

"ITALIAN PRINCE" LOSS

B.O.T. Surveyor's Theories on the Fire

FURTHER EVIDENCE FROM THE CREW AT THE INQUIRY

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 at The Niblett Hall, Temple, E.C., yesterday. It was the fifth day's proceedings, and the Inquiry was adjourned until Monday, when it will resume at the Institution of Civil Engineers. Yesterday evidence was given by the fourth engineer, a number of the crew and by the master of the yacht *Viva II*, which came alongside the *Italian Prince* after she had been abandoned. He described the fire in the passenger ports as "white," and said that the fore part of the ship was very much alight. Mr. F. J. Welch, a Board of Trade surveyor, said that he had formed the view that the outbreak was an oil fuel fire. He was definitely of the opinion that the supply of oil to the fire was not cut off at the time that the fire was discovered.

The inquiry is being held before Mr. K. S. Carpmal, 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 and 10.

Mr. SIDNEY REAY, fourth engineer, said he was serving in the *Italian Prince* when she was lost; he had not served in her before. He had served with the Prince Line about 4½ years. His experience had been only with motorships. He was keeping watch by himself in the engine-room.

Mr. BATESON: When you went on watch was there anything abnormal in the engine-room?—Nothing at all.

EFFORTS TO EXTINGUISH FLAMES

The first he knew of anything out of the ordinary, WITNESS continued, was when he heard a bell rung on the manoeuvring platform and heard a shout, and he saw flames reflected on the starboard boiler. He got a fire extinguisher and attempted to play it towards the fire under the boiler, but that was not very successful. He got a second extinguisher and played it on the flames at the junction of the tank top and the ship's side. This did not have the effect of reducing the flames but only kept them in one place. He removed the inboard and outboards and the floor plates to get a better shot at the fire. The chief engineer and other members of the engine-room crew came down. A third extinguisher seemed to damp the flames, which seemed to subside.

Some of the deck hands came down, and fire was reported from the port side and another extinguisher was used. The boat'sun let down a deck hose and in quite a short time the fire was put out. Then they heard an explosion above the starboard boiler. He took a hose and went under the boiler and played the hose on the fire. He went out of the engine-room and went up to his room. His clothes had been ripped by crawling underneath the boiler. He got to his room and obtained some more clothes and went to his boat station. There was a boat ready to lower away and he got into the boat. At first he had thought the fireman had had a blow back or something had come from the stokehole. He turned off the pump because he thought it safer at that time.

Mr. ADDIS: Was there any difference of opinion as to the best way of dealing with this fire?—None.

Mr. ADDIS: Had you any reason to believe it was going to develop into a serious fire?—I was of the opinion it was a small fire and could be brought under control.

When in the boat do you remember the crew shouting out for the wireless operator?—Yes, and we pulled back and got him into our boat.

CONDITION OF TANK TOPS

In answer to Mr. Pilcher, the WITNESS said that the condition of the tank tops was comparatively clean. He could not see any oil which might have trickled down.

Mr. PILCHER: How long were you on the tank top?—About 20 minutes.

Mr. REAY added that he could prove it was not dirty on the tank top because he wore a white sweater which did not show any trace of fuel oil afterwards.

In reply to Mr. Havers, he said that there were about six foam fire extinguishers and they all operated successfully mechanically.

Before he received the report that there was a fire in the port side the fire on the starboard side seemed to have been practically out. He heard one big explosion. When he went

round to the starboard again the fire had increased in intensity.

In reply to Mr. Carpmal, Mr. Reay said he formed the impression it was a fuel oil fire.

Mr. JOSEPH CONNELLY, donkeyman greaser, said that two hoses were playing in the engine-room. Answering Mr. Pilcher, he said that he did not see the paint or bitumastic burning down the side of the ship as he could not actually see the ship's side.

Mr. CARPMAEL: When you were down on the tank top what state was it in?—I should say it was clean.

Mr. HAROLD LEADSTONE, another donkeyman greaser, said that he saw that lagging on one of the pipes of the engine-room was glowing. When the order was given to abandon ship he went in the after port boat in which were passengers. Flames came out of the top of the funnel, and at the base of the funnel. The *Italian Prince* was like a furnace.

Captain WALLACE GRIMP, who said he had held a master's certificate for 28 years, stated that he was master of the motor yacht *Viva II*, on passage from Cairo to Southampton. "On Sept. 7," he said, "my chief officer sighted the *Italian Prince*. I had a report of the fire just after four in the morning. After a quarter-of-an-hour to 20 minutes we closed on her. We had all hands on deck, and when we got alongside I could see the boats had gone away."

Captain Grimp added that he steamed round the vessel and stopped his engines and lowered a boat and sent three of his seamen. The *Viva II* lay about 200 yards away. The *Italian Prince* headed practically east. There was very little wind. The *Viva II* lay on the port (weather) side. There was no fire round the funnel. That had burned out.

"WHITE FIRE"

"In the passenger ports there was white fire, almost as if you had put searchlights inside. The fore end was very much alight, and the after end was alight, but not so much as the fore end. There was no smoke coming from the funnel."

By Mr. Addis: He had no automatic alarm on his wireless.

In answer to Mr. Bateson, Captain Grimp said that Vercy lights were going off from the *Italian Prince* for a considerable time.

Mr. RHODES, chief officer, recalled, said that there had been boat drill at the beginning of the voyage but no fire drill.

Mr. FRANCIS JARDINE WELCH, engineer and ship surveyor to the Board of Trade, said that he understood the smothering valve on the deck could not be used because burning paint from the funnel was falling on top of it.

Mr. Welch added that the fire appliances the vessel had when she arrived in London were not up to the standard recommended by the Board of Trade.

SHIPPING AND CARGO

Lower Great Western

By cargo

On 1st inst. the ship
"Hesperus" left London
for Bristol, carrying
cotton, wool, and
other goods.

On 2nd inst. the ship
"Hesperus" arrived
at Bristol, bringing
cotton, wool, and
other goods.

On 3rd inst. the ship
"Hesperus" left Bristol
for London, carrying
cotton, wool, and
other goods.

On 4th inst. the ship
"Hesperus" arrived
at London, bringing
cotton, wool, and
other goods.

On 5th inst. the ship
"Hesperus" left London
for Bristol, carrying
cotton, wool, and
other goods.

On 6th inst. the ship
"Hesperus" arrived
at Bristol, bringing
cotton, wool, and
other goods.

On 7th inst. the ship
"Hesperus" left Bristol
for London, carrying
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On 8th inst. the ship
"Hesperus" arrived
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Mr. BATESON: As far as the evidence goes, was she fully equipped when she sailed on her last voyage?—She was deficient in foam in the machinery spaces.

Mr. WELCH added that she required 18, and she apparently had 12 gallons of foam-making equipment. The oil fuel installation was particularly good from the fire risk point of view with one exception, which was the position of the discharge pipe from the unit to the boiler fronts. He was not criticising it from any particular rules. The pipe line was not in a position where leakage there would be obvious. Referring to the steam smothering apparatus, he said that the arrangement as shown in his plan was slightly different from the normal arrangement in that it allowed steam to go to both places on opening the valve. It would not be criticised on that score. As an arrangement this was satisfactory.

Mr. BATESON: You have heard the account of the accidental opening of that valve and the emission of steam into the boiler-room?—The chief engineer's description of what happened in regard to the discharge of steam was entirely consistent with what I would expect if the valve was cracked.

POSSIBLE CAUSES CONSIDERED

Mr. BATESON: Have you considered possible causes and sources of the fire?—Yes.

Have you taken into account the evidence which has been given about it?—Yes.

Have you considered any material other than the evidence we have heard here in Court—statements or documents?—A considerable amount of research.

Have you considered any evidence about the fire other than the evidence we have heard here about the beginnings and nature of the fire?—Yes.

WITNESS said that he had immediately found out who was in the stokehold on watch when the fire was discovered, and was told there was a fireman by the name of Welsh. This man was called with the officers and other witnesses and made a sworn statement. Mr. Welch said he had used that statement in arriving at a conclusion.

Mr. BATESON said that he understood that this witness was now somewhere in the Antarctic. He left shortly after his statement had been taken before the official investigation had been ordered.

Mr. WELCH said he had formed a view on the possible or probable source of the fire.

Mr. BATESON: What kind of fire was it?—I think it was an oil fuel fire.

Mr. Bateson referred to suggestions made of the burning of bitumastic on the side of the ship.

Mr. WELCH said that the ship had been coated with bitumastic solution followed by bitumastic enamel. The

enamel was inflammable, but less so than the solution.

Mr. BATESON: If it did catch fire would it spread over the whole surface where the enamel was or remain in one place?—From the evidence I have I would definitely say it could not spread because it has an extremely high fire point.

Is it possible that the bitumastic became ignited before the oil became ignited?—Quite impossible.

The first place he considered where the oil could have come from to become ignited was the cargo oil in No. 3.

FIREMAN'S DEPOSITIONS

The depositions of Charles Douglas Welsh, a fireman trimmer, were read by Mr. BATESON. Welsh deposed that when he took over the 8-12 p.m. watch at 7 55 p.m. on Sept. 6 everything was normal, and the stokehold generally was in a clean condition. About 8 5 p.m. he changed the starboard wing burner and used the torch to ignite the clean burner, lighting the torch at the starboard low fire and extinguishing it in the pot on the forward bulkhead in the usual manner. The burner lighted normally and there was no flash and no drips at the burner or externally and he was certain the burner functioned normally. He was satisfied all the six burners in use were burning correctly.

At 8 30 he went into the engine-room and came back into the stokehold. While pacing across the stokehold he saw through the starboard pass flames appear below the starboard boiler. The flame appeared to be from oil burning on the tank top and the flame was spreading from forward to aft. He warned the donkeyman in the engine-room and he rang the bell while Welsh returned to the stokehold and put out the three burners in the starboard boiler. He started to go up the stokehold ladder to give the alarm when he heard voices below and returned. He assisted the engineers to remove the fender plates in the front of the starboard boiler which were hotter than usual. Through the opening he saw flames from the tank top at the forward end of the boiler.

Questioned as to possibilities of the origin of the fire Mr. WELCH, continuing his evidence, referred to the possibility of careless handling of the torch which he knew from experience did drop burning paraffin. It might have put a drop of burning paraffin on the tank top through a slight gap. He did not, however, regard that as the most probable cause of setting anything alight because of the "time lag." He considered a spark from that same torch igniting gas, but again he had to point out the difficulty of time. He had thought of the possibility of a man having lit a cigarette passing from the engine-room to the boiler-room and carelessly throwing a match down between the tie plate and the boiler.

A POSSIBILITY

Mr. BATESON: Could a lighted cigarette have produced the necessary fire if it had gone on smouldering long enough?—It is a possibility.

Having heard of the course the fire took, do you think the supply of oil to the fire was effectively cut off?—I am definitely of the opinion that the supply to the fire was not cut off at the time the fire was discovered.

Was it cut off, in your view, effectively at any time up to the time the *Vica II*, and the German ship were there?—Not necessarily.

It might have been cut off. It might have burned the available oil. The photograph appeared to show there was no oil burning at the time when it was taken.

Mr. BATESON: Having regard to the nature of this fire, could the smothering apparatus have been used effectively at any time during the course of this fire?—I come up against serious difficulty there.

Without any battening down whatever and excluding draught, it was difficult to say that the steam would be effective.

On the assumption that battening down could have been done, he would reply in the affirmative.

The hearing was adjourned until Monday, when it will be resumed at the Institution of Civil Engineers.

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