

"ITALIAN PRINCE" LOSS

"Vessel Not in Good and Seaworthy Condition"

FAILURE TO FIGHT FIRE DUE TO LACK OF CO-ORDINATION

B.O.T. Inquiry Findings

The findings of the Board of Trade Inquiry into the loss of the British steamer *Italian Prince* were announced yesterday. The *Italian Prince*, which carried a cargo including explosives, was abandoned on fire off Finisterre in September last. The Court found that the default of the owners, or their representatives, and the master and chief engineer contributed to the loss; that the fire-fighting appliances for the machinery spaces were inadequate; that the failure to overcome the fire was due partly to failure to sight the source and partly to lack of co-ordinated effort; and that the vessel was not in a good and seaworthy condition on sailing.

The inquiry was held before Mr. K. S. Carpmael, K.C., sitting as Wreck Commissioner, with whom were Captain W. E. Whittingham, Commander J. R. Williams, Engineer Lieut.-Commander T. A. Pearson and Mr. A. M. Robb, Assessors.

Mr. O. L. Bateson (instructed by the Solicitor to the Board of Trade) appeared for the Board of Trade. Mr. G. St. C. Pilcher and Mr. W. W. Porges (instructed by Messrs. Middleton, Lewis & Clarke) represented the owners, the Prince Line, Ltd. Mr. E. E. Addis (instructed by Messrs. Rehder & Higgs and the Mercantile Marine Service Association) represented the master of the vessel, Captain James Halloway. Mr. C. R. Havers (instructed by Messrs. Charles G. Bradshaw & Waterson, acting for the Marine Engineers' Association) appeared for the chief engineer, Mr. R. J. J. Smith, and the second engineer, Mr. A. M. McNeil. Messrs. Nordon & Co. watched the inquiry on behalf of Mrs. M. M. Brown, a passenger. Messrs. Winter & Co. on behalf of Mr. and Mrs. Duvill, passengers, and Mr. J. B. Hewson on behalf of the British Mexican Petroleum Company, Ltd.

The previous proceedings were reported in LLOYD'S List of Feb. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 23 and 24.

Mr. CARPMAEL, delivering the findings of the Court, said: "The initial cause of the loss of the *Italian Prince* was an outbreak of fire in the boiler room, but the ultimate cause was an extension of the fire to the deck and subsequently to the cargo, because of inability to cope with the fire in the boiler room. The default of the owners, Prince Line, Ltd., or their representatives, and of the master, Captain James Halloway, and of the chief engineer, Mr. Robert J. J. Smith, all contributed to the loss of the ship; but the default of the chief engineer is partly explained by the initial default of the owners or their representatives."

Answering other questions submitted to it, the Board found that the *Italian Prince* was built by the Furness Shipbuilding Company, Ltd., Haverton Hill-on-Tees, in 1921; that the propelling machinery was built by Richardsons, Westgarth & Co., Ltd., and that three boilers were installed, arrangements being made for the burning of either coal or oil.

The life-saving appliances with which the ship was fitted were all in good condition when the ship left on her last voyage.

The fire-fighting appliances for the machinery spaces were not in accordance with the recommendations of the Board of Trade and were inadequate. The fire-fighting appliances for the other parts of the ship were in accordance with the recommendations of the Board of Trade.

The ship carried 4478 tons of general cargo, including Government explosives and stores. The latter were stored in magazines to the requirements and satisfaction of the Admiralty and the War Department. She carried a crew of 34 and 12 passengers—six women, four men and two children.

The findings stated that the ship was built under Lloyd's Register of Shipping Rules and Regulations 1919-1920 and she was classed +100 A 1 with Lloyd's Register of Shipping. The *Italian Prince* left the River Thames on her last voyage on Sept. 3, 1938, for Malta, loaded with 4478 tons of general cargo. She also carried about 1000 tons of oil fuel. Regarding the outbreak of fire it was necessary to consider the question of the oil fuel installation and the fire-fighting appliances in the machinery space with some particularity. The 1919-1920 Rules contained, *inter alia*, the following:—

Section 49 (13): Oil fuel pipes should where practicable be placed above the stokehold and engine-room plates and where they are always visible.

The wording was changed later, and in 1936-37 was:—

Section 20 (5): Oil pipes and fittings—(a) The oil pressure pipes conveying heated oil are to be of solid drawn steel and placed in sight above the platform in well lighted parts of the stokehold or engine-room.

The later wording was not compulsory with regard to the *Italian Prince* as she was built under the earlier rule.

THE INITIAL CAUSE

The Court was of the opinion that the initial cause of the fire was leakage from the supply pipe which was led along the outboard side of the starboard boiler.

"The Court is clearly of the opinion that the pipe was not always visible within the meaning of the rule, although it would have been perfectly practicable to have rendered it always visible. It was quite invisible from the engine-room and could only have been seen with difficulty from the stokehold, even in the absence of the fender plates at the wing. In the light of the knowledge which had accumulated in the 16 years which had elapsed since the oil-burning plant in the *Italian Prince* was installed it would have been reasonable to expect that the owners or those responsible on their behalf . . . should have realised the defects referred to above and made some attempt to remedy them. The curtailment or removal of the fender plate or the cutting of a hole in the screen bulkhead would have been a material remedy."

The findings continued: "In particular the Court is satisfied that the pipe in question was never examined. As an indication of the lack of care with which this matter was dealt with on behalf of the owners it may be mentioned that Mr. Rhynas, the Superintendent Engineer who supervised the May, 1937, repairs and survey, was at that time entirely ignorant of the existence of the important Board of Trade Notice, M. 140 to shipowners, shipbuilders and masters with regard to the prevention and extinction of fire in cargo ships. There was apparently no provision in the owners' organisation for keeping such an important notice in mind, and no provision for ensuring that copies were in the possession of and known to the master and chief engineer of a vessel such as the *Italian Prince*, which was being newly converted to burn oil fuel. In fact the Court is satisfied that neither the master nor the chief engineer knew of the existence of the notice."

In March, 1938, the original burners were replaced by others, and again there was no examination of the pipe, although it might be that such slight superficial sighting as was possible was made from the top of the boiler. "The

failure to consider the details of the oil fuel installation was aggravated by lack of proper consideration of the fire-fighting appliances.

THE FOAM EXTINGUISHERS

"On the last voyage the complement of foam extinguishers provided only two-thirds of the total quantity recommended by the Board of Trade, namely, 12 gallons instead of 18 gallons. The unsatisfactory attitude in the matter of foam extinguishers was accompanied by a concealment of information regarding the provision of steam-smothering pipes.

"The Court is of the opinion that this form of protection against the risks of fire was actually installed. The Board of Trade were, however, ignorant of the provision of the smothering lines and in January, 1938, and also subsequently, raised the question of the deficiency of the fire-fighting appliances in this respect. Mr. Kent, on behalf of the owners, did not at any time disclose that provision for the admission of smothering steam had been made when the ship was built; either he had forgotten or was quite indifferent. The Court concludes that the owners' representatives gave scant consideration to the question of adequate fire-fighting equipment. The unsatisfactory attitude of the owners' representatives in the matter of the steam smothering pipes has left on the Court the impression that the surveyors of the Board of Trade were treated as interfering rather than as co-operating in the maintenance of safety of life and property at sea."

Regarding the attempts to deal with the fire it was noted that the time between the discovery of the fire and the abandonment of the vessel was a comparatively short one. "The Court is of opinion that the failure to overcome the fire was due partly to failure to sight the source of the fire and partly to lack of co-ordinated effort. The Court is, however, of the opinion that the failure to sight the source of the fire was largely due to the position of the pipe which is presumed to have failed and to the presence of the fender plate."

In order to illustrate the failure to sight the source of the fire, and the lack of co-ordinated effort, it was necessary to give a résumé of events, and after detailing how the fire was discovered the findings stated that when the alarm bells were heard the master proceeded to the navigating bridge, the chief officer collected a smoke helmet, ordered the boatswain to rig hoses, and then assisted in bringing a smoke helmet from the bridge to the engine-room door. The chief and second engineers went down to the stokehold and the chief engineer stopped the refrigerating engine on his way there. The third engineer sent for a smoke helmet, but these had already been taken and one was then not far from the engine-room door. The fourth engineer, who was then on watch, saw the glow of flames, stopped the fuel pump and then attempted to quench the fire with a foam extinguisher which he had obtained from the stokehold. Two officers took the two smoke helmets and one engineer tried to obtain one, but the apprentice, who according to the "Instructions for Fire Stations," was responsible for the bringing of smoke helmets to the fire, did not do so. In fact, smoke helmets were not necessary at least in the initial stages of the fire.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FIRE STATIONS

"Having indicated this initial lack of co-ordinated effort, it is proper now to make a comment on the printed 'Instructions for Fire Stations' posted at various positions in the ship. These instructions embodied a reference to a Downton pump, which was not installed. It is not suggested that this

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error would in any way explain any lack of co-ordination, but it does provide emphasis for a charge of laxity on the part of the owners or their representatives.

"After coming on to the bridge the captain ordered the third officer to work out the position of the ship and then sent him to obtain information about the outbreak. From the chief engineer the third officer obtained a favourable report, which he conveyed to the master. This was the only report received by the master from the chief engineer, but at the climax of the fire the master received a very unfavourable report from the chief officer. Apart from going down to the deck to see hoses rigged and making an ineffectual effort to enter the stokehold and engine-room the master remained on the bridge or its vicinity until about the climax of the fire, ignorant of the extent and development of the outbreak and not exercising any control over the activities of his subordinates."

At an early stage of the fire, the findings went on, the chief engineer, chief officer and third engineer had all made separate visits to the boiler tops, each acting on his own initiative and not in accordance with any ordered plan. After the fire on the port side had been extinguished there was something in the nature of a muffled explosion over the boiler tops, which was probably due to the ignition of oil vapour which had been driven from oil leakage and had been drawn towards the fan intake and ignited by the flames below.

"It is possible that the ultimately large conflagration over the boiler tops could have been prevented had further fire-fighting appliances been available. Both the second and third engineers were on the boiler tops at some time when there was serious fire in that region. The third engineer used a foam extinguisher with some effect and the second engineer a soda-acid extinguisher without much effect. The foam extinguishers had now all been discharged and no attempt had been made to use the four refills that were available. In these circumstances the second engineer and third engineer went for a hose but before that had been brought the water supply was failing because of shortage of steam for driving the pumps and the order had been given to abandon the ship."

Describing how the ship was abandoned, Mr. Carpmael said that the after port boat had been sent away with the passengers and ten of the crew. The forward boat was being used for the abandonment of the ship but the wireless operator was not advised and transmitted a signal that the boats were being lowered after the ship had, in fact, been abandoned. The absence of the wireless operator was ultimately noted in the forward port lifeboat which approached the ship and picked up the operator who had left the ship and swum towards the boat on receiving a signal made to him.

"The order for abandonment was given by the master without his having received any information from the chief engineer as to the progress of the fight with the fire, but on the other hand he had received a very unfavourable report from the chief officer. Moreover, the climax of the fire had been accompanied by a great burst of flame out of the funnel, and this fact would give emphasis to the unfavourable report. A further consideration was that fire had spread to the starboard side of the boat deck. It is probable that before the climax the fire on deck was not serious, but the cover on the forward boat on that side had been set alight and an attempt to swing out the after boat had been abandoned. The fire on the boat deck was caused by burning paint from the funnel, but no attempt was made to prevent the fire spreading."

No reasonable explanation was put forward by the master to explain why no such attempt was made. The passengers had been sent away immediately before the abandonment of the ship.

"It is not proper to censure the master for premature abandonment, in view of the facts that all the extinguishers had been discharged and the water supply had practically failed. In fact, however, the abandonment was premature. Between nine and ten hours after the abandonment the ship was still afloat."

"There is no direct evidence on the origin and seat of the fire but the Court is of opinion that the initial cause was either leakage from a joint in the supply pipe led along the outboard side of the starboard boiler or from the pipe being 'necked' at the flange. It is possible that the jointing material was of a kind which is not now considered suitable for use in pipes carrying heated oil under pressure."

AN INITIAL HANDICAP

Referring to the desirability of having attacked the fire from the top of the boiler the findings stated:

"Although sporadic visits were paid to that region there was no real attempt at fighting the fire from there until the culmination, and it was then too late; the bulk of the foam had been squandered in inefficient attempts to extinguish the flames on the tank top. It must, however, be emphasised that there was an initial handicap on any efforts at extinction; the handicap resulted from the inaccessibility of the pipe and the presence of the high fender plate."

The Court was of opinion that it would have been perfectly practicable to have turned on the steam smothering at an early stage, but that the question of using the steam smothering was never considered and the ventilation was never closed—further indication of the lack of co-ordinated effort.

"Having arrived at the conclusion that the source of the fire was due to the failure of a pipe for conveying heated oil under pressure, which pipe was masked from view and inaccessible," the Court's findings continued, "it is, in the opinion of the Court, impossible to come to any conclusion other than that the *Italian Prince* was not in a good and seaworthy condition on sailing. The Court, in coming to this conclusion, has also in mind that the *Italian Prince* was very considerably lacking in the foam extinguishers as recommended by the Board of Trade."

QUESTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

"The question thereupon arises as to who was responsible for this state of affairs. It was urged on behalf of the owners that the vessel was built according to plans approved by Lloyd's Register, which showed the actual position of the pipe in question; that the vessel was regularly surveyed thereafter by Lloyd's surveyors; and that at the time the change to oil burning was made, in May, 1937, the vessel was in fact undergoing her second No. 1 survey. There are powerful considerations in favour of the owners but the Court is of opinion that there was failure on the part of the owners' representatives to which the condition of the vessel on sailing must be attributed."

"As regards the future, the Court considers that the record of this disaster provides emphasis for the requirement that all pipes containing heated oil under pressure must be completely visible and easily accessible. It considers also that attention should be drawn to the need for fire drill in machinery spaces as well as on deck; and organisation of fire services should include provision for the refilling of used extinguishers."

"The Court also desires to draw attention to the fact that where a fire occurs in the machinery space of an oil-burning vessel this must in many cases necessitate the closing of the oil fuel supply to the boilers. As a necessary consequence the steam supply must gradually and progressively fail, with the result that the water pumps are put out of action."

There may or may not be a remedy for this state of affairs, and whether there is one is not a matter for this Court. The fact remains that in this case the failure of the water supply must have been one of the most important factors in the decision of the master to abandon his vessel. Had pumping power been available the Court is of opinion that the upper deck fire could readily have been extinguished."

The Court found no actual evidence as to when or how the *Italian Prince* sank, but it appeared that on Sept. 8 the Dutch tug *Thames* searched the vicinity where the ship had been on fire, but only found large patches of oil and some drifting cargo. It was therefore presumed that the fire eventually reached the explosives and that the vessel blew up and sank.

The findings of the Court were signed by all its members.

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