

(No. 2732.)

“BLANCHE MAUD.”

The Merchant Shipping Acts, 1854 to 1876.

IN the matter of the formal Investigation held at Glasgow on the 17th day of November 1885, before H. C. ROTHERY, Esquire, Wreck Commissioner, assisted by Captain HARLAND and W. B. ROBINSON, Esquire, Chief Constructor R.N., as Assessors, into the circumstances attending the supposed loss of the sailing ship “BLANCHE MAUD,” of Newport, Monmouth, with a crew of 17 hands, whilst on a voyage from Leith to Valparaiso with a cargo of coal.

Report of Court.

The Court, having carefully inquired into the circumstances of the above-mentioned shipping casualty, finds, for the reasons annexed, that, when the said vessel left Leith on her last voyage, she was in all respects in a good and seaworthy condition, that she was not overladen and had sufficient stability, that her hold was properly ventilated, and that, although no provision had been made for testing the temperature of the cargo during the voyage, there is no reason to think that the coal spontaneously ignited, and that there is nothing to show how the vessel was lost.

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

Dated this 17th day of November 1885.

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

We concur in the above report.

(Signed) ROBERT HARLAND, } Assessors.
W. B. ROBINSON, }
C.C. R.N. }

Annex to the Report.

This case was heard at Glasgow on the 17th day of November instant, when Mr. Donald appeared for the Board of Trade, and Mr. Ward for the owners of the “Blanche Maud.” Nine witnesses having been produced by the Board of Trade and examined, Mr. Donald handed in a statement of the questions upon which the Board of Trade desired the opinion of the Court. Mr. Ward then addressed the Court on behalf of his parties, and Mr. Donald having been heard in reply, the Court proceeded to give judgment on the questions upon which its opinion had been asked. The circumstances of the case are as follows:—

The “Blanche Maud,” which was an iron barque, belonging to the port of Newport in Monmouthshire, of 656 tons gross and 630 tons net register, was built at Stockton-on-Tees in the year 1874, and at the time of her loss was the property of Mr. Thomas Beynon, of Newport, and others, Mr. Thomas Beynon being the managing owner. She left the Edinburgh Dock, Leith, on the 25th of February last, with a crew of 17 hands all told, and a cargo of 997 tons of coal, bound to Valparaiso; but owing to contrary weather was obliged to lie in the Roads until the 2nd of March, when she was towed down as far as the Isle of May, where the tug cast her off, and she proceeded on her voyage. On the 7th she was telegraphed from Prawle Point, and was not seen again until the 8th of May following, when a vessel called the “Emma Waters” spoke her off Staten Island, near Cape Horn, all being well; but from that time she has not been seen or heard of, and the object of the present inquiry is to ascertain, if possible, what has become of her.

Now the first question upon which our opinion has been asked by the Board of Trade is, “Whether, when the vessel left Leith, she was in all respects in good and seaworthy condition?” She was built, as I have stated, in the year 1874, and was then classed 100 A1 at Lloyds. Since that time she has been twice thoroughly overhauled by Lloyds, the last time in March

1883, and after having on each occasion been put into a thorough state of repair, she was continued in her original class, and underwent her last annual survey in February last, just previous to her departure on her last voyage. Several witnesses have been produced who knew her well, and who speak of the very efficient way in which she was always kept up; amongst others, Mr. Claughton, a ship builder and naval architect residing at Liverpool, who superintended the repairs which were done to her at South Shields in August 1877, and Mr. Merritt, who was employed by the owner to dock her and paint her in February last, just previous to her departure, and who accompanied her as far as the Isle of May. Mr. Paxton, also, the shipwright surveyor to the Board of Trade at Leith, inspected her just before she sailed, and speaks to the good appearance which she then presented. We are also told that she had four boats, a lifeboat, a large yawl, a gig, and a small dingy; and there is no reason to think that she was not, when she left Leith, in all respects in a thoroughly good and seaworthy condition.

The second question which we are asked is, “Whether the holds were properly ventilated, and whether the ventilators and all other deck openings were properly and sufficiently secured?” We are told that she had four ventilators, which terminated just below the deck, fitted with cowls, and about 14 inches in diameter. Two of them were between the fore hatch and the fore mast, one went through the deck house, and the fourth was just forward of the break. The two foremost were fitted with screw tops, and the two after ones with wooden plugs, which could be put on in case of bad weather. The fore and main masts also were of iron and hollow, pierced at intervals from the keelson to the deck with holes, so as to act as ventilators to the hold; in addition to which there were the bollards with openings of about four inches diameter; and there was also a booby hatch aft. The hatches were constructed of wood some 2½ inches thick, supported by strong fore and afters. There is, therefore, no reason to think that the ventilators and deck openings were not properly and efficiently secured.

The third question which we are asked is, “Whether any, and if so, proper means were adopted or provided to detect spontaneous combustion in the cargo or any heating thereof?” It does not appear that there were any means provided to detect spontaneous combustion or the heating of the cargo; there were no tubes, such as are recommended in the report of the Commissioners on spontaneous combustion on board ships, down which thermometers could be lowered, and in fact no means whatever of testing the temperature of the cargo during the voyage. At the same time it should be observed that the coal with which the vessel was laden came from the main seam of the Brownlee Colliery, which we were told was peculiarly free as well from explosive gases as from iron pyrites, and that there is no instance of either explosion or spontaneous combustion having occurred with this coal, although large quantities of it are annually exported to the West Coast of America, and to other distant ports. Although then there were no means of testing the temperature of the coal on the voyage we have no reason to think that in this instance they were at all required.

The fourth question which we are asked is, “Whether the vessel was overladen?” We are told that she had on board 997 tons of coal as cargo, besides 12 tons for ship’s use. Now a list has been brought in by the managing owner of all the voyages which the vessel has made since she was built, with the weights of the cargoes which she carried on each occasion both out and home, from which it would appear that she has made altogether eleven voyages exclusive of the last; of these ten were to ports on the West Coast of South America, and the other to Rangoon, so that she has been 20 times round Cape Horn, and twice round the Cape of Good Hope. Now, if we look at the weights of the cargoes which she carried on these several voyages, we shall find that on the fifth, sixth, and seventh voyages out, as well as on almost all the return voyages, she carried somewhat heavier cargoes than she did on her last voyage; and we are told that during the whole of this time the owners have never made a claim upon the underwriters for damages,

a tolerably clear proof that she was well able to carry the cargoes with which she was laden. As regards her freeboard, it would seem from a displacement scale which has been brought in, that at one time the load line must have been placed at 3 feet 9 inches below the deck, giving her a mean draught of 16 feet 1 inch. Since then, however, it has been raised, for on the last voyage the load line seems to have been at about 3 feet below the deck; and Mr. Paxton, the shipwright surveyor to the Board of Trade at Leith, told us that he measured her side just before she sailed, and found that she then drew 16 feet 6 forward and 17 feet 5 inches aft, or a mean of 16 feet 11½ inches, and that she had a freeboard of 3 feet and half an inch, the load line being nearly awash. He added that she was at that time in the Edinburgh Dock, where the water would be brackish, and that in his opinion she would, when she got to sea, rise about an inch and a half, making the freeboard about 3 feet 2, or 38 inches. Mr. Paxton also told us that, although this would be about an inch below the minimum allowed for a vessel of her dimensions by the Board of Trade rules, he did not think that she was too deeply laden, as she had a very good side. The conclusion, therefore, to which we have come is that, although fully laden, she was not too deeply laden; and, judging from the experience of her past voyages, we are prepared to say that the cargo which she had on board on her last voyage was not more than she could fairly carry.

The fifth question which we are asked is, "Whether, as laden, she had sufficient stability?" No evidence was laid before us from which we could say with certainty what amount of stability she had, either laden or in ballast. The stevedore, however, who superintended the loading at Leith, told us that until they had put some 400 tons of coal in her she seemed tender, but that as the loading proceeded she became stiff, which is what we might reasonably expect. The managing owner also told us that she was a particularly stiff vessel, and judging from the experience of her previous voyages, we should be disposed to think that that would be so. In proof also of her good sea-going qualities, Mr. Beynon told us that on the voyage which she made to Rangoon, and from which she returned with a cargo of rice, the master after he had filled the hold with cargo found that she was eight inches by the head, upon which he put 20 tons of rice into the cabin, so as to trim her properly; and that although she met with very bad weather on that voyage, and at one time had to lie-to for three days, she completed her voyage, and discharged her cargo at Rotterdam, without having damaged a single grain. We have, therefore, no reason to think that, laden as she was with a cargo of coals, she had not sufficient stability.

The sixth question which we are asked is, "What was the cost of the vessel to her owners?" According to Mr. Beynon she cost them 12,000*l.*, including extras, and the expenses of bringing her from Stockton where she was built round to Newport in Monmouthshire.

The seventh question which we are asked is, "What was her value when she left Leith?" Mr. Beynon told us that they allowed from 400*l.* to 450*l.* annually for depreciation, and that when she left on her last voyage they valued her at 7,500*l.*, which in the opinion of the assessors is not an excessive value to put upon her.

The eighth question which we are asked is, "What were the insurances effected, and how were they apportioned?" We are told that she was insured for 7,000*l.* upon the hull, of which 3,000*l.* was done in Glasgow and 4,000*l.* in Liverpool; and that the freight, which amounted to about 1,050*l.*, being 2*l.* per ton on 997 tons, and of which 326*l.* had been advanced, leaving a balance of above 700*l.* still due, was insured for only

500*l.* These, we are told, were the only insurances effected upon her.

The last question which we are asked is, "What, in the opinion of the Court, from the evidence before them, is the cause of this vessel not having been heard of since she was spoken off Prawle Point on the 7th March last?" A letter has been brought in, which, although not strictly speaking evidence, may yet be referred to in an inquiry of this description; it was written by the master of a vessel called the "Emma Waters," to his owner, by whom it was sent to Mr. Beynon. That letter is in these terms, "On the 8th of May, Cape St. John, Staten Island, bearing S.S.E., distant four miles, we were close alongside and speaking by mouth to the barque 'Blanche Maud,' of Newport. As I have not seen her arrival reported at Valparaiso or elsewhere (she was bound to Valparaiso from Leith), I fear something may have happened to her. I may state that everything seemed to be in perfect order on board of her, and that the captain mentioned to me that he was forced outside of the Falkland Islands through contrary winds, and that he had a lot of bad weather to contend with. At midnight of the same day that I spoke him, we encountered a very heavy gale of wind from S.W., and she was nowhere in sight the following day. You will most likely be acquainted with the owners, and should the ship not have turned up, please furnish them with the enclosed particulars." Now, if the statements contained in this letter are to be relied on, and I do not see why they should not be, the vessel seems to have been spoken off Staten Island, near Cape Horn, on the 8th of May. Whether, indeed, she foundered in the gale which immediately followed, as the master of the "Emma Waters" seems to imply, is more doubtful, for he says that she seemed to be in perfect order, and the experience of her previous voyages would lead us to think that she was not likely, loaded as she was, to go down in such a gale of wind as the master of the "Emma Waters" speaks of. On the other hand, we were told by Captain Tasker, the master of another of Mr. Beynon's vessels, the "Lady Wolseley," that in rounding Cape Horn on his homeward voyage he was driven by northerly winds about two degrees further south than he usually went, and that on the 16th or 17th of August last he found himself on the edge of a large field of ice, and that it was only after tacking to the northward for about four hours, that he was enabled to get clear of it. From this it is inferred that the ice might have been further north when the "Blanche Maud" rounded Cape Horn, and that she might have become imbedded in or stove by it; on the other hand, the master of the "Emma Waters" says nothing about seeing any ice. That the vessel was lost either by an explosion of gas or by the spontaneous combustion of her cargo is in the highest degree improbable; as we have said, the coal with which she was laden is peculiarly free from explosive gas, as well as from iron pyrites, and there is not, we are told, an instance on record of explosion or of spontaneous combustion having occurred in this coal, although large quantities of it are annually exported to the West Coast of America, and to other distant ports. There is then no evidence before us as to how the vessel was lost; and all that we can say is, that there was nothing in the condition of the vessel, or in her equipments or cargo, which would account for her not having reached her port of destination.

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

We concur.

(Signed) ROBERT HARLAND, }
W. B. ROBINSON, } Assessors.
C.C. R.N. }

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