

THE "USWORTH" INQUIRY

Master Questioned on
Manning of the Ship

CRITICISM OF STEERING GEAR

Lord Merrivale's Tribute
to Crew's Behaviour

The Board of Trade inquiry into the sinking of the *Usworth* in the North Atlantic in December last was continued yesterday in the large hall of the Institution of Civil Engineers 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 assessor, and Mr. E. H. Mitchell, naval architect assessor.

The Solicitor-General (Sir D. B. Somervell) and Mr. G. St. Clair Pilcher—appointed for the Board of Trade; Mr. H. G. Willmer (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. Patinson & Brewster; 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 SOLICITOR-GENERAL stated that the Board of Trade would not be ready for the next inquiry—that relating to the *Blairgowrie*—until after the Whit-sun recess, and not before June 16 or 17.

LORD MERRIVALE said he would not fix a date now, and if it were found that the inquiry could be accelerated so much the better.

Captain REED, master of the *Usworth*, was further examined by Mr. Digby. He said he could not speak too highly of the behaviour of the crew, but when he sent forward the carpenter and one other man to No. 2 hatch it was not to repair it but to cover it up so that the crew could not see it.

MR. DIGBY: Were you afraid of a panic?—WITNESS: Under the circumstances in which we were they might have lost their heads.

As a matter of fact, the crew worked very well right up to the end?—Yes.

In reply to Mr. Hayward, Captain REED said he was master of the ship three and a half years. The managers were Mr. Dalgliesh, Sen., Mr. James and Mr. Dalgliesh, Jun.

LORD MERRIVALE: Who was the effective man?—WITNESS: Mr. Dalgliesh, Sen.

OFFICERS' WORKING HOURS

MR. HAYWARD asked the witness to state the average number of hours the officers had to work when at sea.

WITNESS: Anything from 12 to 16.

MR. HAYWARD: That would come to something more than 100 hours a week. Is any overtime paid to officers and engineers?—No.

It is understood that everyone else gets overtime if he works more than eight hours a day?—Yes.

LORD MERRIVALE: I rather doubt if that is within the ambit of this inquiry.

MR. HAYWARD: Very strictly not, my Lord. I shall in due course submit that the morale of the officers is affected by these conditions.

LORD MERRIVALE: We have got the facts, and we must not go too far here.

Captain REED, replying to further questions, said the *Usworth* was provided with five hatches.

MR. HAYWARD: Was it physically possible for two officers to supervise loading at five hatches?—No, sir. Witness added that he was struck by the low height of the cargo. That might have been due to slack trimming. If all the vacant places had been filled the shifting of the cargo might have been prevented.

With regard to the two apprentices who were in the *Usworth*, Mr. HAYWARD asked if the officers had time to give them instruction in navigation and so on.

WITNESS replied that they had no time for that. He was proceeding to speak of the officers having had no sleep from the time the *Usworth* met with her first mishap when the Solicitor-General intervened and asked whether that matter was relative to the issue of the inquiry.

LORD MERRIVALE: It seems to me that there are two groups of questions here, one bearing on the inquiry as to whether the law was complied with as contained in the statutes and regulations, and the other as to whether the statutes and regulations give protection to life and property. I cannot exclude that second.

The SOLICITOR-GENERAL said he had no desire to narrow the scope of the inquiry, but his friend (Mr. Hayward) seemed to be developing a question as to the number of men required to handle the boats.

LORD MERRIVALE: Whether there is blame for breach of the law there is the larger question whether the regulations provide sufficient protection.

Captain REED, continuing, said the firemen were Afghans. There were eight of them, and when he ordered as many as possible to come to trim the cargo six obeyed but two insisted on reading the Koran.

In reply to Mr. WILLMER, he said that when the ship left Sydney she was in his opinion seaworthy, and that was his opinion to-day. She was a fine sea boat. Speaking of the weather that was experienced, he said

he had been going to sea 24 years and he had never seen the like of it in his life. It was "extraordinary bad weather." Not only was there the hurricane force of the wind, but one could not see a quarter of a mile for spray, which seemed like a kind of fog. That lasted approximately from 4 p.m. on Dec. 13 until midnight. With regard to the steering gear he did not like the type with which the *Usworth* was equipped and thought it ought to be abolished. He had not had occasion to use the secondary steering gear before.

He was familiar, he said, in reply to further questions, with the Board of Trade requirements as to deck hands. When the ship sailed from Swansea there were the carpenter, the boatswain, five A.B.s and two apprentices—nine altogether, and they were all deck hands.

MR. WILLMER: Both the apprentices had had more than two years' service and so that entitles them to rank as A.B.s?

LORD MERRIVALE: Where do you find that?

MR. WILLMER: I am instructed that that is so.

LORD MERRIVALE: There is nothing in it.

WITNESS said one of the apprentices had had 3½ years' experience and the other 2½ years. One was 20 and the other 18. They were efficient men.

NUMBER OF DECK OFFICERS

MR. WILLMER: Your view is that the *Usworth* should have had three deck officers besides yourself and not two?—Yes.

Has she ever had three besides yourself?—No, always two.

You appreciate that the Board of Trade regulations mention the master and two mates?—I have never seen that.

Had you ever, before the time of the casualty to the *Usworth*, brought it to the notice of the superintendent that there ought to be another deck

officer?—I had not personally, but I believe the officers themselves had approached the superintendent.

As to the effect of the number of officers on the actual casualty, I understand your view is that the immediate cause of the abandonment was the damage done by the heavy seas?—Yes.

Had it not been that the steering gear was disabled you might have avoided the major consequences of the heavy seas?—True.

Supposing you had had another officer, or another crew hand, would the position have been the same? Would you have acted differently?—I could not have done differently.

Was the accident in any way connected with the number of men you had on board?—No, not at all.

To what do you attribute the casualty?—To exceptionally heavy weather and the steering gear not being under control.

In reply to the Solicitor-General, Captain REED said he regarded the form of steering gear which was used as open to criticism on the grounds of safety. There was always tension on the chains. There was also the likelihood of jerks, and the wear and tear caused the links to part—to break. It was fairly frequent for a link to go, and owing to the stretching of the chain it was necessary on a voyage to Montreal to take out on an average three links.

The SOLICITOR-GENERAL: Will it be fair to say that your criticism of this steering gear substantially amounts to the one fact that the links are liable to break, and when they do so there is danger to the ship?—That is so.

In reply to the Solicitor-General, Captain REED said he considered that the number of "deck hands," as he had described them—namely, nine—was "quite all right" under normal conditions. When one got into trouble, as the *Usworth* did, nine was out of the question.

The SOLICITOR-GENERAL: Do you want to express a view as to the propriety of a vessel of this size going to sea with nine deck hands as you had when going to Montreal?—Witness: I have no criticism.

LORD MERRIVALE: Even though there was rough weather?—Yes, my lord.

The SOLICITOR-GENERAL: Do you regard eight as cutting it rather fine?—Yes.

This concluded the examination of Captain Reed. Before he left the box LORD MERRIVALE remarked that Counsel had spoken of the manner in which the captain and his shipmates, both those who survived and those who lost their lives, had behaved. Nothing he could say could express more fully the appreciation of those who knew anything of the facts of the manner in which they behaved. "It seems to me," added Lord Merrivale, "it is worthy of the finest traditions of the Merchant Service."

CHIEF ENGINEER'S EVIDENCE

JAMES CRAIG ELLERINGTON, chief engineer of the *Usworth*, said he served three years and nine months in the ship.

MR. DIGBY put a number of questions to the witness about the repairs which had to be done to the steering gear.

WITNESS said he was not sure whether in September, 1931, they had to have a new chain, but a month later at Swansea the chains had to be overhauled. At Cardiff, in 1932, two chains had to be overhauled, and at Montreal in the September of that year, the chains were taken ashore and the links renewed. At Liverpool, in 1933, six chains were overhauled and 2 cwt. of new chain and 22 links were provided. At Immingham, in March, 1934, the chains were again overhauled and 54 new links put in, and at Swansea, November, 1934, before starting on the last voyage, 23 ft. of new links were put in. At Montreal there was a general examination of the steering gear.

MR. DIGBY asked whether all that did not strike him as phenomenal.

WITNESS replied in the negative. All slow tramp steamers, he said, were heavy on their steering gears.

Mr. DIGBY: If chains stretch, do the links become weaker?—Yes.

So that every time the links get stretched the steering chains get weaker and are less able to withstand fracture?—Yes.

Lord MERRIVALE asked whether the amount of wear on the chains during the time of which he had been speaking was normal or abnormal.

Witness replied that it was normal, considering the weather.

Replying to further questions by Lord MERRIVALE, WITNESS said with regard to the wireless apparatus that the dynamo continued to work until two hours before the ship went down. Lloyd's surveyor went on board at Swansea. He did not inspect the steering gear but he set the safety valves of the two main boilers.

Mr. JOHN ROURKE, the carpenter, was the next witness. Replying to Mr. G. St. Clair Pilcher, he said that he had been in the *Usworth* for 3 years 9 months, and she was his first ship.

Questioned in regard to the stowage of the grain cargo, witness said that in Nos. 1 and 5 holds a platform of oak wood was placed on top of the bulk grain and on that were placed four tiers of bagged grain, the whole coming to within about 5 ft. of the ceiling of the hold. Nos. 2, 3 and 4 holds contained only bulk grain, which came almost to the top of the hold.

Mr. DIGBY: As a carpenter with only 3½ years' experience in one ship, you would not call yourself a seaman, would you?—WITNESS: No.

COUNSEL: Well, it has been done for you. In the articles you are described as "carpenter and seaman."

WITNESS agreed with Counsel that there had been trouble with the steering gear practically the whole time he had been in the ship.

Questioned with reference to the emergency steering gear, witness said it was eventually rigged, but it carried away immediately.

COUNSEL: For all the good this secondary steering gear was it might just as well have been left ashore at Swansea?—WITNESS: Quite so.

Mr. HAYWARD: When you first sailed in the *Usworth* did she carry the same number of hands as she did on this last voyage?—WITNESS: No.

How many hands did she carry then?—Twenty-eight was her full complement.

When she left Swansea on her last voyage, witness continued, she carried 27 hands, the one short being an A.B. The ship had been short of this A.B. for just over two years.

THE PALLISTER BRAKE

Replying to the PRESIDENT, WITNESS said that he had seen the Pallister brake in use on board the *Usworth*. Given ordinary weather circumstances it held the rudder effectively.

JOSEPH LAWRENCE BRAY, one of the two apprentices, said he was 18 years of age at the time of the disaster, and had been at sea for 3 years 9 months. He had had two ships before the *Usworth*, in which he was making his first voyage.

In reply to Mr. DIGBY, witness said he did the work of an A.B., kept a night watch and took the wheel. He had had no training before going to sea, and received no instruction in nautical matters on board.

Evidence was then given by Mr. HENRY OSBORN, a retired surveyor to Lloyd's Register of Shipping, in regard to the vessel's first survey, in 1931. Mr. THOMAS RICHARDSON and Mr. HAMISH MCGAVIN PATON, both surveyors to Lloyd's Register, also gave evidence as to later surveys.

Captain WALTER FREDERICK TROTT, nautical surveyor to the Board of Trade, spoke of his survey of the life-saving appliances, lights and sound signals, on Nov. 5, 1934. The star-board lifeboat, he said, had two defective air cases; and the port lifeboat had five cases defective; these were sent ashore at Swansea and repaired. He had a walk around the decks and he did not see anything to which he could take exception.

The inquiry was then adjourned until 10 30 this morning.



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