

"ITALIAN PRINCE" LOSS

The Steam Smothering Apparatus

MR. K. S. CARPMAEL'S QUESTIONS TO SUPERINTENDENT

Vessel's Master in the Box

The Board of Trade inquiry into the loss of the British steamer *Italian Prince*, 3478 tons gross, which was abandoned on fire in the Bay of Biscay last September, while on a voyage to Mediterranean ports with a cargo which included explosives, was continued at The Niblett Hall, Temple, E.C., yesterday. On the resumption Mr. S. N. Kent, the owners' superintendent, continued his evidence. He was questioned at length by the Wreck Commissioner on the steam smothering apparatus with which the vessel was equipped. Later in the day the master went into the witness box and told his story of the fire. He had not completed his evidence when the Court adjourned.

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.

Questions about the existence of a steam smothering apparatus in the *Italian Prince* were asked when Mr. S. N. Kent, chief superintendent engineer of the Prince Line, continued his evidence. Cross-examined by Mr. Pilcher, Mr. Kent said that having regard to his opinion that the ship's fire-fighting equipment was adequate he did not feel justified in recommending the expense of the additional installation of a 10-gallon froth extinguisher.

In answer to Mr. Bateson, he said he had not mentioned the existence of the steam smothering apparatus to a Board of Trade surveyor who inquired about the ship's fire-fighting equipment because he wanted confirmation from a colleague at Hartlepool that the installation had been inspected and approved by the Board.

SHIP'S CONVERSIONS

Questioned by the Wreck Commissioner, Mr. Kent spoke of the ship's conversion to oil-burning, reconversion to coal fuel, and further adaptation for exclusive burning of oil.

Mr. CARPMAEL: While she was burning coal I suppose the steam smothering apparatus would not have been considered necessary?—No.

What sort of pipes were they?—Iron pipes.

And during the first 12 years of her life the line was unnecessary in your opinion?—Yes.

Was it ever examined?—One of the chief engineers examined it within two months of the ship's arrival in London from New York on January 26, 1938.

For the first 12 years of her life did anyone examine the smothering line?—No.

Had it fallen into complete disuse: had it in fact never been used?—That is right.

Was it ever surveyed?—No.

There is only one valve necessary to work the arrangement and that can be worked either on deck with the spindle valve or down below?—Yes, on the boiler tops.

When you turned the vessel over from coal to oil I suppose it would be your responsibility?—Yes.

You would have to see that those in charge knew the installation?—Yes.

And I suppose that the question of fire-fighting ought to be uppermost in your mind?—Yes.

Did you do anything in 1932 about the fire smothering apparatus which you say was fitted?—The ship was converted at Manchester and my superintendent in Manchester supervised the conversion, and Mr. Watson, who had long experience of oil burning, was there. I did not see the vessel at the time.

Did you give any instructions with regard to it?—No instructions except as to conversion.

You have agreed that the steam smothering apparatus had not been used at all?—Yes.

If it was to be any good I suppose you ought to make certain about its condition?—Yes.

Were any steps taken to see that it was in working order?—No other than that the chief engineer would probably examine it. At that time these regulations did not apply.

I do not think you are doing yourself justice: your owners had thought it necessary to fit steam smothering apparatus when the vessel was built: in the event of the vessel burning oil fuel. In those circumstances it is not a question of regulations, is it?—No.

I want to know whether any examination was made of the fittings?—In

the normal way these would be examined when all the under parts of the boilers were examined and reconditioned, as they often were.

Were they examined before the oil-burning conversion in 1932?—I could not honestly say they were; certainly not by me.

You gave no instructions?—No.

Was any examination made at the reconversion in 1937?—That was in the hands of my colleague who attended the vessel.

Does that mean you do not know whether any examination was made?—As far as I am concerned, no.

I suppose it follows that you did not give instructions?—If a colleague is attending a survey you do not tell him what to do because it comes in the day's work. It is one of those things you do naturally.

Are the real facts that the steam smothering arrangements had been entirely overlooked after having never been used?—I can only say that the steam smothering line is in such a position that when any of the boiler bearings or tank tops were dealt with one would naturally look to see if the thing was in order.

I cannot quite understand your not telling Mr. Blackmore (a Board of Trade surveyor) if a steam smothering apparatus was fitted.—I naturally concluded that Mr. Turnbull had dealt with it in Hartlepool and I wanted confirmation.

The matter had been raised before then, had it not?—Yes.

And the vessel had gone to Hartlepool?—Yes.

You had informed Mr. Blackmore that the matter would be raised in Hartlepool?—Yes.

And then he comes back and says the matter had not been attended to, and you did not tell him that the apparatus had been fitted?—I had no confirmation that it had been passed by the Board of Trade.

It is not a question of its approval but of its having been actually fitted and being in the ship.—It is clear in my mind that it had been fitted.

Yes; but why did you not tell Mr. Blackmore so? Is it not the fact that it was entirely overlooked?—Apparently so.

Why did you send for Mr. Lambert (a former chief engineer of the *Italian Prince*) a month ago?—To confirm that the steam smothering apparatus was in order.

So you were still doubtful about it?—Not in my own mind. I asked him when the apparatus was last overhauled and he said he examined it when he was chief engineer of the ship.

THE MAGAZINES

FREDERICK R. T. HUBBARD, a foreman carpenter, said he supervised the construction of magazines in the *Italian Prince* to hold 42 tons of explosives for the Royal Air Force.

JOHN HENRY TAYLOR, a foreman stevedore, said he was in charge of the loading, which was carried out in the presence of one of the ship's officers and of a Government inspector.



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ANDREW RHYNAS, who was in charge of the conversion of the *Italian Prince* to oil burning in May, 1937, said that nothing was said about any steam smothering apparatus when he discussed the ship's fire arrangements with Mr. Kent. After the vessel had left London in March Mr. Kent asked him whether the steam smothering line was in order. Witness mentioned that he heard while the ship was at Hartlepool that there had nearly been an accident on board through a leak or someone's having opened a valve, but as he heard nobody had been injured he made no further inquiries. Both he and Mr. Kent, he said, were agreed that the Board of Trade regulations were satisfied by the 14 gallons of foam extinguisher which the *Italian Prince* carried.

Mr. Rhynas said he knew of the existence of the steam smothering apparatus when the *Italian Prince* was converted to oil burning, and knew of nothing which might have put it out of order.

Mr. CARPMAEL: If you attached importance to it ought you not to have made sure that the engineers knew about it?—I left it to the chief engineer. I had it in mind but did not discuss it with him.

FLASH POINT OF OIL FUEL

JOHN CLARK, a petroleum tester, told the Commissioner that if any of the oil used by the *Italian Prince* were raised to a certain temperature on an exposed surface it would give off inflammable vapour. It was possible—depending on the air conditions—that the vapour would “flash” without igniting the surface of the oil.

Captain JAMES HALLOWAY, the master of the *Italian Prince*, described the scene on board the vessel when the fire broke out on the beautifully clear night of Sept. 6, with a north-east wind blowing, and a confused, choppy sea. Captain Halloway said he had held an ordinary master's certificate since 1897, and had commanded Prince Line vessels since 1911. He became master of the *Italian Prince* in 1935. The *Italian Prince* loaded cement at Swansea; then went on to the Royal Albert Dock, proceeding to Higham Bight, where she loaded explosives. The ship carried her full complement of twelve passengers. On deck there were two fifty or sixty-foot lengths of canvas hose, 100 ft. of leather hose, two two-gallon extinguishers in the wheel-house, two in the saloon, and more than six anti-fire pistols in the saloon and the officers', passengers' and crew's quarters. Regular fire drills were held on board, never at greater intervals than 14 days, and the company had properly printed forms displayed relating to fire and boat drill. Lifeboat drill was held before leaving Higham Bight, all the passengers, with the exception of the young children, attending. The passengers did not attend the fire drill. There were more

than enough life-jackets, the passengers being fitted at the time of the boat drill.

At this point Captain Halloway said, in answer to Mr. Bateson, that he had been unable to save anything except the ship's scrap log.

About eight o'clock in the evening the ship was to the south of Cape Finisterre, and the third officer was on watch. About half-past eight, while the master was in his room the fire bell rang. It was the chief officer's practice, Captain Halloway explained, to report to him every evening after making an inspection of the ship, and on this night his report was quite satisfactory.

“When I heard the firebell,” witness said, “I went on to the bridge and sent the third officer to inquire where the fire was. I gave instructions for fixing our position and I also took a rough position myself from Cape Finisterre. We were approximately 25 miles south-west of Cape Finisterre: the third officer took a more exact bearing. Everybody went to the fire stations. I got a report from the third officer to say that fire had broken out in the starboard side of the stokehold. I went down to see, leaving the third officer on the bridge. I went to see that the hose and everything were properly laid out and also to try to get down the stokehold from the port side to see if I could get anywhere near. Directly after the fire alarm went the engine-room telegraph rang from the engine-room to ‘Slow,’ and of course I immediately answered it. Then—I suppose in a minute—it rang to ‘Stop.’

“In that time I had changed the course and pulled her position from a true southerly course to right angles in order to turn her to port. After that the ship rapidly lost her weigh, and I went down to see about it. I was prevented by dense smoke and fumes, but I did not at that time see any flame. There were one or two small explosions at that time in the vicinity of the starboard side amidships, and shortly after that there was a heavy dull thud.

“I went back to the bridge and I was so perturbed . . .”

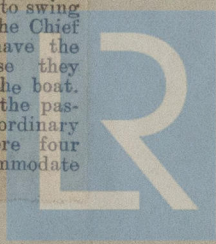
At this point Captain Halloway was overcome with emotion and was allowed to pause a few minutes until he had recovered his calm.

“I decided then,” he continued, “to have the boats swung out in case the fire reached any great dimensions. I did not at that time anticipate that it might. It was only a precautionary measure. The crew of the after starboard boat was broken off from fire-fighting in order to swing out their boat. I sent for the Chief Steward and told him to have the passengers prepared in case they might have to be put in to the boat. That was the boat to which the passengers would go in the ordinary course of events. There were four boats, two of which could accommodate the crew.

LIFEBOAT ON FIRE

“The effect of the fire was a dense mass of smoke passing from the engine-room directly over the boat, and paint from the funnel began to fall on the forward starboard boat, and it was not very long before the whole of the boat was on fire as well as the deck in the vicinity. No steps were taken to put out the fire on the boat because the men were engaged in getting the port lifeboat out for the passengers. I decided to put the passengers there for safety. I never anticipated that it would have been a case of the passengers being picked up by another ship. All the passengers went into the boat with ten members of the crew in charge of the second officer. The boat was cast off and stood by. I sent a message to the wireless operator to send out an SOS just before the passengers left.” About this time, the master went on, one of his officers reported to him that the men seemed to be getting the better of the fire. “I went on to the boat deck,” he said, “with the idea of battening down and having the whole thing smothered. I looked down into the engine-room and saw a glow in the starboard corner. The smoke and fumes were so dense that as they came out of the skylight the smoke curled in wisps and broke into flames. Then I began to be a bit anxious for my men down below.”

At this point, before Captain Halloway had completed his evidence, the inquiry was adjourned until to-day.



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