

(No. 753.)

“AURORA.” (S.S.)

The Merchant Shipping Acts, 1854 to 1876.

In the matter of the formal investigation held at Westminster on the 7th October 1880, before H. C. ROTHERY, Esquire, Wreck Commissioner, assisted by Captain E. D. GRANT, C.B., R.N., Captain PARFITT, and Captain HARLAND, as Assessors, into the circumstances attending the loss of the steamship “AURORA,” of Dublin, and the loss of the lives of fifteen of her crew on the 15th of September last, whilst on a voyage from Oporto to Southampton.

Report of Court.

The Court, having carefully inquired into the circumstances of the above-mentioned shipping casualty, finds, for the reasons annexed,—

- 1. That the vessel was not properly navigated, inasmuch as she was kept too long on her course with the wind and sea abeam, instead of being put, as she ought to have been, head to sea as soon as the gale commenced, and kept there while it lasted.
- 2. That the ballast was of proper quality and was properly stowed.
- 3. That the vessel was properly fitted for carrying the cattle on the voyage in question, so far as relates to the pens and wooden fittings.
- 4. That although the cattle were secured in the usual way with coir ropes it is a question whether strong hemp ropes would not, under the circumstances, have been better.
- 5. That beyond keeping her head to sea whilst the gale lasted, and using stronger head ropes for the cattle, it does not appear that any step was omitted to be taken to ensure the safety of the vessel during the voyage.
- 6. That in the opinion of the Court the loss of the vessel is due to her having been kept too long on her course with the wind and sea abeam, instead of being put, as she should have been, head to sea as soon as the gale commenced, and kept there while it lasted.

The Court is not asked to make any Order as to costs.

Dated the 7th day of October 1880.

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

We concur in the above report.

(Signed) H. D. GRANT, WM. PARFITT, ROBERT HARLAND, } Assessors.

Annex to the Report.

This case was heard at Westminster on the 7th October 1880, when Mr. Kenelm Digby appeared for the Board of Trade, and Mr. Harrison for the owners of the “Aurora.” Five witnesses having been produced by the Board of Trade and examined, Mr. Kenelm Digby asked the opinion of the Court upon the following questions:—

- “1. Whether the vessel was properly navigated?”
- “2. Whether the ballast was of proper quality and properly stowed?”
- “3. Whether the vessel was properly fitted for carrying the cattle on the voyage in question?”
- “4. Whether the cattle were properly secured?”
- “5. Whether any and what further or other steps might have been taken to ensure the safety of the vessel during her voyage?”
- “6. What in the opinion of the Court was the cause of the casualty?”

Mr. Harrison, having called Captain Carnegie as a witness for the owners, then addressed the Court on behalf of his parties, and Mr. Kenelm Digby having replied for the Board of Trade, the Court proceeded to give judgment on the questions on which its opinion had been asked. The circumstances of the case are as follow:—

The “Aurora,” which was an iron screw steam ship belonging to the port of Dublin, of 597 tons gross, and 377 tons net register, and was fitted with compound

engines of 99 horse power, was built at Cork in the year 1856, and at the time of her loss was the property of Messrs. Palgrave and Murphy; Mr. Michael Murphy, of No. 17, Elder Quay, Dublin, being the managing owner. She had been bought some years since by Messrs. Palgrave and Murphy, and had been by them specially fitted out for the cattle trade between the Spanish Peninsula and this country, a trade in which they were largely engaged, having, we are told, during the last 16 years brought over no less than 80,000 head of cattle. She seems to have been well fitted for the purpose, and had a pair of new compound engines put into her in 1875, and so late as May last had been put into dry dock, thoroughly overhauled, and received a passenger certificate. She had two decks, three holds, all forward of the engines, three water-tight bulkheads, 4 boats, of which 2 were life boats, and 3 hand pumps, besides the usual engine room pumps.

On the 4th of September last she left Glasgow with a general cargo bound to Oporto, arrived there on the 9th of the same month, and having discharged her outward cargo proceeded at once to take in ballast, which consisted of coarse sand mixed with stones, and of which about 80 tons were put into the main hold, and about 100 tons into the after hold. They also took in about 2½ tons of provender for the cargo of cattle, which they were about to ship, and stowed it away in the fore hold. At 1 a.m. of the 12th, all the ballast being on board and levelled, they proceeded to put up the cattle pens and fittings in the ’tween decks and on the main deck. These consisted of stanchions 5½ inches square, firmly secured at top and bottom with two rows of planks 3 inches thick by 11 inches deep, forming the ends and sides of the pens, the planks being dropped into brackets on the stanchions and lashed to prevent the cattle unshipping them. This took them about an hour to do, and at 2 a.m. they began to ship the cattle, which were placed partly in the main and after holds and partly in the main deck. In the lower holds, there being no pens, the cattle were arranged in two rows, one on each side of the ship, with an alley way down the centre, each bullock having a separate head rope, which passed with a bight round one of the horns, and with a half hitch round the other, and was secured to a ring bolt in the ship’s side. In the ’tween decks and on the main deck all the bullocks were in pens, two, three, or at the outside four being in one pen; and they were secured in the same way with head ropes attached either to ring bolts in the ship’s side, or to the stanchions or planks forming the pens. There were in all 250 taken on board, of which 50 were placed in the lower after hold, 40 in the lower main hold, 45 in the after, and 38 in the main ’tween decks, the remaining 77 being on the main deck. By 6 a.m. all the cattle were on board and secured, and at 7 a.m. the vessel left for Southampton with a crew of 22 hands, all told, and drawing 8 feet 9 forward and 13 feet 3 aft.

The wind was at this time light from the S.W., but there was a heavy sea from the N.W. At 8.15 p.m. they were off Cape Finisterre, upon which the vessel was steered N.N.E. to pass Cape Villano, and at 11 p.m. the course was altered to N.E. ½ E. for Ushant. On the following morning the wind had gone to the northward, and at 9 p.m. a heavy gale set in accompanied with very severe gusts of wind, commencing at W.S.W., and working round in the morning to W.N.W. The vessel was, however, still kept on her course N.E. ½ E., and between 9 and 10 a.m. a heavy sea struck her, and the head ropes of some 15 of the cattle in the ’tween decks giving way they were thrown to leeward, giving the vessel a list to starboard. On this the cattle in the lower holds tried to scramble up to windward, and in their struggles shifted the ballast down to leeward. After a time the cattle that had got adrift were hauled up and secured again, but the vessel still had a list to starboard owing to the ballast having shifted over to that side. The vessel was nevertheless kept on her course N.E. ½ E., and at 2 p.m. another heavy sea struck her, throwing a number of the cattle, both in the ’tween decks and in the lower holds to leeward. On this the master was obliged to bring the vessel head to sea, steaming away at full speed all the time to prevent her getting to leeward on the French coast, and for about three hours they were employed securing the cattle. At 6 p.m. all was again straight, except that the vessel still had a list to starboard, and the vessel was then put on her course E.N.E., and, according

to the second mate, the master said that if he could see anything he would go into Brest with her. Nothing however was seen, but the vessel continued to go more and more over to starboard, and at 7 p.m. orders were given to jettison some of the cattle from the deck, and about 25 were thereupon thrown overboard; but in doing so one of the lee gangways was unfortunately lost overboard, and from that time it was found impossible to keep the water off the decks and prevent its getting below. At about 2 a.m. of the following morning, the 15th, the water had risen in the engine room so high as to put out the fires, upon which the vessel became unmanageable. Orders were thereupon given by the captain to get the boats ready, but he very properly would not allow them to leave before daylight. At 4 a.m., the day beginning to break, orders were given to launch the two starboard boats, it being impossible to get either of the port boats out owing to the heavy list which the vessel had. The cutter, which was the foremost boat, was thereupon launched, and the second mate, 4 seamen, and the two Portuguese cattle drovers got into her, but the after boat, which was a life boat, for some reason or other could not be cleared in time, and in about 10 minutes afterwards the vessel sank, carrying everything down with it. The men in the cutter having no means of keeping the boat's head to the sea were obliged to allow her to drive before it, and at about 11 a.m. they arrived off a place 6 miles to the east of Abervrac, a small town on the coast of France, nearly due north of Brest, and having landed they found their way to Brest, whence they were forwarded to this country. Nothing, however, has since been heard of any more of the crew, and there can be no doubt that they have all perished.

Such being the facts of this case, the first question upon which our opinion has been asked is, "Whether the vessel was properly navigated." From the evidence of Captain Carnegie, Messrs. Palgrave and Murphy's Marine Superintendent, who had for many years commanded vessels in the cattle trade, it appears that the usual course when carrying cattle is to put the vessel's head to sea as soon as bad weather sets in so as to prevent her getting a list either to the one side or to the other, and that seems to be a very obvious and proper course with such a cargo, and with sand ballast in the bottom. Why that course was not taken by the master of the "Aurora," as soon as the gale commenced, and why he continued on his course with the wind and sea abeam from Monday evening, when the gale set in, until about 3.15 p.m. of the Tuesday, it is not easy to say; and, unfortunately, the poor man is not here to give us his reasons. In default, however, of any explanation on the subject the Court cannot but agree with Captain Carnegie that the vessel was not properly navigated, and that she ought, as soon as the gale commenced, to have been brought head to sea and kept there till it was over.

The second question on which our opinion is asked is "Whether the ballast was of proper quality and properly stowed." It seems that the ballast, which the "Aurora" had on board, was coarse sand mixed with stones; and we were told by Captain Carnegie, who had often sailed with cattle from Oporto, that it is the same as is invariably supplied to cattle ships leaving that port. He told us also that it makes a very good bed for the cattle, and that they are carried more safely and more comfortably upon it than in any other way. In that opinion also the Assessors entirely concur, and it would seem therefore that the ballast was of proper quality, and there is nothing to shew that it was not properly stowed.

The third question on which our opinion has been

asked is "Whether the vessel was properly fitted for carrying cattle on the voyage in question." The question, I apprehend, relates to the pens and cattle fittings, and not to the head ropes, by which the cattle were secured, and which belongs more properly to the next question. I have already stated that the pens were constructed of 5½ inch stanchions at the corners, with two rows of planks 3 inches thick by 11 inches deep, forming the ends and sides. This, I am informed, is the usual way in which the cattle pens are constructed, and in the opinion of the Assessors they were sufficient and suitable. It is true that some of the planks were said to have been broken, but this might naturally have been expected to occur when the head ropes gave way, and the whole weight of the bullocks was brought upon them.

The fourth question on which our opinion is asked is "Whether the cattle were properly secured;" which I presume refers to the head ropes by which the cattle were secured. These ropes were 2½ inch coir, and are the same which are usually employed for the purpose on board cattle ships, being light, and not so liable to rot; at the same time they are not so strong as good hemp rope. So long indeed as the vessel is upright no great strain would be brought upon the ropes; but as soon as the vessel got a list, the strain which would be brought upon them by the weight of the bullocks would be such as only the strongest rope would be able to bear. Whether, under these circumstances, it might not be better to have good strong hemp for securing the cattle rather than the coir rope generally employed for that purpose, may be a question for the consideration of the owners. Captain Carnegie told us that hemp rope, although it would cost more at first, would last longer, and that he did not think that in the end it would be more expensive. Coir rope however, is, as I have said, that which is usually employed for the purpose, and on all ordinary occasions it is in the opinion of the Assessors sufficient and suitable.

The fifth question on which our opinion has been asked is "Whether any and what other steps might have been taken to ensure the safety of the vessel during the voyage." Except that the vessel's head was not kept to the sea whilst the gale lasted, as it apparently should have been, and that possibly it might have been better to have had stronger head ropes for the cattle, it does not appear that any steps were omitted to be taken to insure the safety of the vessel.

The sixth question that we are asked is "What, in the opinion of the Court, was the cause of the casualty?" The loss of the vessel was no doubt due to her not having been put head to sea as soon as the gale commenced, and kept there whilst it lasted. Why this was not done, and how it was that the pumps in the engine room were not able to keep the water under so as to prevent the fires being extinguished, we are quite unable to say, neither the captain nor any of the persons connected with the engine room department having been saved. Had the vessel been kept head to sea, in all probability the casualty would not have occurred.

No application, and therefore no order, was made as to costs.

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

We concur.

(Signed) H. D. GRANT,
WM. PARFITT,
ROBERT HARLAND, } Assessors.

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