

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22, 1936

THE "SHEAF BROOK"

B.O.T. Inquiry into Loss
OpenedHOW THE S.O.S. WAS FIRST
RECEIVED

From Our Own Correspondent

SUNDERLAND, Tuesday.—An inquiry into the loss of the steamer *Sheaf Brook* in the North Sea last November with 20 hands was opened at Sunderland to-day, before Judge Richardson, acting as Wreck Commissioner. It was stated that the first S.O.S. message from the ship was picked up by a Mrs. Scott as she was trying to get the programme from the Newcastle broadcasting station. Questions in cross-examination by Counsel for the National Union of Seamen contained the suggestion that seamen who had complained of the condition of the *Sheaf Brook* had been refused any re-engagement in the vessel.

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 Railwaymen.

Mr. BATESON said the *Sheaf Brook* was lost on a voyage with coal from the Tyne to Hamburg on Nov. 20. Actually 21 hands were signed, but two failed to turn up and only one extra hand was signed by the master, so that the ship sailed short of one deck hand. The *Sheaf Brook* was built at Burntisland in 1924 and her gross tonnage was 2179.01. She was a single-deck steamer of self-trimming type. She had a book value of £28,882, but had not been written down, and her actual value was about £15,000. She was insured for £30,000 to pay £20,000 for a total loss, together with an insurance of £1500 for freight. Immediately before her last voyage she was extensively repaired at a cost of £3500.

VESSEL SOUND AND SEAWORTHY

Counsel said there could be little doubt that when she sailed she was in a perfectly sound and seaworthy condition, so far as repairs went. She was loaded at Dunston and Jarrow with coal and she sailed from Jarrow at 8.30 on the night of Nov. 19, and at 1.35 p.m. on the next day the *Sheaf Brook* sent a wireless message to the owners recording strong winds and a speed of five knots. After that, said Mr. Bateson, the next that was heard was a wireless message which was picked up accidentally about 9.15 p.m. the same day by a Mrs. Scott, who happened to pick up the message while she was endeavouring to hear a programme from the Newcastle Station. She understood that the message stated: "S.O.S. *Sheaf Brook* position 110 miles ESE. of Tyne, engines flooded, require assistance, dangerous list to port." Mrs. Scott picked up the message in Morse, but having been a telegraphist she was well able to understand it.

Counsel said that the interesting part about this was that Mrs. Scott was tuning in on a wave length of about 267, whereas ordinarily the *Sheaf Brook* would send out her messages on a wave length of about 600 metres. The Post Office suggested as a possible explanation that part of the ship's aerial might have been carried away, and with this particular type of wireless that might automatically change the wave length. As soon as the vessel's operator discovered the fault he might make the necessary adjustments to send out messages on his ordinary wave length.

At 9.47 similar S.O.S. messages were picked up by other ships, including the *Kassos*, which was only 35 miles away. A sister ship, the *Sheaf Water*, also picked up distress signals, and again at 11 o'clock a weak crackling note was heard, which was probably the *Sheaf Brook* making desperate efforts to get her wireless going again. At 3.25 in the morning the *Sheaf Water* saw three rockets and later found some wreckage, including the jolly boat upturned and stove in. It was painted black like the *Sheaf Brook's* boats.

At Jarrow the ship had a slight collision with another ship, but no material damage was done. Mr. Bateson said that when the *Sheaf Brook* sailed her mean sailing draught in salt water was 18 ft. 6 in. It was not possible to be certain about the allowance for salt water as she was loaded in partly fresh water, but it appeared she was something like an inch overloaded. If she were, however, to any extent overloaded it was to so small an extent as to be quite immaterial in this case.

Mr. PILCHER said he was instructed that the correct draught for the *Sheaf Brook* under the new load line rules was 18 ft. 6 in., in which case the vessel was exactly right on her marks when she sailed, and not even possibly overloaded to the extent suggested. Counsel did not want such a suggestion to go unchallenged.

Mr. BATESON said that evidence of other ships in the vicinity at the time showed there was a moderate easterly gale blowing and a very heavy sea.

Mr. HENRY STEEL, ship surveyor to the Board of Trade, giving evidence, said he had calculated the ship's winter freeboard at 7 ft. 2½ in., equivalent to a draught of 18 ft. 4½ in. That was the draught the *Sheaf Brook* should have had when she sailed. According to his calculations, the *Sheaf*

Brook still had sufficient righting movement at an angle of 50 deg. on the assumption that she remained intact, but at an angle of 26 deg. it was possible the water might find its way into the ship. The *Sheaf Brook* was possessed of average stability.

Asked to assume that the ship's port side was perforated from the outside and that the engine-room and boiler space together with the stokehold were flooded, Mr. Steel said that this would not destroy all the ship's reserve buoyancy. The ship would sink about 3 ft. 3 in. It would not, he thought, induce a permanent list to port.

Answering Mr. Holmes, he said it was more likely that a permanent list to port would be caused by the coal cargo shifting.

Mr. WILLIAM ALFRED SOUTER, shipowner, of Newcastle, permanent director of the *Sheaf Shipping Company*, Ltd., said his company had owned four other self-trimming colliers besides the *Sheaf Brook*. They had always found self-trimming colliers perfectly satisfactory. The *Sheaf Brook* stood in the books of the company at £28,882. Her actual value at the time of the loss was about £15,000.

Asked why the ship stood so high in the books, Witness replied that owing to the depression in shipping his firm had not made sufficient profits to write her value down.

Judge RICHARDSON: It looks as if she had not been written down much at all.

Mr. SOUTER, continuing, said that extensive repairs were carried out at Wallsend, together with a comprehensive overhaul, at a total cost of £3495, just before the ship sailed on her last voyage.

Answering Mr. Bewick, Mr. Souter said he was never told that the *Sheaf Brook* had a severe list to port at any time between February, 1934, and October, 1935.

LETTERS FROM THE MASTER

Mr. HOLMES: I have a number of letters written by the master to his wife over a period of three or four months before the loss which show a serious state of things. Did this ever come to your notice?—I cannot say.

What about a report from the second engineer as to the condition of the boilers?—I would suggest that all the complaints in these letters refer to matters which would be remedied by the repairs carried out in November.

Mr. HOLMES: Well, the amount of repairs which the ship needed then showed that she could not have been in the best of condition.

Mr. BEWICK: Did you not receive a special letter from the Board of Trade referring to complaints about the condition of the *Sheaf Brook* made by the seamen? I never heard of it.

The letter was certainly written to the owners. You never saw it?—No.

Do you know that instructions were sent to various officers of the company to refuse to re-engage any of the seamen who sent up these complaints to the Board of Trade?—I am not aware of it.

If Captain Arnott, one of your masters, says that he received such instructions, is he wrong?—I do not know anything about it.

Mr. ALBERT LANE, a director of W. A. Souter & Co., Ltd., admitted that letters were received from the Board of Trade surveyors setting out repairs necessary to the ship.

Captain Charles Groves, marine superintendent to Messrs. Souter, said he received no complaints from the crew as to the condition of the ship. Repairs were carried out on the ship after he met the Board of Trade surveyors.

Mr. HOLMES quoted a letter from the master to his wife, dated July 14, in which he wrote: "I do not want you to think that I am putting you off about that voyage with us, but I must insist that the old hooker is dry-docked first." Mr. Holmes said the master described how, on July 6, one boiler gave out, a hatch was stove in by huge seas and the other boiler broke down. On Aug. 1 he wrote to his wife: "We have had a serious passage again this trip. Our poor deck cargo has just about all gone. Half the boat deck was carried away and the three boats shifted out of position. Every room in the ship has been flooded out. It was impossible to keep the galley fires on, so we have had to eat dry bread and drink cold water as if we were in gaol."

Captain GROVES said he had not heard of most of those complaints.

Mr. HOLMES submitted a report written by the second engineer, and left with his wife, complaining of the condition of the boilers, and said it was written by a man who was apparently under the impression that something was going to happen.

Captain GROVES: The *Sheaf Brook* was not in a bad condition. All necessary repairs were done before her last voyage.

Judge RICHARDSON said that complaints of the vessel's condition before her last repairs were done were not of very great importance, unless it could be shown that even the spending of £3500 was only a drop in the bucket.

The inquiry was adjourned until to-morrow.

4260-0324