

The Dominion

Wednesday, February 13, 1924.

MARINE INQUIRY

WRECK OF PORT ELLIOT

CAPTAIN FISHWICK GIVES EVIDENCE

The adjourned inquiry into the wreck of the steamer Port Elliot, belonging to the Commonwealth and Dominion Line, on January 12, on the East Coast between Horoera Point and Te Araroa Point, was continued yesterday. Mr. W. G. Riddell, S.M., presided, and the assessors were Captain J. J. Smith and Captain Rogers.

Mr. J. Prendeville appeared for the Marine Department, Sir John Findlay, K.C., for Captain A. T. Fishwick (master of the vessel), Mr. G. G. Watson for the owners of the steamer, and Mr. E. K. Kirkcaldie for the first and third officers.

Thomas Smith, lighthouse-keeper at East Cape for the last six months, said that he was on duty on the night of the stranding from sunset to midnight. The lights were burning well. The weather was misty, and on the land was very foggy, so that at times the light was in dense fog.

John Bollons, master of the Government steamer Tutaekai, said that the vessel picked up the East Cape light at 3.10 a.m. on January 12 at a distance of six and a half miles, and headed for the passage between East Island and the East Cape. He lost the light in a mist—it was thick in the passage—and steamed round the East Cape for the landing-place, a mile and a half from the light. Owing to the northerly prevailing he altered the course at 4.20 a.m. for Hicks Bay. He saw the Port Elliot and communicated with her. As immediate assistance was not required he remained in Hicks Bay and kept in communication with the Port Elliot, and at 1.30 p.m. proceeded to her, taking the crew off the Port Victor. The weather was thick and misty on land and fair out to sea, making it difficult for a vessel ashore to pick up the land. He did not notice any set towards the East Cape.

James W. Knox, third officer on the steamer, said that on January 12, at 5 p.m., they were about three miles from land near East Cape. The weather was fairly good at sea, but after losing the light they could not see the land. They lost the light about four hours after sighting it. At 10.30 p.m.,

half-an-hour after passing Matakana, they sighted a vessel outside them, at a distance of approximately two miles. About 9 p.m. they had sighted a light ashore which might have been a bush fire.

A. T. Fishwick, master of the Port Elliot, said that he had been twenty-six years at sea as first officer and master. He had been four or five years on the New Zealand coast. The ship left Auckland at 6.22 a.m. on January 12. He set a course off Cuvier Island to pass 13 miles off East Cape. S. 66 E. was the true course, allowing 14 deg. of easterly error and 6 deg. for set and leeway. At 12.50 p.m. the weather cleared a bit, and the wind dropped. At 3.10 p.m. the wind was light south-east, and he took off three degrees from the course they were going. At 9 p.m. the weather was fine and clear, and as they did not see the land off White Island he altered the course to S. 61 E. to take him ten miles off East Cape. At 10.5 p.m. the course was again altered to S. 56 E. true. At 10.20 p.m. the third officer reported that he had seen a flashing light which he thought was the East Cape light, about three points on the starboard bow, but he was not certain. Witness decided to again alter the course at 10.25 p.m., as the log showed 134 miles, and as the weather seemed fairly clear, to S. 59 E. by compass, so as to take the ship four or five miles clear of the land. At 10.53 p.m. the third officer again reported seeing East Cape light four points on the starboard bow, and thought he was about 13 miles off the light. About 11.30 p.m. the third officer reported that he had not seen the light since 10.53 p.m. Shortly after he sent word that he had seen the loom of the land on the starboard beam. As soon as witness got on the bridge he gave orders to "starboard," then "hard to starboard" and "full astern." He thought he saw a low point about half a point on the port bow. The ship struck heavily at the same time as he gave the order "full astern" at 11.41 p.m. At 11.52 he stopped the engines, and at 11.55 p.m. rang "full astern" again without avail. The ship was falling off to starboard 23 degrees. At 12.6 a.m. he tried "full astern" again, but the engineer reported that the bulkhead between the engine-room and stokehold was buckling up, water was flooding the engine-room, and the engines were stopped. He sounded the holds and found No. 1 dry, Nos. 2 and 3 making water, and the engine-room and stokehold making water rapidly, Nos. 4 and 5 holds dry. The crew were sent to the boat stations, and boats were swung out. At 0.15 a.m. on January 13 the chief officer sounded the holds again and reported that Nos. 2 and 3 holds and the engine-room were making water rapidly, and steps were taken to stop leaks, but it was found that nothing could be done. The three life-boats were lowered, and the boats crews were called over and orders given to the officers of the boats to keep off the ship and await orders. Witness, the first officer, chief engineer, and

some of the men remained on board to see if anything could be done. At 4.45 a.m. the engine-room and stokehold were making water rapidly, and he decided to take to the boats till daylight not knowing what turn the boilers might take. About 3.45 a.m. he had ordered the crew aboard. About 5 a.m. he sounded the holds and found No. 1 making water, Nos. 2, 4, and 5 dry. Owing to the engine-room being flooded they could not attempt to make steam. At 2.30 p.m. on January 13 they commenced to transfer the crew to the Tutaekai. About 6 p.m. the crew were all safe on the Port Victor, except those who had volunteered to stand by the ship, as well as Captain West, who arrived by the Port Victor. Witness personally set the courses during the run. The ship was well found and the compasses were very good.

To Mr. Kirkcaldie: The East Cape light was sometimes obscured by smoke. He saw a steamer (the Tutaekai) pass inshore about a mile and a quarter or a mile and a half inside his ship. He had no fault to find with the third officer, whom he had always found reliable.

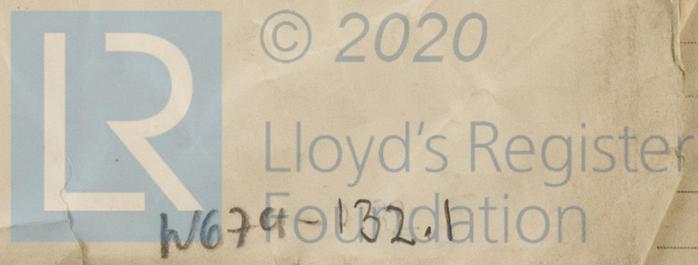
To Mr. Watson: Witness was either on the deck or the bridge during the night. After discussing the matter with the third officer he was satisfied the East Cape light had been seen. He saw two or three bush fires when daylight came on January 13, and he was now satisfied that the third officer and the apprentice first mistook one of the bush fires for the East Cape light. His last course should have taken them four or five miles off the East Cape—a safe course.

To Sir John Findlay: He was 60 years of age in April, and had spent 40 years at sea. He had been a master mariner since 1895, and had never had a disaster at sea before. If the light had not been reported at 10.53 p.m. he would have slowed down, altered the course to the eastward, and taken four or five casts to the left. His explanation of the disaster was that the set of the sea from 9 p.m. altered the ship's course towards the land. He had not known of a set of two miles an hour at that place before the disaster.

Mr. Kirkcaldie addressed the Bench on behalf of the third officer, pointing out that he had been shown to be a careful navigator and had done all there was humanly possible to carry out his duty.

Sir John Findlay, on behalf of Captain Fishwick, contended that the set shown in the evidence was not known to the captain, and quoted authorities to prove that he could not be held responsible for the result. The captain was entitled to accept the assurance of the third officer that the East Cape light had been seen, and was justified in acting accordingly.

Decision was reserved.



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