

(No. 256.)

“CORINTH,” (S.S.)

The Merchant Shipping Acts, 1854 to 1876.

In the matter of the formal investigation held at the Crown Court, Cardiff, on the 29th day of April 1878, before H. C. ROTHERY, Esquire, Wreck Commissioner, assisted by Rear-Admiral APLIN, R.N., and Captain JONES, as Assessors, into the circumstances attending the stranding of the steamship “CORINTH,” of Cardiff, on Brigg’s Reef, county Down, on the 8th of April 1878.

Report of Court.

The Court, having carefully inquired into the circumstances of the above-mentioned shipping casualty, finds, for the reasons stated in the annexed judgment, that the stranding and loss of the said ship was due to the negligent navigation thereof by William Thomas, the master, in not making sufficient allowance for the set of the current to the southward when he laid his course from Copeland Light; in not ascertaining the true position of his vessel, which he could easily have done by taking cross-bearings; and in leaving the deck to consult his charts when he found that his vessel was being carried too far to the southward and was nearing the shore, before ordering the helm to be ported.

For these wrongful acts and defaults the Court suspends the certificate of the said William Thomas for three months, but recommends that during the period of such suspension he be allowed a first mate’s certificate.

The Court makes no order as to costs.

Dated this 29th day of April 1878.

(Signed) H. C. ROTHERY, Wreck Commissioner.

We concur in the above report.

(Signed) T. L. APLIN, Rear-Admiral, } Assessors.
HENRY JONES, }

Judgment.

The Commissioner.—The “Corinth,” which forms the subject of the present inquiry, was an iron screw steamship of 287 tons gross and 182 tons net register, and was fitted with two engines of 35 horse-power. She was built at Wallsend-on-the-Tyne in the year 1873, and at the time of her loss was the property of Messieurs Vellacott, of this town, Mr. Henry James Vellacott, of Vienna Chambers, Bute Docks, being the managing owner.

The vessel left Neath Abbey for Belfast on the 6th of April instant with a cargo of 350 tons of coal and a crew of 10 hands all told, consisting of a master, a mate, three able seamen, chief and second engineers, and three firemen. Before her departure from Neath the three able seamen who then formed part of her crew left her on the ground that she was one hand short of her complement. The master accordingly brought up at the Mumbles, went ashore, and procured three new hands, whom he took on board, and at 2 a.m. of the following morning, the 7th, the vessel proceeded on her voyage. At this time it was blowing a gale from east-north-east; and in crossing St. George’s Channel she experienced very bad weather, so much so, that from 4 a.m. of the 8th she had to lie to for about eight hours, and during that time the cargo appears to have shifted, and she got a list of three or four strakes to port. At mid-day she again proceeded on her voyage, encountering still very bad weather, and kept away to the east so as to get under the shelter of the Mull of Galloway. She proceeded under shelter of the Mull of Galloway until they made out Port Patrick Light, when the vessel was steered across for Belfast Lough. At about 10 o’clock or half-past she was abreast of the Copeland Light, and in half an hour from that time was aground on the Briggs. The engines were at once set full speed astern, but all their efforts failed to get her off until about 1 a.m., when she floated off with the rise of the tide, but soon afterwards filled, and sank before they could run her aground.

Now the question which we have to consider is, how was it that this vessel came to be run ashore? According to the master the course which he steered before reaching Copeland Island was north-west and by north, and

after passing the island his course, he told us, was west-north-west. He also said that after rounding Copeland Light, which they did at a distance of about two miles, seeing that the vessel was being set more to the southward than he intended, he went down into his cabin to examine his chart. After being below some five minutes or so he returned to the deck and immediately gave orders to hard a-port the helm, but the vessel, owing either to the list which she had, or to some other cause, would not answer her helm; and although it was kept a-port for five minutes or more she would not pay off, and took the ground. Such is the master’s statement.

When, however, we came to examine Robert Richards, the mate, the account which he gave of the course steered by this vessel was very different. It seems that he did not come on deck until after they had passed the Copeland Light, and on then going on the bridge he found that she was heading west by north half north, one and a half points more to the westward than the captain told us. Both he and the master said that on these courses the compass had a deviation of about ½ a point, but whether the deviation was to the east or to the west they were not agreed. It does not, however, much matter, as we shall speak only of the vessel’s compass course.

We come now, however, to the men who were at the helm, and it is on their evidence that we ought perhaps to place the greatest reliance, for they must, if anyone, know the course they were steering. Richard Hullin was at the wheel from 8 to about 10.30 p.m. of the 8th. He told us that he was at the wheel when the Copeland Light was first sighted, and that the vessel was then steering west, the Copeland Light bearing right ahead. He said that, when the vessel had got to within five or six miles of the light her helm was ported so as to bring the light about a point on the port bow, and that she was continued on that course west by north so long as he remained at the helm, which was until within about ten minutes of the casualty. He told us also that instead of passing two miles to the northward of the Copeland Light they passed about one mile from it. This man was succeeded at the helm by a seaman named John Thomas, and his evidence was directly confirmatory of that of Hullin. He stated that the orders that he received from Hullin were to steer west and by north; and he said that he kept the vessel on that course down to the time when she took the ground. He told us that shortly before the master went below, as he presumed, to consult his charts, and that immediately on his return to the deck, he told him either to steer west-north-west, or to port or to hard a-port, or something of that kind. It is not impossible that the master might, as has been suggested to me by one of the assessors, on coming on deck have said: “Port, hard a-port, keep her west-north-west,” or something of that kind. There is thus a direct conflict of evidence between these persons, and it is for the Court to say to which the greatest credence should be attached.

Now it was said by Mr. Ingledew that the evidence of Hullin was clearly false for several reasons. In the first place, he said that the proper course from the Mull of Galloway to Belfast Lough would be, as the master had stated, north-west by north. No doubt that would be so, provided that the course of the vessel were altered as soon as they had made the southernmost point of the Mull of Galloway. But the evidence is that they did not stand away for Belfast Lough until after they had made Port Patrick Light. Now it must be remembered that this casualty occurred on the 8th of April instant, when it would be daylight until after 7 o’clock. If, therefore, they continued their course under shelter of the Mull of Galloway until they had come within the range of Port Patrick Light, which at its utmost extent can be seen only to the distance of eight miles, it is clear that they must have stood well up to the north before they laid their course for Belfast Lough, and in that case the course would have been, not as the master has said north-west by north, but probably nearly a westerly course. It was also contended by Mr. Ingledew that Hullin must have been guilty of perjury when he said that he steered the vessel on a west course, and yet kept the Copeland Light right ahead, for that whether the tide was running up or down at that time, if he had kept the same course, the light must have been brought on the one bow or on the other. But it must be observed that, seeing that when this vessel took the ground at 11 o’clock it was half flood, at 8 o’clock, when her course was laid from the Mull of Galloway towards Belfast Lough, it must have been about slack water; and the vessel might therefore very well have been kept upon a west course, and yet have kept the light ahead.

Let us now consider which of the two statements as to the course steered by the vessel is the most probable, that of the master or that of the two men who were at the wheel. According to the master they passed two miles to the northward of the Copeland Light, and then steered a west-north-west course; but if so, we are at a loss to understand how it was possible for them to have got on to the Briggs, whatever at that particular time may have been the strength of the current; indeed, Mr. Ingledew himself fairly admitted that such a course must have carried them well to the northward of the Briggs. On the other hand, the statement of Hullin, the man at the wheel, that when they sighted the Copeland Light they steered for it until they got within five or six miles, and that they then brought the light one point on the port bow, which took them about a mile to the northward of Copeland Light, would be quite consistent, allowing one mile in five for an alteration of the helm one point. Having passed one mile to the northward of the Copeland Light, a course west and by north with the current setting them as it would do at half flood, to the southward, would take the vessel very nearly to the spot where she grounded. We can therefore have no doubt that the statement of the two men who were at the wheel, Hullin and Thomas, that she was steered west by north after passing the Copeland Light, and not west-north-west as the captain had told us, gives the true explanation of this casualty. A course west by north, had there been no current, would have taken the vessel clear of the Briggs, and it is probable that the master laid his course without thinking at all of the current, or which way it would set him.

Now the Board of Trade has charged the master with neglect of duty in not ascertaining the true position of his vessel, and in allowing her to continue on her course after he knew that the ship was too close inshore, and in not navigating her with proper and seamanlike care; and we are bound to say, however reluctant we may be to do so, that these charges have been proved. The master ought, after passing the Copeland Light, to have seen from the bearing of the light alone that he was getting further to the southward than was consistent with the safety of the vessel. He admits that he saw the Donaghadee Light, and if he had had any doubt as to his position he ought to have taken cross-bearings. No charge has been made against

him for not taking soundings, and possibly they might not have helped him much to fix his position; but the two lights would, had he taken cross-bearings, have shown him his true position. Being also in doubt as to his position, and seeing, as he has told us, from the appearance of the Copeland Light that he was drifting towards the south, and was nearing the land, he ought, instead of continuing his course at the rate of eight knots an hour, to have stopped his vessel, or at any rate ported his helm before going below to consult his chart. We think that this master has been guilty of improper and unseamanlike conduct in the navigation of his vessel. At the same time we are disposed to look leniently upon his conduct, which, apart from the evidence that he has given in the case, was good. He was in his place attending to his duties; he was not recklessly navigating his vessel, and no doubt, as Mr. Ingledew has said, he was anxious to bring his vessel into port; but he has shown a want of care in not making proper allowance for the set of the tide to the south after he had passed Copeland Light, in not taking cross-bearings when he might easily have done so, and thus accurately fixed the position of his vessel, and in not ordering the helm to be put to port before he went down below to look at his chart, although he knew at the time from the appearance of the Copeland Light that he was nearer to the shore than he ought to have been. Had he consulted his charts before he passed the Copeland Light, and made himself perfectly familiar with the navigation of these waters, he would have known where he was without having to go down into his cabin to look at his charts at a time when his presence on deck was of the utmost importance. Had he done so he would have seen from the closing in of the Donaghadee Light that he was running into danger.

On the whole, we are disposed to think that a lenient sentence may properly be passed upon him; a mere reprimand or censure would, in our opinion, not be sufficient, but we shall suspend his certificate for three months. And we shall recommend that during the time of suspension he be allowed a first mate's certificate. [To Mr. Waldron].—You do not ask for any costs?

Mr. Waldron.—No, sir.

(Signed) H. C. ROTHERY,
Wreck Commissioner.