

"ITALIAN PRINCE".

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The Court of Enquiry into the loss of this vessel by fire came to the conclusion that the fire was caused by oil issuing from a defect in the oil fuel discharge pipe from the oil pumps to the furnaces.

The nature of the defect could not be ascertained but it would be either a crack or break in the pipe or defective jointing material at the flanges joining two lengths of the pipe together.

The pipe in question was placed between the starboard boiler and the ship's side where it was not easily accessible nor always visible to the engine-room attendants.

The Court came to the conclusion that the position of the pipe and the incomplete compliance with the Board of Trade recommendations for fire extinguishing appliances made the vessel unseaworthy and that the loss of the ship was due to the default of the Owners, their representatives, the Master and Chief Engineer.

In giving the judgment of the Court the Commissioner stated that it was urged on behalf of the Owners that the vessel had been built according to plans approved by Lloyd's Register which shewed the actual position of the pipe in question, that it was regularly surveyed by the Society's Surveyors and that oil burning was reverted to in 5,37 when she was undergoing her Second Special Survey No.1

The Commissioner stated "these are powerful considerations in favour of the Owners but for the reasons given above the Court is of opinion that there was failure on the part of the Owners' representatives to whom the condition of the vessel on sailing must be attributed".



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The Society is not concerned with the provision of chemical fire extinguishing appliances, but it is directly concerned with the position of the pipe which is alleged to have failed and caused the fire and with regard to that pipe the following observations are offered:-

(1). Plans shewing the position of the pipe were not submitted to this Office for approval, but that fact does not exonerate the Surveyor who had the case in hand during construction from the responsibility of seeing that the Rules were observed.

(2). The Rule regarding the position and visibility of the pipe in force at the time the vessel was built is as follows:-

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

The use of the words "where practicable" does not convey the impression that it is of paramount importance that the pipes shall be above the stokehold and engine-room plates and where they are always visible--it conveys the impression that while it is desirable that pipes may be so fitted they may be in other positions and not always visible and it may well be the case that it is owing to this somewhat plastic wording of the Rule that the pipe was fitted as it was, viz:- between the starboard boiler and the ship's side.

The Court held, however, that the position of the pipe rendered the vessel unseaworthy.

It must be admitted that the pipe was not in the best possible position for access, but, as the Commissioner stated, it could as it was have been made visible quite readily.



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The fire broke out in the stokehold between the ship's side and the starboard boiler, i.e. at the site 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.



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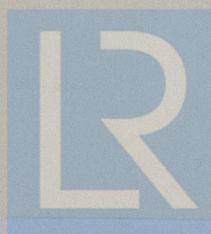
By this time, however, the boat deck and a life boat were in flames, this deck fire being caused by oil gas passing up between the inner and outer funnels and bursting into flame on reaching the atmosphere. Burning paint fell off the funnel on to the boat deck and boat and set them alight.

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.

In view of these sworn facts it is submitted that the loss of this vessel is not to be attributed to the position of the oil fuel discharge pipe, but to the failure of the ship's personnel to make proper and timely use of the facilities provided in accordance with the Rules for use in such an emergency.

It may be added that at an interview on the 11th instant the Engineer Surveyor-in-chief of the Board of Trade stated that he would take no exception to a proposal to fit an oil fuel discharge pipe in the position which has been criticised by the Court in this case, although he would ask for the pipe joints to be in a more accessible part of the pipe and he would ask for attention to be paid to the method of supporting the pipe (this because there had been some suggestion that the pipe might have been damaged by men standing on it during some scaling and painting operations).



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Cases of this kind are extremely rare and it is considered that the Rules as they now stand deal satisfactorily with the matter, but arising out of this case there are two points which are worthy of consideration.

(1). If it becomes necessary to shut down the oil fuel supply to the furnaces a situation arises in which the steam supply falls and in the present case it was found that at the time the decision to abandon ship was taken there was insufficient steam to give an adequate supply of water to the hoses. This was probably a deciding factor when the Master gave that order.

The same cause would also put a limit on the time during which steam smothering would be effective.

The Rules require two oil fuel heaters and pumps to be fitted in oil burning steamers, but it is not specially stated that there should be two distinct discharge pipes to the Boilers.

A case might arise in which an oil fuel discharge pipe might develop a defect which would require the pipe to be put out of use in circumstances in which stoppage of the machinery or pumps would be menace to safety, but if there was an alternative fuel discharge circuit it could be put into use at once.

(2). Fire extinguishing appliances.

The Rules are as follows:- "Water service pipes and hoses are to be fitted so that the stokehold plates and tank top under the boilers can at any time be flushed with sea water and in addition steam from the auxiliary range of piping is to be led to pipes perforated for the emission of steam into the lower parts of the boiler-room.

Where steam fire extinguishing apparatus is not fitted equivalent apparatus is to be provided"

Steam smothering may be useful in dealing with an oil fuel fire on a tank top. For fires in other positions it could only be effective if all vents were closed up and it is to be noted that steam may not be available for an extended period.

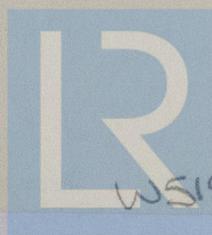
In short steam smothering alone is not enough.

The Board of Trade and most if not all foreign maritime governments require chemical fire extinguishing appliances for passenger vessels and some foreign governments have such requirements also for cargo vessels.

The Board of Trade have recommendations for chemical fire extinguishing appliances. (The Court found the Owners at default in this case because these recommendations were only partially complied with) and at the interview with the Board's Engineer Surveyor-in-chief referred to above he stated that it was intended to make these recommendations statutory.

It is submitted for consideration whether it would be desirable to omit the reference to steam smothering from the Rules and add a clause to the effect that the Government regulations cover what is necessary for fire extinguishing.

It is also submitted for consideration that plans of oil fuel piping should be submitted for consideration in all cases of new installations and that the Society's Surveyors be informed of the case and requested to examine the oil fuel installations and oil discharge pipes at all Boiler and Special Surveys and in cases where these are not completely in accordance with the Rules and in good order to recommend what is necessary and report the matter to this Office.



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