

"ITALIAN PRINCE".

In a letter dated the 6th instant the Owners asked for the Society's comments on the findings of the Court of Enquiry into the loss of this vessel by a fire which originated in the stokehold and, which the Court found, was due to leakage from the oil fuel discharge pipe from the oil pump to the boiler furnaces.

The case is dealt with in the endorsements dated 15.4.39 and 26.4.39 which were drawn up after the findings of the Court were made known.

It is submitted the Owners be informed in reply to their letter that with regard to the position of the oil fuel pipe, the Society's Rule at the time the vessel was built was as follows:-

"Oil fuel pipes should where practicable be placed above the stokehold and engine-room plates and where they are always visible".

It will be seen at once that the Rule is not rigid. It meant that the best place for such pipes was above the stokehold and engine-room plates in places where they were always visible, but that they might be in other places.

The pipe was tested when the vessel was new to 300 lb hydraulic pressure and was satisfactory at that pressure.

This is evidence that the pipe and its joining flanges were of substantial construction.

If the jointing material between the flanges of such a pipe is, as it should be, very thin and impervious to oil, the likelihood of any subsequent trouble from the pipe and its joints is remote in the extreme and in view of this it is considered that the question of visibility at all times is one which could be easily overstressed.

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It cannot be contended that the pipe was in the best possible position but it is held that it was in a suitable position and ~~was always~~ fully in accordance with the spirit of the Rules in force at the time the vessel was built.

It is considered that the loss of this vessel is not to be attributed to the position of the pipe, but to the fact that the oil fuel supply from the tank was not shut off until it was too late.

The reasons for this view are as follows:-

The fire broke out in the stokehold between the ship's side and the starboard boiler, i.e. at the side of the oil fuel discharge pipe. The source of the fire was not obvious, but in view of its situation it is reasonable to say that the first step to be taken should have been to shut off the oil fuel supply since oil was the only combustible material in the stokehold which could initiate a fire.

The Chief Engineer, however, tackled the situation with the idea that the bitumastic (a preservative material applied to steelwork) was on fire, and at no time during the fire did he think it was an oil fire. The 4th Engineer, who was on watch when the alarm was given, at once stopped the oil fuel pump, not because he thought to stop the source of the fire by so doing, but because, as he stated in evidence, he was afraid of a "blow back" at the furnaces.

The stoppage of the pump was not, however, sufficient to stop the flow of oil from the defective pipe, because the oil supply tank was at such a height that the head was sufficient to force the oil through the pump along the defective pipe.

The situation therefore was that although the Staff were doing the best they knew to cope with the situation, the fire continued to be fed with oil.

After a series of explosions had occurred (due to the escaping oil becoming gaseous), but not until then, the Chief engineer took the step which he should have taken at first and shut down the valve on the oil tank, a valve which is required by the Rules for the express purpose of shutting off the oil supply in such an emergency as this.

By this time, however, the boat deck and a life boat were in flames, this deck fire being caused by oil gas passing up between the inner and outer funnels and bursting into flame on reaching the atmosphere. Burning paint fell off the funnel on to the boat deck and boat, and set them alight.

It was the deck fire which caused the Master to give the order to abandon ship, not the fire in the stokehold.

The extent of the stokehold fire at this stage may be gauged by the fact that after the abandon ship order had been given there were some men under the starboard boiler attending to the hoses.

It may be added that the statements that the vessel was built in accordance with plans approved by Lloyd's Register ~~were~~ correct in the main, do not apply to plans of the oil fuel pipes. No plans of these pipes were submitted to this Office for approval, but that does not, of course, exonerate the Society's Surveyors from seeing that the Rules are complied with.



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