

"ITALIAN PRINCE" LOSS

German Master's Letter on the Fire

MR. CARPMAEL'S QUESTIONS ON OIL FUEL SYSTEM

Inquiry Adjourned till Feb. 22

The Board of Trade Inquiry into the loss of the British steamer *Italian Prince*, which was abandoned on fire off Finisterre in September last, was continued yesterday. Previously the Court had sat at The Niblett Hall, Temple, E.C., but the venue of the Inquiry has now been changed to the Institution of Civil Engineers. Mr. Welch, a Board of Trade surveyor, continued his evidence. Subsequently the master was recalled and questioned on the subject of the abandonment of the ship. Mr. Bateson read a letter from the master of the German steamer *Njassa*, in the course of which it was stated that the *Italian Prince*, some six or seven hours after her abandonment, was only on fire in No. 4 hold and the after superstructure. The Wreck Commissioner raised a number of points on the oil fuel installation, smothering arrangements and boat and fire station lists, and the Inquiry was adjourned until Feb. 22 to enable Mr. Pilcher to call evidence on the matters raised.

The inquiry is being held before Mr. K. S. Carpmael, K.C., sitting as Wreck Commissioner, with whom are 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. R. A. Clyde (instructed by Messrs. Clyde & Co.) appeared for the cargo underwriters. 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. Bovill, 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 and 11.

Mr. F. J. Welch, engineer and ship surveyor to the Board of Trade, continued his evidence.

Mr. BATESON asked if smothering could have been effectively used at any stage.

Mr. WELCH replied, "If the oil supply had been shut off and if batten- ing down had been done."

To some extent it would have been effective even if the oil had not been shut down. He thought oil leaking from the discharge pipe was the cause of the fire. He was of the opinion that the port side fire was caused by a flash in the boiler tops. He was quite definite it was not due to the lagging. The starboard fire was caused from an exposed leak. He was of the opinion that the gas and oil from the back of the discharge pipes was carried up by the up draught. It would be a mixture of smoke, gas and flame on its path round the starboard boiler. There was no means of closing the annular space round the funnel.

METHODS OF FIGHTING FIRE

Dealing with methods of fighting the fire, Mr. Welch said regarding the oil supply that the proper course would have been to shut off at an early date the discharge valve. That should have been shut to isolate the pipe—which ran past the boiler—as much as possible. He would have then shut the master valve on the boiler front. The shutting of the master valve was of secondary importance. The amount which would have run back was very small indeed.

Dealing with the fire itself, Mr. Welch said it was tackled in the correct way.

Mr. BATESON: Could any steps other than were taken have been taken to find out what the source of the fire was?—I would have expected the fire to have been seen from the top of the starboard fender plate in the stokehold.

He would have tackled it with extinguishers and with hose. Having used the extinguishers and then the hose, if the fire had shown no signs of getting less it would have meant he had not tackled it in the right way or that it was being fed. If it had got less with the effect of what he was doing obviously he would have carried on doing that. If he could have seen no means of applying the hose more effectively and the fire was getting ahead and he had been in complete ignorance of what was causing it, he would shut up the stokehold and put the steam on.

Mr. CARPMAEL: Before you attack a fire you have to plan operations?—Yes.

You have to have someone in charge?—Yes.

And you have to know, in fighting it, where the fire is?—That is absolutely right.

If it is in a number of places that would be essential knowledge for the man in charge?—Yes.

Mr. BATESON asked about the fire on the deck, which had been stated to have been caused by paint from the funnel, and Mr. WELCH expressed the view that this could have been dealt with by sweeping the paint on to the steel portion of the deck.

Mr. PILCHER: During the investigation you have made, the owners of the

Italian Prince have done all they could to help you?

Mr. WELCH: That is correct. And to facilitate your investigations?—Yes.

If the valve on the top of the boiler which emits steam to the smothering apparatus was in good order and the perforated holes were free, is there any other portion of the apparatus which could require examination or survey?—Only the bore of the pipe itself.

Mr. WELCH added that with the inch-bore, internal corrosion and collection of scale was likely.

Mr. PILCHER: What should be done in your view?—The obvious thing is to put the steam through it.

One of the lengths of pipe might have been corroded at the neck. It might have been so corroded as to have blocked the bore or necked it up. The inch pipe was the weakness in the installation.

Dealing with fire extinguishers, Mr. PILCHER asked, "Do you agree that five 2-gallon foamites are as good as one 10-gallon of foamite?"

Mr. WELCH: No. Witness added that in his opinion five 2-gallons would not be as good as one 10-gallon, but he would raise no objection to an owner who expressed the view that the reverse was the case.

Mr. PILCHER: May it well be that where you have an oil gas fire such as you have been assuming, it may be better to fight a fire of that kind with a larger number of portable extinguishers than one large, and perhaps cumbersome, machine?—It may be, yes.

Mr. Pilcher suggested a possible source of weakness of the pipe might have been due to a bump received by the outside of the vessel in the immediate vicinity of the pipe. Mr. WELCH said he thought this very unlikely.

Mr. PILCHER: The pressure to which the pipe was subjected was not excessive and I do not think you suggested the owners had left undone anything they ought to have done with relation to the maintenance of the pipe?—That is so.

TANK TOPS REASONABLY CLEAN

Mr. WELCH continued that he was quite satisfied that the condition of the tank tops had no bearing on this fire and that they were reasonably clean.

Mr. PILCHER: If one could block up the various openings to which you refer then the steam smothering apparatus might be effective?—It might be effective up to the 110 lb. I spoke of.

In further answer to Mr. Pilcher, Mr. WELCH said that 40 minutes from the outbreak of the fire and when the burners had been put out, the pressure would be about 90 lb.

Mr. PILCHER: Steam smothering would have been no good?—It would have been less effective.

WITNESS added that the operation of batten- ing down could have been done in 20 minutes. The stokehold and engine-room would both have had to have been dealt with.

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Mr. PILCHER: You would have had to shut off four engine-room ventilators?—That would have been advisable.

Up to a certain time and certain boiler pressure they could say that steam smothering would have been effective. Mr. WELCH said. From that time on the effectiveness fell off, and he was quite unable to say at what point it would or would not put out the fire.

Mr. HAVERS: You have arrived at a theory as to what was the cause of the fire on this ship by a process of elimination of all other causes of the fire?—Yes.

There were about six other possible sources of the fire you considered before you arrived at your final conclusion?—Yes.

The same sort of process would have to have been followed by the man on the spot who was trying to think what was the cause of the fire?—With the difference that he had the opportunity of seeing certain things that could help him immediately.

How long did it take you to arrive at any conclusion as to the cause of the fire?—It took me weeks because I had to make detailed inquiries and study plans.

Did you attach considerable importance to the deposition of Mr. Welsh—because that was the only evidence that anyone had seen oil burning at all? No doubt that was a very valuable clue to you, wasn't it?—I did not attach very much importance to the fact that Welsh saw oil burning. The importance of his evidence was on the cause of ignition.

Did you accept Mr. Welsh's evidence that he saw oil burning on the tank top?—I accepted it with caution.

The chief engineer would not have had the advantage you had of having all the information that could be obtained?—Obviously not.

From that point of view he would be at a great disadvantage in arriving at a conclusion?—I cannot answer that without mentioning the advantages of being on the spot.

TIME TO FIND OUT CAUSE

In what time do you think the chief engineer ought to have come to the conclusion this was an oil fire?—In a quarter of an hour from the alarm.

How long had there been a leakage of oil before ignition occurred?—It might have been days—a strictly limited leak.

Witness added that he would not necessarily have expected to find oil on the tank top.

In answer to Mr. Carpmael, Mr. WELCH said there must be some criticism of the failure to attempt to refill extinguishers. The refills were on board for the express purpose of putting these extinguishers ready for a further outbreak as soon as possible. That should be done as soon as possible.

In answer to a further question by Mr. Carpmael, witness said that he was definitely of the opinion that at

an early stage there was a flash of the gas which was being evolved by the leak, and that flash was neither seen nor heard, and that was quite understandable. He considered that the flash of gas ignited the dusty end of the pipe line in the steam pipes on the boiler tops and it was rather that which was seen burning. The further fire low down on the port side was either of some material such as ash or waste or something lying in the wind to retain enough dust to be ignited.

Mr. CARPMAEL: The flickering is consistent with a layer of oil on the tank top?—No, because the flash cannot in my experience ignite oil lying on the surface of the tank top.

Mr. BATESON: Is there any explanation as to how the fire could go on, taking into account the drop in pressure?—I think there is evidence to cover that field.

Dealing with possibilities, Mr. WELCH said that if the leak that was supplying the fire before the pump was stopped remained at the same size after the pump was stopped, there would have been no continued fire. There was a possibility of the leak being enlarged by the fire itself. A split in the pipe would not so readily have the same result.

Mr. BATESON referred to a letter from the master of a German vessel to the vessel's owners, containing an extract from the log-book. In answer to Mr. Havers regarding this, Mr. Bateson said there was no suggestion made that there was premature abandonment in this case.

Mr. CARPMAEL said the question passing through his mind was whether the decision was taken with little consultation between the master and the chief engineer.

The master of the *Italian Prince*, Captain HALLOWAY, was recalled, and said he decided to tackle the fire from down below at the original base of the fire, and for that reason he sent all extinguishers from the deck, wheel-house and saloon, and all anti-fire apparatus. He thought he must have received some report in between the time he had a message from the third officer and the chief officer told him "things were pretty bad." He tried to go down himself to see conditions, and tried to go down through the stokehold from the starboard entrance. He got some way but could not get any farther. Fumes were bad. That was about 20 minutes after the first alarm.

DECISION TO ABANDON SHIP

Mr. CARPMAEL: How long after the first alarm did you get a report from the third officer?—About five or seven minutes.

The explosions had occurred before the chief officer came to him, he added. It was some considerable time after this that he gave the order to abandon ship.

Mr. CARPMAEL: How long?—I cannot tell the time.

In further answer to Mr. Carpmael, Captain HALLOWAY said he did not think of employing the four men passengers in any fire fighting.

Mr. CARPMAEL: Why not?—One was, I know, more or less a cripple. The other three I did not consider whatever.

It sounds a natural thing to do?—Yes, it does now.

It did not strike you at the time?—No.

Before you took the decision to abandon ship did you think of consulting the chief engineer and chief officer?—No, but before the final abandoning there was the chief officer on the right hand side of me and chief engineer on the other. I asked: "Do you think we could do anything more?" They said, "No," they did not think so.

He did not consult them before the abandonment. He decided to abandon ship himself.

In reply to Mr. Addis, he said that he had received a letter from the wireless operator after he had got home. His relations with the wireless operator were the same as with other officers. He made no suggestion he had left him behind.

Mr. CARPMAEL read extracts from the letter which said, "You have the satisfaction of knowing you did the only thing possible in the circumstances."

Mr. BATESON read a translation of the letter from the captain of the German steamer *Njassa* to the owners of that vessel. The letter said that as already advised, the *Njassa* encountered the burning *Italian Prince* on Sept. 7, 1938, in the forenoon. As they learned later through a Press announcement, a portion of the passengers and crew were landed in Portland by the Italian steamer *Atlantide*. According to the story of these people, the ship was said to have explosive materials on board. The premature abandonment of the ship by the crew might be attributable thereto.

"According to a radiogram received from the Italian steamer *Albisola*," the translation continued, "the *Italian Prince* had already been abandoned by the crew six to seven hours prior to our arrival at the burning vessel. When we were in close proximity to the burning vessel, four hours in the forenoon, on Sept. 7, 1938, the vessel was only afire in No. 4 hold and the after superstructure. The whole of the forepart, including the bridge, was quite unaffected."

"If, then, as already remarked, a premature abandonment of the ship by the crew is comprehensible by reason of the existing danger of explosion, we have no explanation as to why the crew which boarded other vessels did not give immediate suitable warning to all ships likely to be involved. The vessel at the time of the accident was situated off the most-frequented portion of the Spanish coast (Cape Finisterre).

"The wireless station of the s.s. *Njassa* was in continuous occupation

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at the time in question. Moreover, according to our observations, a number of other ships proceeded to the casualty. These could also not have received any warning, as otherwise they would have neglected to do so, or at least circulated a corresponding warning to other vessels. In the general interest, I therefore ask you to communicate this report to the competent authorities in order to learn what was the further fate of the *Italian Prince* and why this vessel's command failed to circulate corresponding warnings to other ships. By this neglect, under the circumstances, grave danger might have arisen to other vessels."

Mr. PILCHER submitted that there was nothing to show that the owners of the *Italian Prince* had neglected any work of maintenance in regard to the oil fuel discharge pipe. There was no evidence which went to show they had been in any way neglectful in that respect.

Mr. CARPMAEL said that it was not a question of maintenance, rather a question of general policy with regard to the installation of the oil fuel system. Mr. Carpmael added that the position appeared to be so far as the owners were concerned that they were faced with the position that their ship was fitted with a comparatively old type of oil fuel installation. It had not been used for many years, and when they did decide to change over to oil fuel they apparently gave no consideration to the new knowledge and new regulations. For example, with regard to the regulations they did not comply with the rule that pipes should always be visible. That was a matter which could easily have been remedied by removal of the fender plates. The smothering arrangement was apparently really not considered by the person responsible. The whole system had fallen into disuse, and he was fairly satisfied at the moment that he did not give consideration at the time to that at all. Then there was the fire foam, and no notice taken of these recommendations of the Board of Trade even after repeated attention had been drawn to them. Finally there was the issue of the obsolete boat and fire station lists. These were the matters which seemed to him to concern the evidence.

Mr. PILCHER said that a letter had been written by a firm of engineers saying that the oil fuel installation had been tested to 400 lb., and was approved by Lloyd's, and the owners had spent £14,600 in repairs in the last two years.

Mr. CARPMAEL said he was not making a reflection on Mr. Pilcher's clients: it was just that he wished to know.

The hearing was adjourned to Feb. 22 in the Institution of Civil Engineers, unless notice was received to the contrary. The adjournment was to enable Mr. Pilcher to call evidence on the questions raised.



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