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(No. 878.)

“PENWITH.”

The Merchant Shipping Acts, 1854 to 1876.

IN the matter of a formal Investigation held at Cardiff on the 15th and 17th days of January 1881, before ROBERT OLIVER JONES, Esquire, assisted by Rear-Admiral PICKARD, R.N., and Captain COMYN, into the circumstances attending the supposed loss of the British sailing ship “PENWITH,” of Hayle.

Report of Court.

The Court, having carefully inquired into the circumstances attending the above-mentioned shipping casualty, finds, for the reasons stated in the annex hereto, that the ship left Cardiff on the 11th day of May 1880, and has not been heard of since; but there is no evidence before the Court from which an opinion can be formed as to the cause of her supposed loss.

Dated this 17th day of January 1881.

(Signed) R. O. JONES,
Judge.

We concur in the above report.

(Signed) BENJ. S. PICKARD, R.N., } Assessors.
D. R. COMYN, }

Annex to the Report.

The opinion of the Court was asked on behalf of the Board of Trade upon the following questions:—

1. Whether, when the “Penwith” left Penarth, she was in good and seaworthy condition, and her cargo properly stowed and trimmed?
2. Whether she was overladen, and whether, as laden, the vessel had sufficient stability?
3. Whether she had sufficient freeboard?
4. Whether her hold was properly ventilated, i.e., so as to ensure a system of surface ventilation which would be effective in all circumstances of the weather?
5. Whether all the deck openings were efficiently protected, so that heavy seas breaking on board could not find their way below?
6. Whether the master, officers, and crew, were sober and competent to undertake the navigation of the vessel when she left Penarth?

And finally—

What, in the opinion of the Court, is the cause of this vessel not having been heard of since she proceeded from Penarth to sea on the 11th May last.

The “Penwith,” of Hayle, official No. 68,866, was built of iron, at Hayle, in the year 1878. Her length was 137 feet, breadth 26 feet, and depth in hold 12 feet. Her gross tonnage was 288 tons, her registered tonnage 276 tons. She was rigged as a barquentine. She had one deck, and one hold with three hatchways. She had an iron collision bulkhead, water-tight, and without any openings. She was classed at Lloyd’s 100 A1, with a “star” for special survey, and was owned by Messrs. Bain & Co., of Portreath, Cornwall.

The “Penwith” left Penarth dock, Cardiff, bound for Rio Grande do Sul, on the 11th day of May 1880, with a crew of ten all told, under the command of Mr. John C. Cock, who had for twenty years been in the service of the owners, and who was described by

Mr. D. W. Bain as a remarkably sober and intelligent man, who possessed the entire confidence of the owners.

We have no doubt that on leaving Penarth the vessel was in good and seaworthy condition.

She carried a cargo of 422 tons of South Wales steam coal, raised from the collieries of the “Ocean” Steam Coal Company in the Rhondda and Ogmore Vallies, Glamorganshire—a coal which is well known to give off explosive gas very freely, but which is free from liability to spontaneous combustion. A cargo of this coal needs especial care to its ventilation. Due provision should be made to ensure a current of air over the surface of the coal; and according to Mr. Wales, the Government inspector of mines, this can only be well and effectively done by artificial means, that is, by the use of a fan or similar apparatus. According to Mr. Wales, a ship of the size of the “Penwith” would be amply ventilated by two pipes placed at one end of the hold for introducing air, and two at the other end for its escape, the escape pipe being connected with the fan.

In the case of the “Penwith” there were no means of ventilation except the hatchways. As the coal with which she was laden continues to give off its gas for some days after it is wrought, the vessel was exposed to the risk of an explosion by dependence on the hatchway, which the weather might render it unsafe to leave open sufficiently long as the sole means of ventilation.

The owner informed the Court that ventilation was left, as other matters appertaining to the building and fitting of the ship were left, to the judgment and care of the builders, who had built other vessels for him in a satisfactory way. The master also, it seemed, had authority to make any provision that he might have thought necessary for the safety of the vessel. But although the owners might have had good reason for placing great confidence in the builders and the master of their ship, we can hardly exonerate them from blame for so entirely neglecting their own responsibility in a matter of so much importance.

To this risk of explosion was added the danger arising from the manner in which the cargo was stowed and trimmed, which not only encouraged the accumulation of gas, but rendered the cargo liable to shift if the ship met with heavy weather. Midships a space large enough to hold at least forty tons of coal was left, another space being left forward.

With regard to the second and third questions, we are of opinion that the ship was not overladen, and that she had sufficient stability and freeboard. We find that on three previous voyages she had carried heavier cargoes of coals than that shipped on the last occasion.

The only deck openings were the hatchways, and those, we think, were sufficiently protected.

There is nothing in the evidence to lead us to conclude that the master, officers, and crew were not sober or not competent to undertake the navigation of the vessel when she left Cardiff.

As to the cause of this vessel not having been heard of since she sailed from Penarth Roads, we can offer no opinion. She started with a fair wind and fine weather, and in the ordinary course ought to have reached her destination in about sixty-five days.

A letter to her owners from Captain Cock, dated at Penarth, on the 11th May last, was the last intelligence about her which has been received.

(Signed) R. O. JONES.
BENJ. S. PICKARD, R.N.
D. R. COMYN.