

FRIDAY, APRIL 24, 1936

"SHEAF BROOK" LOSS**Master of Sister Ship
Gives Evidence****DOGGER BANK CONDITIONS***From Our Own Correspondent*

SUNDERLAND, Thursday. Further evidence was given to-day at the Board of Trade inquiry into the loss of the Newcastle steamer *Sheaf Brook* with all hands in the North Sea last November. Judge Richardson is sitting as a Wreck Commissioner with three assessors, Lieut.-Commander F. S. Murray, Captain T. W. Hanney and Mr. J. L. Scott.

Mr. O. L. Bateson represented the Board of Trade; Mr. G. St. C. Pilcher, K.C., appeared for the owners, W. A. Souter & Co., Ltd., of Newcastle; Mr. L. S. Holmes appeared for the master, Captain C. E. Brown, the Mercantile Marine Service Association and the Imperial Merchant Service Guild; and Mr. Herbert Bewick represented the National Union of Seamen; Mr. R. Gardner was present, representing the Transport and General Workers' Union; and Mr. A. Fell was for the National Union of Railway-men.

Captain JOHN COUPLAND, master of the sister ship *Sheaf Water*, in giving evidence, said that at about 10 p.m. on Nov. 20, while his ship was on passage to Seaham in ballast his wireless operator received an S O S from the *Sheaf Brook* via Cullercoats. The position given was 110 miles ESE. of the Tyne, which was 63 miles from the *Sheaf Water*. "When I got the S O S," witness continued, "there was a strong breeze from the east increasing to a moderate gale. The sea was rough. The *Sheaf Brook* would have the wind and sea against her. We were doing 11½ knots at the time and I told the chief engineer to give her all we had got. We got up to about 12½ knots, our maximum speed, and at about 3 a.m. we arrived at the approximate position of the *Sheaf Brook* as given in the S O S.

THE SEARCH FOR WRECKAGE

"The wireless operator continued his efforts to get in touch with the *Sheaf Brook*, and he got some crackling noises which he assumed were from her. He never got any actual message from the *Sheaf Brook* after the first S O S. When we got to the position there was nothing to be seen of the ship or her boats. We carried on at slow speed, and at about 3 25 a.m. the look-out man on the fore-castle head reported a rocket on the starboard bow. Just afterwards the chief officer and I saw two more. The rockets were very clearly visible. We saw nothing more. Daylight came at about 7 30 a.m., and we had been cruising round for some time. Shortly before noon we sighted the first wreckage, and after that we were among it all the afternoon trying without success to pick up something which could be identified. I saw a jolly boat painted black floating bottom upwards. She was stove in with two holes in her. Other wreckage which I saw included a rope lifeboat ladder, a boat chock painted black, a wooden derrick truck, two boxes-like tea chests, some locker doors and numerous pieces of wood painted buff and white. After midnight I realised the hopelessness of the position, and proceeded on my course, keeping a sharp look-out for survivors.

Answering Mr. Pilcher, Witness said the weather was nothing but what the ordinary collier would have been able to survive in safety. If the hatches of the *Sheaf Brook* had been stove in, he would have expected to see some hatch covers floating about, but none were seen.

Mr. Pilcher pointed out there were a good many wrecks marked on the chart in that vicinity of the North Sea—the Dogger Bank.

Witness said it would be difficult for the master of the *Sheaf Brook* to estimate his position exactly, but with the sounding instrument he had on board he would know when he was on the Dogger Bank.

Mr. PILCHER: As master of a similar vessel, what in your experience are the sea-going qualities of your type of ship?

"VERY FINE" SHIPS

Witness: Very fine indeed. He added that he had never known a North Country coal cargo to shift in the self trimmers.

Mrs. HILDA SCOTT, of Cullercoats, described how she was trying to get the Newcastle wireless programme on her small American set which only received on wave lengths between 200 and 250 metres, when at about 9 14 on the night of Nov. 19 she heard the Morse message: "S O S *Sheaf Brook* 110 miles ESE Tyne dangerous list to port engines flooded assistance required. S O S." Witness said that having been a telegraphist before marriage she was able to understand the message, which was repeated at intervals of two to three minutes, until she switched off well after 9 30. She did not take steps to communicate the message to anyone, because it never entered her head that she was the only person who would be receiving it. Witness had qualms during the night as to whether anyone else had heard it, and next day she told the officer at the Cullercoats radio station.

Witness added that she did not hear messages to the effect that the wireless cabin was flooded.

Bowman Ions, a sailor who served on the *Sheaf Brook* last

year and had only missed the fatal trip because he was injured on the previous voyage, said Captain Brown was a careful and competent master.

Mr. BATESON: Was she a good sea boat?

Witness: Well, she went through the weather.

Was she a wet or a dry boat?—She was rather wet when carrying timber. With a deck cargo she had a slight list, usually to port. She was rather tender.

Mr. BATESON, who informed the Judge that this meant that the vessel was liable to roll when carrying coal, said Ions' ship always had a list to port probably due to heavier auxiliaries on the port side.

ROBERT PURVIS, a Tyne pilot, said that when the *Sheaf Brook* arrived from Denmark on Oct. 31 she had a very strong list, and the captain said they had had a very bad trip. Water was in No. 3 hold. When he brought the ship down from Dunston to Jar-row to complete loading for her last trip she had a port list of four or five degrees, but when he took her out she was as near upright as made no matter.

HENDERSON C. MURRAY, called by Mr. Bewick, said he was boatswain on board the *Sheaf Brook* last year and she was not a well-balanced ship. She always had a list whether light or loaded. On every voyage she carried 30 to 40 tons of bunkers on the deck usually on the bunker hatch, and in heavy weather this coal used to roll down to the port side which accentuated the list.

SALVAGE SHIP MASTER'S OPINION

An affidavit was read by Mr. Bateson from Captain Gerdtz, of the German salvage steamer *Albatross*, describing his vain search for traces of the *Sheaf Brook*. He pointed out that a German drifter had been sunk and German trawlers damaged by sunken wrecks in that part of the Dogger Bank, and added that he was definitely of opinion that the loss of the *Sheaf Brook* was due to the same cause. He suggested that the *Sheaf Brook's* position was in the vicinity of the spot in which the German cruiser *Blücher* was sunk in 1915. Moderate weather conditions prevailing at the time would not account for the sinking of the *Sheaf Brook*.

Commenting on this evidence, Mr. Bateson said that the Admiralty chart showed that as far as could be ascertained the *Blücher* was sunk 150 miles to the east of the position given by the *Sheaf Brook*.

When Mr. HOLMES suggested calling the daughter of the chief engineer to speak as to a report sent to her with a covering letter regarding the condition of the vessel's boilers on Oct. 13, Judge RICHARDSON said that would be most material if the ship had not been so thoroughly overhauled immediately before her last voyage.

Mr. HOLMES agreed that he would not call the witness.

Captain THOMAS RENSCHAW said since 1926 he had been in command of self-trimming colliers almost exactly similar to the *Sheaf Brook*. He had never known a case of the cargo in a self-trimming collier shifting.

Captain CHARLES WALKER, assistant harbour master at Blyth and a former master of the *Sheaf Brook* and other of the company's vessels, said he had never noticed any list to port such as witnesses had termed "permanent." She was a good sea boat. He had served in six self-trimming colliers and had never known the cargo to shift or to cause a list even in very heavy weather in the Atlantic and the Bay of Biscay.

Replying to Mr. Pilcher, witness said the south-west patch of the Dogger Bank was not a part of the North Sea which he would choose to cross in bad weather. "I once crossed the south-west patch in very dirty weather," he proceeded, "and the waves were throwing sand on to the decks so we must have been near the bottom." In good weather, however, there was no danger in crossing the south-west patch.

Captain PHILIP DENT, another master of self-trimming colliers, said he had never known the coal cargo in a self-trimmer to shift in any weather conditions. Witness always avoided the south-west patch of the Dogger Bank in winter. He knew of a steamer which had been lost presumably on the south-west patch.

EXTRACTS FROM SHIP'S LOG

Mr. ALBERT LANE, a director of W. A. Souter & Co., Ltd., submitted extracts from the log of the *Sheaf Brook* in the case of previous voyages with small coal on which no trouble had been experienced through the shifting of cargo.

Witness said the only instance he knew of coal cargo shifting in a self-trimming vessel was that of the *Sheaf Arrow*. In that case it was due to the hatches being stove in. Since the loss of the *Sheaf Brook*, the firm had instructed its masters to avoid the south-west patch.

Captain C. V. GROVES, marine superintendent of the Sheaf Steam Shipping Company, Ltd., said while no instructions had previously been given to avoid the south-west patch he considered it undesirable to go near the place.

Mr. PILCHER: While no one wants to impute negligence to Captain Brown, there may be a hundred and one reasons why he found himself there. What is your view of the possibility of any trouble having arisen through his taking that course?

Witness: I feel confident that the vessel hit one of these wrecks.

Replying to Mr. Bateson, witness said so far as he knew Captain Brown was the only one of the firm's masters who took a direct course past the south-west patch.

The inquiry was adjourned till to-morrow.

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