

(No. 4346.)

## "WOODHORN" (S.S.)

IN the matter of a formal Investigation held at Valetta, Malta, on the 9th and 10th July inst., before the Sitting Magistrate, assisted by the Nautical Assessors, STEPHEN STAINES and ROSARIO FREUDO AZAPARDI, into the circumstances attending the casualty which occurred to the British S.S. "WOODHORN" on the 1st and 2nd June last, in the waters of Skira, by the cargo of esparto grass taking fire.

The Court having carefully inquired into the circumstances attending the above-mentioned casualty, finds for the reasons stated in the proces-verbal and in the report of the assessors, which I confirm, that the fire was due to an accidental cause, and that Samuel Lawlan, master, is in no way to blame, and he must therefore be acquitted.

(Signed) P. FREUDO AZOPARDI, Magistrate.

14th July 1891.

Proces-verbal on the inquiry respecting the nature and cause of the accident to the British s.s. "Woodhorn."

After the transmission from the acting superintendent of the ports to this Court of the report concerning the fire which broke out in the said steamer, I, the undersigned magistrate, ordered that an inquiry be kept in order to ascertain what was the cause of the fire, and whether any one was to blame for it.

For this purpose I ordered that Samuel Lawlan, master of the said ship, be summoned to appear before me, sitting in the Court, as investigating magistrate, and that a copy of the report from the acting superintendent of the ports be also served on Captain Lawlan.

I appointed to assist me as nautical assessors the master mariners, Stephen Staines and Rosario Freudo Azopardi.

On the 9th July I opened the investigation, and having observed that the preliminaries had been duly kept, I took the unsworn statement of the captain, which is enclosed in the papers, after having duly cautioned him, and appraised him of his right of having any opportunity of making a defence.

On the 10th July I concluded the investigation with the evidences of George D. Procter, chief engineer, and Francesco Attard, an A.B., both lately belonging to the vessel, who happened to be in the island.

From the investigation it appeared that the "Woodhorn" is a British merchant steam-going ship, built of iron at Wallsend in 1879, bearing the official number 79,221, and the register tonnage 950, belonging to the port of North Shields, and owned by James Walton, of North Shields. She left Cardiff on the 6th May last for Bona, with a cargo of coals and a crew of 22 hands all told. She arrived at Bona on the 16th, and left for Gabes on the 25th, where she arrived on the 27th; commenced loading esparto grass; left Gabes on the 31st May at 2.30 a.m., and arrived at Skira at 5 a.m. of the same day. During all this time no occurrence took place. On the 31st May she commenced loading esparto grass, and continued till sunset of the 1st of June, the cargo being then nearly complete. At 11 p.m. on the same night the watchman, whose evidence could not be taken, as he was not found in the island, reported that the ship was on fire. The captain being informed of the occurrence, soon came forward, and perceived smoke coming from the fore hatch. All hands were called on deck, the hatches of No. 2 hold were broken off, and it was apparent that the fire had broken there. Consequently bales of cargo were heaved up in a burning state and thrown into the sea. But as this was being done flames were seen coming up from the lower hold. Water was poured

into the hold from several parts, but the fire being extensive, there was no chance of putting it out. On the morning of the 2nd June bales of cargo were thrown into the sea from No. 1 hold in order to prevent the spreading of the fire.

The master asked to come on board the masters of the steamers "Cartagena" and "Aberdour," to see the fire and consult with him. They did so twice, and delivered to him a report of the case, a copy of which is herewith enclosed. A conclusion was arrived at to sink the ship altogether as the only means to save her. At noon on the same day all hands left the ship in boats, as it was dangerous for all to remain on board. On the morning of the 3rd of June the master went on board again with the mate and engineer and found the fire spreading, and in order to prevent further spreading, ordered the sea connections to be opened again. The ship was gradually sinking, and on the morning of the 4th she sank altogether, at a mile distance from the shore. All efforts and all means available were put into action to overcome the fire, but to no effect. No clue was traced as to the cause of the fire. The ship would have been consumed by the same had it not been for her sinking. She was afterwards lifted by the Danish salvage steamer "E. Z. Svilza," taken to Sfase, discharged completely, and then towed to Malta—her own engines also working—and arrived at Malta Harbour on the 7th instant, where she is now lying. I received the report of the assessors, who are of opinion that self-combustion of the cargo was the cause of the fire, thus excluding any other accidental cause or culpable act of any member of the crew, no suspicion having been raised or evidence adduced to support the existence of any other cause than that arrived at by the assessors. The conduct of the officers and men on board during the accident was praiseworthy, they all having done their duty.

In conclusion I drew this proces-verbal for the ends and purposes of the law.

(Signed) P. FREUDO AZOPARDI, Magistrate.

Read in open Court on the 14th July 1891.

(Signed) P. FREUDO AZOPARDI, Magistrate.

*Report of Assessors.*

We, the undersigned, having been appointed by the magistrate, Dr. P. Freudo Azopardi, as nautical assessors to investigate and report upon the cause of the fire which broke out on the 1st ultimo on board the British s.s. "Woodhorn," official number 79,221, of North Shields, Samuel Lawlan, master, whilst loading a cargo of esparto grass at Skira.

We were present at the examination of the witnesses, and heard the statement of the master, in order to ascertain the cause of the said accident.

From the said statement and the depositions of the witnesses, we have come to the conclusion, viz., that the fire which broke out on the 1st ultimo on said steamer at the time she was loading esparto grass whilst at Skira must have been caused by spontaneous ignition of the esparto grass, which, considering its very inflammable nature, must have burned so rapidly as not to allow anybody to approach the place from which the real cause of the fire might have been discovered.

The captain and crew used their best endeavours to put out the fire by scuttling the ship to save her, and therefore we have much pleasure in exonerating the captain from all blame.

(Signed) S. STAINES,  
R. FREUDO AZOPARDI, } Assessors.

Confirmed on oath by the assessors in open Court,  
14th July 1891.

(Signed) P. FREUDO AZOPARDI, Magistrate.  
Malta, 14th July 1891.