

(No. 1007.)

“ALNE HOLME.” (S.S.)

The Merchant Shipping Acts, 1854 to 1876.

In the matter of a formal Investigation held at St. George's Hall, Liverpool, on the 7th and 9th days of May 1881, before THOS. STAMFORD RAFFLES, Esq., Stipendiary Magistrate, assisted by Rear-Admiral APLIN, Captain FORSTER, and Captain COWIE, Nautical Assessors, into the circumstances attending the material damage sustained by the British steamship “ALNE HOLME,” of Maryport, through an explosion which occurred on board the said vessel, whereby loss of life ensued, on 27th February last off Vigo.

*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 material damage above-mentioned was, occasioned by the explosion of the gas given off from the coal becoming ignited in consequence of deficient ventilation. One life was lost, John Sponge, A.B. He was missing when the crew were mustered after the casualty; and not being found, was supposed to have fallen overboard. The Court ordered the owners of the vessel to pay 100*l.* towards the cost of this inquiry.

Dated this 9th day of May 1881.

(Signed) T. S. RAFFLES,  
Judge.

We concur in the above report.

(Signed) ELPHINSTONE APLIN, } Assessor.  
Rear-Admiral, }  
GEORGE H. FORSTER, Assessor (1st Class).  
W. COWIE, Assessor.

*Annex to the Report.*

The “Alne Holme” is an iron screw steamer, built at Sunderland in 1876, with a long poop, of 1036.36 tons gross and 657.52 tons registered, and of 98 horse power combined. She was registered at Maryport, and is the property of Mr. Wilfrid Hine, of that place, who is managing owner, and several others. She was commanded by Mr. Charles Markham, who holds a certificate of competency as master, No. 85.571, dated 5th June 1867, and she had a crew of 19 hands all told. The master stated that he had previously to this voyage carried seven cargoes of coals safely in the same vessel, but she did not appear to have been built for the coal trade, and the only ventilation she had, with the exception of that afforded by the hatches, was as regarded the main hold alone by means of two bollards of 14 to 15 inches in height on each side of the vessel abreast of the foremast, fitted with screws 2½ to 3 inches in diameter. There were no cowl or other additional ventilators. She was loaded at Newport, South Wales, in February last, with 1,369 tons of Risca black vein coal, which was considered to be a “fiery” coal, giving off a large quantity of gas and very explosive when one part of gas mixed with 8 to 9 parts of air came in contact with a light, but perfectly safe to carry with proper ventilation. The loading began on the 21st February, and the coals were sent down to be shipped fresh from the mine, and the loading was finished on the evening of the 23rd. 718 tons were put into the fore and main hold, which formed one compartment, 491 tons into the after-hold, and 160 tons into the bunkers. The coal was shipped under the superintendence of Mr. Wm. H. Dunn, foreman trimmer to the London and South Wales Coal Company, to whom the colliery belonged, and the cargo appeared to have been carefully and properly loaded.

The cargo was loaded in the following manner:—  
The lower afterhold was quite full, and the poop

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between decks partly full; but no explosion took place in that part of the vessel which extended from the after bulkhead of the engine room to the stuffing-box bulkhead, and had one hatchway 18 feet × 10 feet. The fore and main hold extended from the fore bulkhead of the engine room to the collision bulkhead, and there were no 'tween decks in this hold. There were three hatchways, each two feet high. No. 1, or fore hatch, 14½ feet × 8½ feet; No. 2, or main hatch, 20 feet × 12 feet; and No. 3, the auxiliary bunker hatch, 4 feet × 5 feet; and there were also two small hatchways under the fore-castle, the covers of which were not gas tight, and they were within a few feet of the crew's fore-castle, in which an open light was burning as usual after dark. In the fore and main hold the cargo was stowed from the after bulkhead close up to the deck in the wings, as far forward as the fore hatch, from under the fore-part of which the coals sloped down to the collision bulkhead, and there was a clear passage under the hatchways about 3 feet square, extending along the middle line of the ship from bulkhead to bulkhead, which passage had been left by order of the master evidently for the purpose of ventilation. A space was left unfilled in the fore part of this hold, which the trimmer considered would have held from 15 to 20 tons, but the master thought it would hold from 50 to 60 tons. Just before the loading commenced, the master was served with a printed notice (annexed to this report) by Mr. Winn, the colliery agent, warning him against the explosive nature of the cargo, and cautioning him as to the necessity for providing for the proper ventilation of the ship, and he was also furnished by the Board of Trade officer, when shipping his crew, with the well-known “official caution” relating to the ventilation required for coal cargoes. The vessel sailed on the 24th for Gibraltar, drawing 17 feet 6 inches aft and 16 feet 6 inches forward, her freeboard in dock being 1 foot 4 inches, and at sea it would be 1 foot 8 inches. The hatchways had been kept open till she sailed, but as they passed the Wolf Rock and opened out the Channel between 7 and 8 p.m., the sea being rough, they had to batten down the main and bunker hatchways and screw the after bollards down. The fore hatchway was half closed, and the tarpaulin being turned back left the other half open. The hatchway of the after hold was also half open. The weather did not permit them to open the hatchway further before the explosion. When off Vigo, the night being dark with a good deal of lightning, about 1.20 a.m. on the 27th, the 2nd mate being on watch with three deck hands, of whom one was at the wheel and one on the look out; the third man, named John Sponge, was sent by the officer on watch just after 1 p.m. to make some tea. He went to the fore-castle for a kettle, and subsequently he went into the stoke-hole, and he was there with a fireman named Jackson when the explosion occurred. The 2nd mate described that he heard a rumble, followed immediately by an explosion in the direction of the fore hold, which blew off the hatches of the fore and main hold, started the combings of the fore hatchway and the fore part of the bridge, and knocked both compasses out of their places, filled the air with fire and coaldust, and set the topsail and foresail, which were furled, on fire. The master who was in bed at the time, felt as if the ship had run against a rock, and came up at once. He ordered the starboard lifeboat to be got over the side ready for lowering and steered for Vigo Light, which was then in sight. But finding, after examination, that the consequences of the explosion had not been serious as regarded the vessel, he resumed his voyage and ordered the crew to be mustered. The man, John Sponge, was found to be missing, and though every possible search was made for him on board he could not be found, though he was seen on deck immediately after the explosion. The vessel reached Gibraltar on the 1st of March without further accident, and afterwards returned to the Mersey, and was put into dry dock at Birkenhead and repaired at a cost, said to be of about 100*l.* She was subsequently sent to Cardiff to load another coal cargo, and there stopped by order of the Board of Trade, and she has since been fitted with three 10-inch cowls to the main hold and two 12-inch cowls to the fore hold, standing 6 to 7 feet high, and which could be carried in almost any weather.

On the close of the evidence, Mr. Squarey, the learned counsel for the Board of Trade, asked the following questions:—

1. What was the cause of the explosion?
2. Were the means adopted for the ventilation of the vessel sufficient, having regard to the nature of the coals shipped, to the season of the year, and to the bad weather which might reasonably have been expected on the voyage?
3. Was the coal properly stowed so as to leave a free passage for air between the coal and the underside of the deck?
4. Were the ventilating bitts at the time of the explosion in good working order, and were they at that time, and previously, kept clear and open, and if not, was the master justified in keeping them closed?
5. Was the master justified in battening down the main and bunker hatches at 7 p.m. on the 24th of February?
6. Had the sea sufficiently moderated after passing Cape Finisterre to enable the master to open the hatches, and was he justified in neglecting to do so?
7. Were the owners justified in allowing the vessel to be in such a state, with respect to the arrangements for ventilating the cargo as she was on the 24th of February, and in neglecting to provide her with better means of ventilation?
8. Was the master justified, having regard to the fact that he had received a caution from the shipping agent and the official caution from the Board of Trade, in proceeding to sea with such arrangements for ventilation as he had when he left Newport?
9. Were prompt and proper measures taken to ascertain whether any of the crew were missing or injured after the explosion?
10. How was the seaman, John Sponge, lost?
11. Was serious damage to the vessel or the loss of Sponge's life caused by any wrongful act or default on the part of the master?

And the Board of Trade stated that in their opinion the certificate of the master should be dealt with. After which Mr. Kennedy, the learned counsel for the master and owners, addressed the Court, and Mr. Squarey replied.

The Court in giving judgment expressed their regret that notwithstanding the numerous inquiries which have been held by order of the Board of Trade into these explosions of coal cargoes, and although ship owners have had the benefit of the results ascertained after careful inquiry by a Royal Commission on the subject, and have been furnished with a pamphlet issued by the Board of Trade, fully informing them of the necessity of ample ventilation, it would appear that risks are still run which might and could be avoided. In answer to the 1st question, the Court could come to no other conclusion than that a large quantity of gas emitted from the coals had become ignited, but there was no evidence enabling them to say under what circumstances the ignition had been caused. In reply to the 2nd question, the Court considered that the means adopted for the ventilation of the vessel were quite insufficient. As to the 3rd question, the evidence shewed that the coals were stowed by experienced trimmers in the usual manner and properly. As to the 4th, 5th, and 6th questions, the evidence before the Court was that when the vessel sailed the ventilating bitts or bollards were in good working order. The master considered that it was necessary after passing the Wolf Rock to close them on account of the roughness of the sea, and if so, he was justified in closing them. He was also justified for the same reason in battening down the hatches; and

according to the evidence the state of the weather did not allow of the hatches being opened again before the explosion. In answer to the 7th question the Court were of opinion that the owners of this ship were not justified in allowing her to be in such a state with respect to the arrangements for ventilating the cargo as she was on the 24th of February, and in neglecting to provide her with better means of ventilation. Ever after the casualty which caused this inquiry, the vessel after necessary repairs at Birkenhead, was sent away to Cardiff again without any attempt to improve the ventilation, to take a coal cargo, and when information reached the managing owner that she was stopped by the Board of Trade because of the want of proper ventilation, he seemed to be surprised that such proper ventilation had not been supplied when she was under repair at Birkenhead. The Court considered that it should have been his duty, especially considering the recent explosion and the loss of life resulting therefrom, to have satisfied himself on this point before the vessel again sailed with a possibility of incurring a similar risk. As to the 8th question, the Court could not say that they considered the master free from blame in carrying a cargo of coal on board a vessel so inefficiently ventilated as this vessel was, but the fact that he had carried seven similar cargoes in the same ship with the same means of ventilation, seemed to have satisfied him that he might safely do so, and the Court remarked that with the means of ventilation which he had, he took as much precaution as he could, and there did not appear in this case, as in certain cases referred to by the learned counsel for the Board of Trade, any default or neglect brought home to the master in the management of the means of ventilation which he had at his disposal. When she was undergoing repair in Birkenhead Dock, after the casualty, the master did intimate to an overlooker of his employers, who was looking after the ship temporarily in the absence of the regular overlooker from illness, his opinion that cowl ventilators should be supplied to the ship, but nothing further was done, and the overlooker intimated that if the Board of Trade should interfere the ventilation would have to be improved. As to the 9th and 10th questions the crew appeared to have been mustered as soon as possible after the confusion occasioned by the explosion was over, and when the discovery was made that Sponge was missing a thorough search was made for him on board, and only when he was not found the supposition arose that the unfortunate man must in some way have fallen overboard, and it was then too late to take any other steps for his recovery, the ship having proceeded a considerable distance from the place where the casualty occurred. As to the 11th question, the Court, while as already stated considering the master not free from a share of the blame, which certainly must attach to every one concerned in sending to sea a vessel with a coal cargo inefficiently ventilated, did not consider that under all the circumstances of this case they were called upon to deal with the master's certificate.

*Order of the Court.*

The Court orders that Wilfred Hine, of Maryport, shipowner, the managing owner of the said steamship "Alne Holme," do pay to the solicitor of the Board of Trade the sum of one hundred pounds on account of the expenses of this investigation.

Given under my hand this 9th day of May 1881.

(Signed) T. S. RAFFLES,  
Judge.

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