

## "ITALIAN PRINCE" LOSS

### Board of Trade Inquiry Opened

#### COUNSEL ON POINTS FOR INVESTIGATION

The Board of Trade Inquiry into the loss of the British steamer *Italian Prince*, 3478 tons gross, which was abandoned on fire off Cape Finisterre while on a voyage from London to Malta, Alexandria and other Mediterranean ports last September, was opened before Mr. K. S. Carpmael, K.C., sitting as Wreck Commissioner, in The Niblett Hall, King's Bench Walk, Temple, E.C., yesterday.

Mr. Carpmael was assisted by the following Assessors: Captain W. E. Whittingham, Commander J. R. Williams, Engineer-Lieutenant Commander T. A. Pearson and Mr. A. M. Robb.

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. Reinder & 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. B. Havers (instructed by Messrs. Charles G. Bradshaw & Waterson) 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, and Messrs. Winter & Co. on behalf of Mr. and Mrs. Bovill, passengers.

Mr. BATESON, opening the inquiry for the Board of Trade, said the *Italian Prince* was built in 1921 by the Furness Shipbuilding Company, Ltd., on the Tees, and was fitted with triple-expansion engines of 539 horsepower, built by Richardsons, Westgarth & Co., Ltd. The ship, which was registered at London, had three boilers and was adapted for burning coal or oil. On her last voyage she was burning oil.

#### CARGO INCLUDED EXPLOSIVES

At the time of the voyage the *Italian Prince* was carrying 4478 tons of general cargo, including Government stores and explosives, foodstuffs, machinery, cement and oils. The explosives were carried in magazines aft.

The vessel sailed from the Thames on Sept. 3, with a crew of 34. About 8 o'clock in the evening of the 6th, when the vessel was steaming south, about 30-35 miles west of Cape Finisterre, with a rough sea on the port quarter, a fireman noticed flames under the starboard boiler. He immediately gave the alarm and all efforts were made to deal with the fire. Extinguishers were used to some effect, a hose was rigged; but shortly afterwards some fire was reported on the port side of the stokehold. It was extinguished without much difficulty. About

9 o'clock sounds like that of small explosions were heard in the neighbourhood of the fan inlet, and radio messages were sent out to a number of ships in the vicinity. The fire proved to be uncontrollable, and by 9.45 the whole of the crew and passengers had left the ship without loss of life, being taken off by two other vessels.

The *Italian Prince* was last seen by the crew early the following morning. Two other vessels, a yacht and a German ship, sighted her, and sent boats to investigate. She was then burning aft and amidships, but not forward. It appeared that the vessel sank some time on Sept. 8, since a Dutch salvage vessel found oil and wreckage near the spot where she was last seen.

#### FIRE APPLIANCES

According to the non-statutory regulations, said Mr. Bateson, the *Italian Prince* should have carried 18 gallons of froth fire extinguisher. "That," he added, "is the view the Board of Trade have taken." Actually, the vessel carried 12 gallons of froth extinguisher. Her other fire-fighting equipment was not, in the view of the Board, the equivalent of froth extinguisher.

"The engine-room and boiler-room smothering apparatus was never used, and the reason will have to be gone into at this inquiry," Mr. Bateson continued. He alleged that the owners had been "not only not very helpful, but rather defiant," when their attention was drawn to the Board of Trade's dissatisfaction with the vessel's fire-fighting equipment. It had been said, he added, that as the vessel was to be reconverted to coal burning the owners did not feel inclined to go to the expense of installing further extinguishing apparatus.

Soon after the master of the burning ship got on board the ship which rescued him, said Mr. Bateson, a proper navigational warning was wireless warning shipping that the *Italian Prince* contained explosives; but for some reason the two vessels which approached her later had not picked up the message. The B.B.C., said Mr. Bateson, did not radiate navigational warnings without the sanction of the Admiralty, and it may have been that such sanction was not forthcoming until after the time of broadcasting.

The Board of Trade technical staff, Mr. Bateson said, had formed the theory that the fire on board the *Italian Prince* was properly caused through the ignition of vaporised oil, which probably leaked through a joint in the starboard tank. "That of itself," he added, "would probably not have been disastrous if proper steps had been taken to prevent more oil continually flowing to the leak. There are a number of valves, all or any of which could have been shut, so preventing the oil from reaching the

discharge tap. So far as is known at present there was no fire in the engine-room itself. The fire was confined to the boiler compartment.

"It may be," Mr. Bateson said, summing up his opening statement, "that the owners fell short of the recommendations, and for those reasons their conduct comes in question. The conduct of the chief engineer also comes in question, both with regard to his handling of the valves—or his failure to do so—and also that he seems to have occupied himself more with endeavouring personally to deal with the fire than with organising his staff and the means at his disposal. Finally, the master: his conduct requires some investigation because apparently he gave no orders at all except with regard to the sending out of the S O S message and with regard to getting boats out and getting his crew away. He appears to have made one abortive effort to get down to the engine-room and then to have retired to the bridge and waited for the worst.

"With regard to the wireless operator there is one other matter in which the master may have been at fault. The report is that the operator was left at his post when the ship was abandoned. How that happened I do not know. He was, in fact, rescued by the master's boat. It appears from his statement that he was left on the burning ship without being given any warning of the abandonment. He did swim some short distance and was picked up by the boat."

"The Board of Trade," added Mr. Bateson, "having regard to the presence on board of explosives and other inflammable material, do not feel that there was any premature abandonment of the ship."

#### SURVEYORS' EVIDENCE

Mr. SIDNEY TURNER BRIGHT, a Lloyd's Register surveyor, who was the first witness called by the Board of Trade, said the *Italian Prince* was classed as 100 A1.

Mr. INSLY BLACKMORE, a Board of Trade engineer surveyor, said he inspected the *Italian Prince* in January last year. On board he saw the superintendent engineer of the Prince Line and pointed out to him the "serious deficiency" in the ship's fire-fighting appliances. Mr. Kent, the superintendent, replied that the ship was going to West Hartlepool in a few days, and while there the matter would be rectified in order that the vessel should comply in this respect with the Board of Trade regulations. He again visited Mr. Kent in April and reminded him that the regulations had still not been fully complied with. Mr. Kent's reply was that the ship was shortly to be reconverted to coal burning, and in the meantime was being used largely to "educate" the firm's engineers.

Cross-examined by Mr. Pilcher, Mr. Blackmore agreed that the Board of Trade regulations governing provision of fire-extinguishing equipment were capable of two interpretations.

NON-MARINE

FIRE

CHANGES OF CRAFT

WIRELESS REPORTS



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Mr. JAMES PATRICK TURNBULL, Board of Trade ship surveyor at Middlesbrough, said he visited the *Italian Prince* in March, 1938. When he asked about the fire-fighting arrangements, he was told that the firm did not intend at that time to incur the expense of further appliances.

Mr. SAMUEL N. KENT, chief superintendent of the Prince Line, said the *Italian Prince's* boilers were refitted in May, 1937, for the burning of oil exclusively. He saw the ship on her return from a voyage in January, 1938, when he found two oil pipes were leaking. They were to be examined when the ship reached Hartlepool. Referring to his interview with Mr. Blackmore, Mr. Kent said there were at least 14 gallons of fire-extinguishing liquid on board, and he considered that this met all the requirements.

Mr. Kent, cross-examined by Mr. PILCHER, produced a plan which showed, he pointed out, that the *Italian Prince* at the time of the disaster was fitted with a steam smothering apparatus. At the time when the plans of the vessel were passed, he added, a steam smothering apparatus was not required by Lloyd's Register, but the installation was specified by the owners. This apparatus had never been removed from the ship.

The inquiry was adjourned until to-day.



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