

# "ITALIAN PRINCE" LOSS

## Chief Engineer's Views on the Fire

### MORE EVIDENCE ON STEAM SMOTHERING APPARATUS

The Board of Trade Inquiry into the loss by fire of the British steamer *Italian Prince* was continued at The Niblett Hall, Temple, E.C., yesterday. It was the fourth day of the proceedings, and at the outset the chief engineer of the vessel continued his evidence. He was questioned on the subject of the steam smothering apparatus and explained that he was unable to get near enough to the fire to see whether it was an oil fire. He stated that when he was second engineer in the vessel there was 40 tons of oil on the tank tops "swishing about as the ship rolled." Evidence was also given by the second and third engineers, and the inquiry was again adjourned.

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 & Watson, 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. Norton & 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. Hlewson on behalf of the British Mexican Petroleum Company, Ltd.

The previous proceedings were reported in LLOYD'S LIST of Feb. 7, 8 and 9.

Mr. ROBERT J. J. SMITH, chief engineer of the *Italian Prince*, continuing his evidence, said in answer to Mr. Bateson that he did not form any opinion at the time as to the cause of the fire. "I did not anticipate its being an oil fire," he said. "While I was doing my best to put out the fire I was considering preserving steam and keeping water in the boilers. I could not get near enough to see whether it was an oil fire. I thought at the time it might have been the bitumastic burning on the ship's side.

Mr. BATESON: The first thing you did was to find whether the pump was working and you found it had been stopped?—Exactly. If it had not been shut off I would have stopped it.

In order to prevent oil flowing to the fire?—I took the precaution of stopping the pump until I found the cause.

Did you take the view it was an oil fire?—Not while I was on the ship.

#### AT A LOSS TO UNDERSTAND IT

What did you think was burning?—I was at a loss to understand it.

You shut off the valve from the settling tank?—Yes, after the explosions. I had in mind at the time the possibility of further explosions and the possible fracture of pipes.

If it had been a bitumastic fire would there have been no difficulty in putting it out?—That I could not say. I was more concerned with putting the fire out than with finding out the cause.

I am more concerned with whether you thought it was an oil fire or whether it was due to some other cause.—I just simply did not know.

Looking back, don't you think it was an oil fire which was being continually fed with oil?—No. I don't think it was being fed because I don't think oil was flowing to feed it.

Did you discover by an accident that the steam-smothering apparatus was working?—Yes; the valve was inadvertently turned off and I saw steam under the starboard boiler.

Was it because the valve was leaking?—That I don't know.

Did you personally make any report to the master during the fire?—Yes. Some time before the explosions. The third officer called down and asked me, "How are you getting on down there?" I accepted that message as coming from the master and I replied: "All right; it will be all right in a few minutes." At that time the position was very favourable, and we were getting control of the fire.

You never saw him at all with a view to discussing arrangements for dealing with the fire?—No.

#### OIL ON THE TANK TOPS

In answer to Mr. Clyde, Mr. Smith said there was, while he was second engineer of the ship, 40 tons of oil on the tank tops. "swishing about as the ship rolled."

Mr. CLYDE: It would get over the steam smothering lines, would it not?—I should hardly think so. I should imagine the pipes to be further off the tank tops than to be immersed in the oil.

There would be some splashing up?—That is possible.

Did you not in those circumstances think it would have been advisable when you became chief engineer to have a look at the pipe?—I thought at that time the steam smothering was all right.

Mr. SMITH said that until he had heard the matter raised at the inquiry he had no knowledge that the ship's steam smothering apparatus was in question. At no time, he said, had the Board of Trade surveyors Mr. Blackmore and Mr. Turnbull mentioned it. "I showed Mr. Turnbull the smothering arrangements for the

deck," he added, "but he did not ask or make any suggestion about anything more. I do not recollect going down into the engine-room with him."

Mr. Smith said he had never actually seen the steam smothering line, but realised it was all right when he saw steam escaping under the boiler.

In answer to Mr. Addis, he said the relations between the ship's company were all that could be desired.

Mr. ADDIS: Was she what you would call a happy ship?—Yes.

Did you receive proper assistance and co-operation at the time of the fire?—Yes.

In your opinion could anything have been done to put out the fire at the time the ship was abandoned?—Definitely not.

What was the conduct of the crew?—Everything was orderly and I don't think anything could have been conducted better.

Mr. PILCHER: Supposing you had been asked to produce your fire-fighting appliances in the engine-room, what would you have produced?—Everything. I would have convinced the surveyor that the steam smothering line was there. I would not have said it was there until I had seen it. But steam smothering was never mentioned to me during either Mr. Blackmore's or Mr. Turnbull's visit.

Mr. SMITH said the apparatus had not to his knowledge been removed during the time he had been chief engineer. He recalled on one occasion when he was second engineer having washed oil from the tank tops.

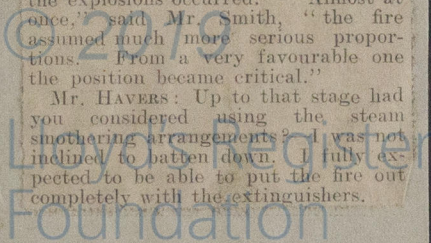
Mr. PILCHER: Is it likely that you would leave oil swishing about on the tank tops?—Certainly not.

Mr. SMITH added that if there had been any oil on the tank tops it would have found its way through the motion of the ship into the coffer dam.

#### EVERYTHING IN PERFECT ORDER

In answer to Mr. Havers, Mr. Smith said that "everything was in perfect order" when he made his routine inspection on the night of the fire. When he went below in response to the alarm bell the three men already on duty were doing exactly what he would have instructed them to do. The whole of his staff had mustered within seven or eight minutes. He saw what he took to be the last small flicker of flame, and it appeared at that time that they were gaining control of the fire. Then the explosions occurred. "Almost at once," said Mr. Smith, "the fire assumed much more serious proportions. From a very favourable one the position became critical."

Mr. HAVERS: Up to that stage had you considered using the steam smothering arrangements? I was not inclined to batten down. I fully expected to be able to put the fire out completely with the extinguishers.







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WS15-0059 1/2



When you discovered that the fire was more serious than at first you considered, did it occur to you that it might be advisable to use the smothering apparatus?—After the explosions and the fire increased in intensity the paint on the intake fan casing and the screen bulkhead over the starboard boiler was burning, and it occurred to me that the fire was more on the boiler tops. Steam pressure was getting low; battening down would have taken some time and I thought keeping the hose going would be to more effect than steam smothering.

Would there be any difficulty in battening down in this case?—I cannot see how it could be done.

The WRECK COMMISSIONER: Do firemen smoke in the stokehold?—They are ordered not to but they sometimes do.

Is it not dangerous in oil-burning ships?—No. The stokehold is well covered.

Mr. Smith said that no steam was generated from the time that the oil pump was closed.

Mr. CARPMAEL: I do not see why the pump should have been shut off unless you suspected it was an oil fire.—It was a precautionary measure until I could investigate the cause.

Did you make any inquiry as to who had shut it?—Not at the time. I was quite satisfied when I saw it had been stopped. If it had not been stopped I would have done it myself. I inquired while we were on the French ship who had stopped it and the fourth engineer gave me to understand he did.

Did you ask him where the fire had started?—His description was the same as mine.

Mr. GEORGE D. RITCHIE, a principal engineer surveyor of Lloyd's Register, agreed with Mr. Porges that the fact that a surveyor's report contained no mention of any steam smothering apparatus would not necessarily mean that such apparatus did not exist.

Mr. WM. F. CHAPMAN, a Lloyd's surveyor, recalled, said he did not recollect, from his inspection of the *Italian Prince*, whether the ship had a steam smothering apparatus or not.

Mr. I. BLACKMORE, a Board of Trade engineer surveyor, also recalled, spoke of his interview with the chief engineer in January, 1938, when the ship was at Millwall Dock. He saw no smothering appliance, he said. To have seen it would have required a detailed examination.

Mr. ALISTAIR M. MCNEIL, second engineer of the *Italian Prince*, described the flames in the stokehold as "moving and flickering here and there." The flames under the port boiler, he said, were on the tank top. He thought it was paint or oil vapour which was burning.

Mr. BATESON: Have you now any doubt that it was oil and oil vapour that was burning?—No.

WITNESS said that he saw no flames in the engine-room, in the stokehold passage or in front of the boilers. He knew there was a steam smothering

apparatus in the ship: the valve had been pointed out to him.

In answer to the Commissioner, he said he did not see the wireless operator until after the ship had been abandoned.

Mr. JOHN M. PYNE, third engineer of the *Italian Prince*, said he could not get into the engine-room when he was awakened, at the outbreak of fire, on account of the fumes and oil-fuel smoke, so he sent for the smoke helmet. On looking at the port side tank top it seemed to him that the pipes were on fire. He knew there was a steam smothering apparatus in the engine-room and that it could be operated from the deck.

The inquiry was adjourned until to-day.



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