs. Martin & Co., who acted on behalf of the time charterers, said that the master of the *Stancrest* was told that if the tides were too low at Bridgwater he had to go on to Dunball to unload.

JOHN EDWARD WEEKES, shipping superintendent at Bevan's Wharf, Northfleet, said that the loading of the *Stancrest* began at 2.30 a.m. on Saturday, Feb. 27, and finished at 1.45 p.m. At 7.30 a.m. the vessel had a list to port of 10 deg. He called to the stowers and told them to correct it. The mate was anxious about it.

Replying to the Chairman, he said he had a conversation with the mate and told him that he thought the ship was "tender."

The CHAIRMAN: Did he agree with you?—I think he must have done. I know he was worried about it the whole time.

You say he was anxious about it?—He was indeed. He was fussing about it. He said it must be the water.

ARTHUR GEORGE MANNING said he saw the loading of the *Stancrest* at

7.30 a.m. The vessel was listing to port but she was put upright. About 11 a.m. she had a slight list to starboard but she righted again.

WILLIAM E. WARE, foreman stevedore at Bevan's Wharf, said that from the manner in which the bags of cement were stowed—tight across the ship—there was no possibility of their shifting.

Captain LEONARD MONTAGUE OETERS, master of the *Goldfinch*, said he left London for France on Feb. 26 and the wind was blowing hard. The weather was extremely bad when he reached the *Royal Sovereign*. Having taken an exceptionally long time on that part of the voyage and having experienced bad weather, he decided it would be prudent to take shelter inside the Isle of Wight, and he anchored off Lymington. Shortly after mid-day on Saturday he carried on with his voyage, hoping to find smooth water. Unfortunately, he did not find it smooth; he had to go along the English coast, and it was not until he reached the Eddystone Lighthouse that he decided to cross the Channel.

Mr. HEWSON: Looking back over the events of this voyage, do you consider it was the best thing to do to leave Lymington at the time you did?—I think I was a little premature.

Your impression is, it would have been better if you had waited a little longer?—Yes; the sea would have moderated.

Mr. HEWSON read a statutory declaration by Captain Cyril Nicholas Jones, master of the *Cornet*, in which he said that on the night of February 28 he considered it prudent, on account of the weather, to take shelter behind the Isle of Wight and he anchored in St. Helens Roads. "If, owing to excessive racing, the engines had failed in the weather conditions prevailing the position would have been extremely dangerous," the statement said.

CLARENCE EDWARD SMITH, assistant marine superintendent of the General Steam Navigation Company, said he visited Bridport on Mar. 24 and saw the lifeboat that had been washed up. He identified the boat as being one of the boats from the *Stancrest*.

Mr. HAYWARD: Was there anything to suggest that the boat had broken away from the ship after she had foundered or whether the boat had been launched before foundering?—Marks of that kind were carefully looked for, but there was no scratch on the gunwale such as the gripes tearing would make, and the painter was frayed at about one foot from the splice. There was no indication as to whether it had been cut or broken or just worn by chafing on the gunwale.

Mr. PILCHER: Have you any theory as to how this boat got adrift without any damage?—My opinion would be that she had been released.

By the crew?—Yes. The drags were of such a nature they would require to be released by hand.

WILLIAM NUTTON, surveyor to the Board of Trade, recalled, spoke as to the condition of the wreckage washed up near Bridport which he had examined. He was of opinion that the damage to the lifeboat was caused by bumping on the beach. He saw no damage on the gunwale that would have been occasioned by the gripes.

Cross-examined by Mr. Hayward, he said that a few—not many—ships built to carry cargo could not carry a full cargo without becoming unstable. He thought the broken hatches which were washed up had been broken while they were in place and not after the ship foundered.

You are assuming a breakage by a downward pressure of sea water?—Yes.

In your view these hatches have been stove in by a heavy sea?—Yes.

Can you say from your experience or knowledge that a crew of nine is a sufficiency of men to deal with such a contingency?—I am afraid I cannot answer that question.

Mr. HAYWARD: It will be one of my submissions to the Court.

This concluded the evidence, and the Court adjourned until to-day, when Counsel will address the Court.

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h number of hatches were washed up near
le Bridport. The findings of the Court
le will be issued at a later date.

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/ Huelin, Ltd., of Jersey.

h Mr. HAYWARD submitted that the
e primary cause of the disaster to the
n *Stancress* was the staving in of the
n hatches in heavy weather. The evi-
st dence on that was so strong that it
a was useless to discuss other alterna-
t tives. If the Court came to the deci-
s sion that the hatches found were the
a hatches of the *Stancress*, it followed,
y with reasonable certainty, that the
s primary cause of the trouble was the
s breaking in of the hatches. "If it
e be so," said Mr. Hayward, "this is
e yet another case in which the crew of
e a British ship—whose safety is only
e provided for by 2½ in. of timber—is
e again being sacrificed needlessly. I
e submit that it is time that this well-
e known weakness to the safety of ships
e —hatch covers—should be dealt with."

u- It would be within the recollection
ve of most of those present that in the
course of four big inquiries—in which
three were cases where hatches were
stove in—it was stated on behalf of
the Board of Trade that experiments
were being carried out with other
forms of hatches—steel hatches. "That
was over two years ago," said Mr.
Hayward, "and it is much to be hoped
that if these experiments are still
hanging on they will be speedily
brought to a conclusion and some seri-
ous steps will be taken to safeguard
the lives of those who go down to the
sea in ships."

THE QUESTION OF MANNING

is "If officers and crews of these ships
ad are to continue to be subjected to this
at particular danger, it is all the more
incumbent on the powers that be to see
that these vessels are adequately
manned, because although the trouble
may start by the breaking in of hatches
it does not necessarily follow that the
ship will be lost if there is time and
opportunity and sufficient men to deal
with the situation."

from 3076 The WRECK COMMISSIONER (Mr.
t she Pilcher): Is there a question on that?

ssage at Mr. HAYWARD: I asked for a ques-
ad of tion on manning to be put in, but the
Board of Trade did not see fit to accede
to my request. Nevertheless I venture
to suggest it is material in this sense:
one has to inquire into the cause of the
loss, and my submission to you is that
the primary cause of the loss is the
breaking in of the hatches, but the
ultimate cause and the loss may very
well be laid to the lack of hands.

om Mr. Hayward said the question of
manning was of greater importance
when they had a ship which was well
known to possess a slender margin of
safety in connection with stability. He
invited the Court to consider the ques-
tion of manning, not only so far as the
number on deck were concerned, but
they must see that the crew's efficiency
was not unduly diminished by over-
work. "It is not right and proper,"
said Mr. Hayward, "that these ships
ought to be allowed to navigate in the
busiest waters in the world—in foggy
and clear weather—without sufficient
members of the crew to provide a look-
out man. It is not fair to the ships
themselves nor to the other vessels. I
do submit that some regulations should
be made with regard to the manning
of these coastal vessels."

37 Mr. Hayward said that under Sect.
of the Merchant Shipping Act a
British ship in any port of the United
Kingdom might be detained if she was
unsafe by reason of under-manning.
But these little ships were popping in
and out of a hundred little ports and
it was manifestly impossible, except at
enormous cost, for the Board of Trade
to have officials at every port to super-
vise their going to sea. It was quite
illogical that whereas a foreign-going
steamship of 700 tons was under an
obligation to carry at least six able sea-
men, the home-going ship of any ton-
nage was under no obligation to carry
any number of able seamen or no able
seaman at all.

es, Referring to the evidence that the
sa, Board of Trade had suggested that if
rs the vessel was to keep her double-
ho bottom ballast tanks empty she should
rs, have a certificated master, Mr.
ol, Hayward suggested that was a strong
argument for making it compulsory
that there should be a certificated

master carried in every British ship.
There was equally good reason that
there should be a certificated mate.

Mr. WILLMER said the purpose of
the inquiry was to ascertain if any-
body was at fault, and to ascertain the
cause of the casualty with a view to
avoiding such casualties in future and
increasing safety at sea. It was the
one redeeming feature of this case that
nobody had suggested that anybody in
this case was at fault. The question
of manning these small ships had been
raised by Mr. Hayward. That did not
arise on any of the questions put to the
Court unless on the one, "What was
the cause of the loss?" Had the
shortage of crew anything to do with
the disaster? It was entirely a matter
for the Court's discretion whether they
dealt with that matter at all. "It is
only proper," said Mr. Willmer, "that
I should reiterate on behalf of the
Board of Trade that this is not a case
in which any charge is brought
against the owners of the vessel."

It might be thought that allegations
of undermanning might involve some
reflection on the Board of Trade and
its officers. Mr. Willmer pointed out
that the Board had to exercise great
care before they detained a ship under
Sect. 459, because if a vessel was
wrongly detained the Board was liable
to damages.

Mr. PILCHER said the only point on
which they could deal with manning
in their report was that by reason of
the exhaustion of the crew they were
not able to deal with this emergency.

THE BOARD OF TRADE'S VIEW

Mr. WILLMER said it would be open for the Court to point out that the circumstances in this case revealed a weakness in the law which, in their opinion, should be remedied. "I cannot help thinking," said Mr. Willmer, "that the only effect of having more men on this ship would be to increase the death roll. The Board of Trade take the view that there is no evidence or material in this case to make the question of manning a proper question. There is nothing to say that sufficiency or insufficiency of men on board had anything to do with the casualty. It is quite obvious that if the scales of manning are to be introduced to make ships of that class carry more men than they do at present that must affect the economics of the whole industry."

"I submit that regulation of industry in such a way as to affect the whole structure of its economics ought not to be introduced unless satisfactory evidence is available to show that it is necessary. On the other hand, where the evidence does show that in the interests of safety regulations are necessary, then of course it is desirable. But my submission is that so far as this case is concerned there is nothing to show, one way or the other, that numbers had anything to do with the loss."

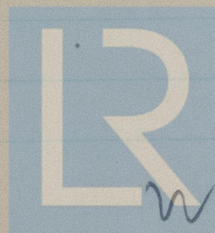
Mr. Hayward had complained that it was now three years since the question of steel or wood hatch covers was ventilated, and that it was about time somebody made regulations about it. The whole question of steel against wood was a very big question. Steel hatch covers were in the experimental stage in the sense that various types were being tried out—some of which were proving satisfactory and others were not. It was most undesirable that regulations should be made tying people down to this or that until those responsible felt quite satisfied that the best known device had been arrived at. Until that time arrived it was premature to make any regulations one way or the other. It might be that this case was one on which the Court could say it had shown the urgency of the problem and the need for investigation of it, but it would do more harm than good to make a recommendation that steel hatch covers should be used in all cases while they were still just being tried out.

THE PORTLAND RACE

Mr. Willmer said that while they could not overlook the possibility of the *Stancrest* striking a submerged rock causing a leak, the evidence they had had pointed to the probability that she was overwhelmed by a sea which stove in her hatches. It looked as if the boat had been launched and that suggested that the disaster was not overwhelmingly sudden, but that the unfortunate men had had some time to make some efforts to escape. The evidence led to the conclusion that she was lost at Portland Race.

"A further thought crosses my mind," said Mr. Willmer, "whether there is in this locality some unknown and uncharted danger of some sort because it is a curious coincidence that only this time last year we were inquiring into the loss of the *Kentbrook*, which occurred in almost exactly the same place and in the same kind of weather. Many of the symptoms are similar in both cases. Whether there are some peculiarities in the Portland Race which make it extend further in some directions in some particular weather conditions that are not fully appreciated yet, I do not know. It is a curious feature that these two small vessels have been lost one after the other in successive years in apparently the same place and in very similar conditions."

This concluded the inquiry and Mr. PILCHER announced that the findings of the Court would be issued at a future date.



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