

THE LOSS OF THE "USWORTH"

Wreck Commissioner's Inquiry Opened

NO CHARGES BY BOARD OF TRADE AGAINST OWNERS, MASTER OR CREW

File with
Usworth
Casualty
rept.

The formal investigation ordered by the Board of Trade into the loss of the *Usworth* in the North Atlantic on Dec. 14 last was opened yesterday before the Wreck Commissioner, Lord Merrivale. Sitting with the Commissioner were Captain A. L. Gordon and Commodore H. Stockwell, as nautical assessors, and Mr. Edmund Wilson, marine engineer, and Mr. E. H. Mitchell, naval architect, as assessors.

The Solicitor-General (Sir D. B. Somervell) and Mr. G. St. Clair Pilcher appeared for the Board of Trade; Mr. H. G. Willmer and Mr. G. O. Jones (instructed by Messrs. Lightbourns, Jones & Bryan, London agents for Messrs. Ingledew & Co., Newcastle-upon-Tyne) for Messrs. Dalgliesh & Co., Ltd., owners of the *Usworth*; Mr. E. Aylmer Digby, K.C., and Mr. Vere Hunt, for the National Union of Seamen and the Transport and General Workers' Union, being instructed in the former case by Messrs. Russell Jones & Co., and in the latter by Messrs. Pattinson & Brewer; Mr. R. F. Hayward and Mr. Harold Griffin (instructed by Messrs. G. F. Hudson, Matthews & Co.) for the master of the *Usworth* and the chief engineer, the relatives of the chief officer and the second engineer, and the following Officers' and Engineers' Protection Societies who are represented on the National Maritime Board: Officers (Merchant Navy) Federation, Ltd.; the Imperial Merchant Service Guild, the Mercantile Marine Service Association, and the Marine Engineers' Association, Ltd.

The proceedings at the preliminary investigation held by Lord Merrivale were reported in LLOYD'S LIST of May 2.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL'S STATEMENT

The SOLICITOR-GENERAL said this was a formal investigation under Sect. 466 of the Merchant Shipping Act into the abandonment of the *Usworth* on Dec. 14 last and her subsequent total loss, as the result of which 17 lives were lost—15 of the *Usworth* and two of the *Jean Jadot*, which was near by and engaged in rescue work. This was the first of four formal investigations which had been ordered into ships lost during the severe gales of last winter. In this inquiry they were concerned with one ship, but the four losses exercised the public mind to some extent—and perhaps rightly—and, therefore, it was thought that there should be the fullest investigation into the causes of the disasters which took place. On behalf of the Board of Trade, their concern was solely to put the Court into the fullest possible possession of the case. At the outset, he would say on very full inquiries which had been made that the Board of Trade made no charges against either the owners with regard to defects in the ship or against the master, officers and crew with regard to their handling; indeed, so far as the latter point was concerned, on the evidence which he should call, and the information he had, they deserved credit for the endurance and gallantry they displayed in the very severe dangers to which the ship was subjected. He was at the moment ignorant of any points that might be raised by those also represented before the Commissioner, and if fresh information came out in the course of the inquiry he (the Solicitor-General) would have an opportunity of dealing with it.

The *Usworth* was subjected to very heavy weather, in which she sank in the middle of the North Atlantic. From Dec. 11 to Dec. 14 she had a series of mishaps, but the Court would come to the conclusion that the im-

mediate, or prime, cause was the breakdown of the steering gear. She was subjected to severe strain for several days; there was an initial breakdown, and then there were attempts to rig up a jury steering gear, and the final damage, the *Usworth* being unable to steer and to meet the weather in any way, was from a terrific sea which swept over her, stove in No. 2 hatch and carried away the boats and most of the deck gear, and water began to flow in and finally extinguished the furnaces. But for the fact that the steering gear had broken down, she would not have been so much at the mercy of the seas. The evidence would show that she was well maintained with regard to both her steering gear and her hatches.

STEERING GEAR

The *Usworth* was a single deck, three island steamship, built by John Blumer & Co., Ltd., of Sunderland, in 1926; for the present owners; she was classed 100 A 1 at Lloyd's, and registered at Newcastle. Her gross tonnage was 3500 odd, her length 356.3 ft., and her net tonnage 2189. She had six watertight bulkheads and six double bottom tanks, including fore peak and after peak. The Solicitor-General described the steering gear in detail, and how the ship was fitted with a Taylor Pallister patent brake, so that, he explained, if she was encountering heavy weather, and there were likely to be heavy blows on the rudder, the use of the patent brake served to break the shock. In this case it had been put on before the accident to the steering gear. After the accident efforts were made to use it to hold the rudder, but they were unsuccessful. The type of steering arrangement in use was almost universal among cargo vessels of that type and size. A good many of the liners and some of the newer cargo boats had an engine further aft, resulting in shorter leads. The general lay-out was the usual form of steering gear for vessels of that kind; it was, in fact, overhauled at Swansea in October, 1934, and work done on it, as to which the chief engineer would give evidence. It was also inspected and the chains readjusted in Montreal, which was the port of departure on the voyage on which the vessel went down.

SHIP'S LOAD LINE UNALTERED

On her voyage out to Montreal heavy weather had been encountered and the chains had slackened to some extent, and that had been dealt with at Montreal. As to the cause of the damage, there was a very heavy blow on the port face of the rudder which put a strain on one side, and in the reaction damage occurred on the other side. As to the freeboard, under the Act of 1932, which put in force the terms of the Load Line Convention, in the case of certain vessels of considerable superstructure some alteration was made in the load line, but so far as the *Usworth* was concerned there was no alteration in her load line as the result of the Convention under the 1932 Act. The total depth of the ship's side was 26 ft. 1 in. A mistake was made by the port authorities at both Montreal and Sydney, Nova Scotia, where the ship took on bunkers, and where the

freeboard worked out at 4 ft. 3½ in., whereas it should have been 4 ft. 7 in. That small variation might be due to hogging or sagging, according to the position of the cargo, but the more probable explanation was that there was a small inaccuracy in the measurement; there was, however, no sort of suggestion that the ship was overloaded. In addition to the cargo, which consisted of 5625 tons of wheat, she had 380 tons of bunkers, 10 tons of fresh water and 25 tons of stores. She was manned by a crew of 26. As to the question of manning of ships, which rightly received public attention, there was no suggestion in the Board's submission that the *Usworth* was undermanned. Instructions (known as Circular 1453) had been issued by the Board of Trade as to what number of efficient deck hands were required on vessels according to their size. The *Usworth* required eight deck hands, which she had.

The Solicitor-General proceeded to give an outline of what happened after the *Usworth* left Montreal on Dec. 2, bound for Sydney, Nova Scotia. The particulars, he explained, were not obtained from the ship's papers because, when the first rescue boat came from the *Jean Jadot*, the master of the *Usworth* thought it was unlikely that he would leave his vessel alive, and so he threw the ship's papers into the boat, and that boat was unfortunately lost and the ship's papers were lost. On Dec. 6 the *Usworth* called at Sydney to bunker, and took on 318 tons of coal. On Dec. 8, 9 and 10 the course was ENE. and the wind NW.—about 4.7. On Dec. 10, owing to the weather, the engines were "racing" and the engines were put on double watches.

THE FIRST DAMAGE

On Dec. 11, when the weather got worse, the first damage—which was unrelated to the final cause of the disaster—occurred when a heavy sea stove in the port saloon door. The vessel hove to with the wind on her starboard bow while repairs were effected. At 4.30 a.m., when the ship was about a thousand miles from Newfoundland and a thousand miles from Queens-town, she refused to answer to the helm, and the steering gear was found to be disabled. The Taylor Pallister brake was screwed right down, but failed to hold the rudder. There were efforts to rig up a jury steering gear, but the vessel was falling into the trough of the seas. At 6 p.m. signals were sent out for assistance, and the efforts in the matter of the steering gear were continued. She was shipping a lot of water, but no water was entering the holds or bilges. The *Jean Jadot* came up in answer to the signals and stood by. There were heavy seas, and at daylight the next day the *Usworth* succeeded in throwing a line to the *Jean Jadot*, and by this means, the *Usworth's* rudder being lashed amidships, she proceeded on her way, her course being set for Fayal. In the afternoon the wind increased, and by 2 p.m. it was force 8; it was south-westerly and the sea was increasing. At 4.30 p.m. the tow line parted.

A message was sent to Queenstown for a salvage tug to be sent out. On Dec. 13, when the *Usworth* was making a southerly course to Fayal (the steering gear having been successfully

rigged up) she probably made about 23 miles with the *Jean Jadot* in attendance. By 1.30 p.m. that day the wind was force 11, and at 2 o'clock, as the weather was getting worse, the vessel was hove to with the wind on her starboard bow. By 3.30 p.m. the wind was force 10, and finally 12. The rudder was lashed because the seas were breaking over the poop, and at 5 p.m. the sea lifted a corner of the tarpaulin of No. 2 hold, but that was successfully resecured. At 9 p.m., when the wind was 10, the final damage occurred: three heavy seas in succession hitting the vessel, the first two caused her to fall off, and the third broke right over her. She had then reached a list of 25 deg. to port. An attempt was made to shift some of the cargo, and the ballast tank was filled. No. 2 hold was stove in; the bridge front and the aerial were blown away, and the engine-room skylights and ventilators were carried away, while Nos. 2 and 5 hatch derricks were adrift. At 10.30 the engines were ordered to be stopped. At 3 a.m. on Dec. 14 water was found to be coming down into the stokehold through the port bunker hatch in the bridge space, and by 5 a.m. the engine-room bilges were found to be choking and impeding the action of the pumps.

By 7 p.m. the *Ascania* arrived and oil was pumped round the *Usworth*. Attempts were made unsuccessfully to pass rocket lines; the stokehold plates were found to be lifting owing to the water in the stokehold; and the water got to the furnaces, which were soon afterwards extinguished. The chief engineer had his ribs broken on Dec. 11, but remained at his work until the end. The Solicitor-General went on to describe how, on Dec. 14, the weather improving slightly, the *Jean Jadot* launched a lifeboat which succeeded in getting to the *Usworth's* port side and aboard of which 14 of the *Usworth's* crew jumped. Unfortunately, the boat capsized before she got back to the *Jean Jadot* and 12 of the *Usworth's* crew, and two from the *Jean Jadot*, were drowned. Two of the *Usworth's* crew in that boat were rescued. By 2 p.m. the weather was worsening, and there seemed no chance of saving the ship. The *Ascania* launched a lifeboat, but unfortunately three of the *Usworth's* crew jumped before the boat was really up to the vessel, and though efforts were made to rescue them they were drowned. Captain Reed and the remaining eight members of the crew were taken off and conveyed to the *Ascania* in a state of exhaustion. The *Ascania* and the *Jean Jadot* proceeded on their voyages, and no one saw exactly how long the *Usworth* remained afloat, but by the time she was left, at 2 p.m., her bulwarks and decks were practically under water. The Solicitor-General concluded his remarks by making reference to the gallantry of the services of the *Jean Jadot* and the *Ascania*.

ANDREW CHARLTON, chief draughtsman to John Blumer & Co., Ltd., ship-builders, Sunderland, the first witness, produced a number of plans.

INSURANCE OF THE VESSEL

STANLEY SPENCER WOODBRIDGE DALGLISH, a director of R. S. Dalglisch & Co., Ltd., managers of the *Usworth*, gave particulars as to the insurance of the vessel, which was bought for £51,500. She was valued at £46,250, and when she was lost her value for insurance purposes was £27,800.

In reply to Mr. DIGBY, who asked witness if he knew of his own knowledge that the steering gear had given trouble on previous occasions, Mr. Dalglisch said he knew that there were a certain number of drydock accounts.

Mr. DIGBY said he wanted to make sure that no correspondence which had taken place with reference to the steering gear or hatches was overlooked.

In answer to Mr. Hayward, who asked whether the witness's company adhered to the agreements made by the National Maritime Board, Mr. Dalglisch said: We do now, sir.

Did you in the case of this particular ship?—Yes, sir.

Are you sure about that?—I think I know what you are getting at, sir, if I may put it in that way.

Mr. HAYWARD: No, not about wages. Wages are, perhaps, a sore subject.

WITNESS: There was a case some time ago about wages about which we had a dispute with the Shipping Federation.

Mr. HAYWARD: That is not the matter I am going to trouble you about. Happily, that is in the distant past. The question I was concerned with was a more important one—the question of manning the ships so far as navigating officers are concerned. This ship, a vessel of 3534 tons gross, was manned by two navigating officers only?—Besides the captain.

Exactly; most ships have a captain; I understand that he is indispensable. The ship was provided with two navigating officers?—Yes, mates.

Which means that while the vessel is at sea these gentlemen are on duty for at least 12 hours per day?—I have no personal knowledge of that, sir.

May I suggest that those who do direct the policy of this company might ascertain what hours have to be worked by those on board? And if one is sick goodness knows how long they have to work.—There is a captain on board ship in case of emergency.

You know in these days of wireless telegraphy ships at sea are not infrequently receiving urgent requests for assistance, which are never denied by seafaring men?—Yes.

Is it a fact that the agreement of the National Maritime Board is that for ships of the size of the *Usworth* and smaller—in other words, that ships of 2750 tons gross and over shall carry three navigating officers in addition to the captain?—I don't think that is a fact, sir. I wouldn't like to swear to that.

Mr. HAYWARD read the provision contained in the Year Book of the National Maritime Board. The agreement, he added, became operative on Sept. 1, 1929. Was he to understand that for the intervening five years the agreement had not been brought to the witness's notice?

WITNESS: Surely we should have heard something about that. Are you quite sure you are right? I cannot understand it. I am sure we were within the regulations.

The question of three mates on your ships has been raised before?—It has been raised on the Shipping Federation, but not on our ships.

Mr. WILLMER said his clients had offered the engineer superintendent and the marine superintendent as witnesses, and were informed by the Board of Trade that they were not required. Having regard to some of the questions he would see that they came.

WILLIAM WATT, principal surveyor on the chief ship surveyor's staff of Lloyd's Register of Shipping, produced survey reports on the hull of the *Usworth* and other documents.

JOHN JOSEPH REED, of North Shields, master of the *Usworth*, bore out Counsel's statement.

Describing the happenings on the night of Dec. 13, WITNESS said that at about 10 p.m. the vessel was struck by three heavy following seas. The first two seas did nothing serious and only washed the decks, though they had the effect of diverting the ship from her previous course. The third sea appeared to come from a different angle—about 4 to 5 points off the starboard bow—and the crest of the wave, as viewed from the bridge, seemed to tower 10 to 15 ft. above the truck of the foremast. (It was mentioned at this point that the truck of the foremast was 80 ft. above the water line; thus the wave would have a height of nearly 100 ft.)

This wave, continued the master, seemed to crash down on the ship, and his (the master's) opinion was that she had gone altogether. The vessel shook herself clear, however—he could not tell how long it was; it seemed like years. The ship appeared to go right on her beam ends, and as she was recovering she seemed to give at least three jerks to the port side, which he

attributed to the cargo having shifted. Later, he discovered that there was a list of 25 deg.

WORK OF THE "JEAN JADOT"

Captain Reed then went on to describe the rescue efforts made by the *Jean Jadot* and *Ascania*. Before the *Jean Jadot* arrived and stood by a second time, he said, he thought the *Usworth* would go at any moment. Her list was increasing, and she kept on giving jerks. "Frankly," he added, "I never expected to leave the ship alive."

The SOLICITOR-GENERAL: Suppose your steering gear had been working properly at the time when you encountered these heavy seas, would you, so far as you can estimate, have been able to prevent damage?

WITNESS: I certainly would have been able to prevent major damage, and I think I should have been able to save my ship.

Witness said that on the outward voyage from Swansea to Montreal they met heavy weather and reached Montreal five days overdue. There was no trouble with the steering gear going out. At Montreal certain adjustments were made; one or two links were cut out, the chains having stretched through the working of the ship.

Replying to Mr. DIGBY, who questioned him in regard to the steering gear, Captain REED agreed that if the *Usworth* had been fitted with an efficient secondary steering arrangement he still might have been able to save the ship. He also agreed that the original steering gear broke down when the wind was not stronger than Force 7 to 8.

Mr. DIGBY: When No. 2 hatch was stove in did you send anybody to attend to it? WITNESS: Yes, the carpenter and one A.B. My idea was for them to put a tarpaulin over the hatch to cover it up so that the crew should not see what had actually happened and so get panicky.

Had you any wires or manila hawsers suitable for towing in your ship?—No, not for weather like that. We only had 4-in. hawsers.

Replying to Counsel, witness said that the vessel had two deck officers and himself. The two officers kept watch and watch—four hours on and four off. He (witness) had had three and a half years' experience in the *Usworth* and had been at sea for 24 years.

COUNSEL: Do you think a ship officered by yourself and two mates are sufficient? WITNESS: Not for that passage.

DECK PERSONNEL

In regard to the deck personnel, the MASTER, replying to Mr. DIGBY, said there were four A.B.'s, two apprentices, the carpenter and boatswain. One of the apprentices had served with him for 3½ years and the other for 2½ years. The original boatswain died at Montreal, and he was replaced by one of the A.B.'s, who was promoted. He engaged an A.B. at Montreal, but the man did not join. He then engaged another man, who also did not join. He then went to the shipping master, who told him that it was impossible to find another man at that time of the season. In effect, he made the return voyage short of one A.B.

COUNSEL: Do you think, with all your experience, allowing for emergencies that that is sufficient in a ship like the *Usworth*?—WITNESS: Not in an emergency. Usually it would be all right, but when you get an emergency then you find how short you are.

Do you consider that a satisfactory state of affairs?—No, but one does not expect these things to happen every day.

What you say is that providing everything goes all right that is sufficient to bring the ship across?—Yes, I mean what we had on the outward voyage.

Coming back there was one less?—That would have been all right providing nothing happened.

You were hampered in your efforts to save the ship by the shortage of your deck hands?—In a sense, yes, but even if I had had a larger complement I could not have done much better.

Turning to the question of the steering gear, Mr. DROBY asked: You have had a great deal of trouble with this chain gear in this ship?—WITNESS: Yes, and in other ships.

Would I be right in saying that it is the cheapest form of steering gear?

—I do not know.

Captain Reed added "Chain and rod steering gear, in my opinion, ought to be abolished."

COUNSEL next questioned the master about correspondence in regard to repairs and renewals to the steering gear over a few years, and also with reference to wireless messages sent out when the ship was in distress.

COUNSEL concluded his cross-examination by inquiring about spare tarpaulin covers, wedges and battens. The MASTER replied that the ship was supplied with spare tarpaulins and wedges, but there were no spare battens.

The inquiry was then adjourned until 10 30 this morning.



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