

(No. 5491.)

“SOUTH WALES” (S.S.)

The Merchant Shipping Act, 1894.

In the matter of a formal Investigation held at the Town Hall, Cardiff, on the 5th, 6th, and 8th days of March 1897, before THOMAS WILLIAM LEWIS, Esquire, Stipendiary Magistrate, assisted by Captain ANDREW CUNINGHAME and Captain EDWARD BROOKS, into the circumstances attending the stranding of the British Steamship “SOUTH WALES,” of Cardiff, off San Miguel, Almeria Bay, Spain, on the 4th day of December 1896.

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 stranding was due to the master's careless navigation. The Court finds the master, Owen Thomas, alone in default, and suspends his certificate for three months.

Dated this 8th day of March 1897.

(Signed) T. W. LEWIS, Judge.

We concur in the above report.

(Signed) ANDREW CUNINGHAME, } Assessors.
EDWARD BROOKS, }

Annex to the Report.

This inquiry was held at the Town Hall, Cardiff, on the 5th, 6th, and 8th days of March 1897, when Mr. Roe appeared for the Board of Trade and Mr. Hugh Ingledew for the master of the vessel; the first and second officers were also parties to the inquiry, but were not legally represented.

The “South Wales,” official No. 87,461, was a screw steamer, built of iron at Wallsend, by Messrs. Schlesinger, Davis, and Company in 1883, and registered at the port of Cardiff. Her dimensions are as follows:—Length, 250·8 feet; breadth, 34·2 feet; and her depth of hold 19·7 feet. Her gross tonnage was 1382·42, and nett registered tonnage 890·66. She was fitted with two direct-acting compound surface-condensing engines of 140 nominal horse-power. She had two steel boilers; the engines and boilers were built by Messrs. R. & W. Hawthorne of Newcastle in 1883.

The “South Wales” was owned by the South Wales Steamship Company, Limited, Mr. W. W. Jones of Pembroke Buildings, Cardiff, being designated managing owner on 26th October 1892. She had three compasses— one pole compass, one on the upper bridge, and one in the wheelhouse, the ship being navigated by the upper bridge compass. She carried a crew of 19 hands all told.

The “South Wales” left Cardiff on the 26th November last under the command of Mr. Owen Thomas, who had a certificate of competency as master, No. 95,031. She was bound for Barcelona with a cargo of 1662 tons of coal and 250 tons of bunkers, her draught of water being 19 feet one inch forward, and 18 feet one inch aft. The ship was well found and in good condition.

The Mediterranean was reached on the 3rd December, and Europa Point was passed at 11 p.m. on that day. The master and the chief officer were on the bridge at the time, and the latter having observed a four-point bearing of the light, its distance was found to be six miles when abeam bearing N. magnetic. At this time the wind was westerly, a strong breeze, and freshening. The course was now altered to E. ½ S. magnetic, in order to give Cape de Gata a berth of four or five miles, and the patent log was re-set.

All next day a gale was blowing with a heavy sea, and the ship was proceeding full speed on her course. The atmosphere was described as thick over the land, but comparatively clear seaward. The master, allowing

a knot an hour for easterly current, expected to be off Cape de Gata at 4.30 p.m., and not having seen the light or anything of the land at 4.45 p.m. he altered his course to E.N.E. magnetic, feeling confident that he had passed the Cape, the patent log shewing 142 miles which, with 18 miles for current, made 160 miles from Europa Point, the actual distance between Europa Point and Cape de Gata being 156 miles. The master and chief officer went to tea at 5 o'clock, leaving the second officer on the bridge and a hand on the look-out, the vessel still proceeding full speed. A very serious conflict occurs in the evidence of the master on the one hand, and that of the officers on the other, as to what transpired at and after 4.45 p.m., when the course was altered to E.N.E. The second mate states that he pointed out a light on the starboard bow to the master, before the latter went down to tea. The chief mate, who was already in the saloon, says, that when the master came down to tea, the latter stated that the second mate had reported a light but that it was that of a steamer going in the opposite direction. The master emphatically denies that any such report was made, or that any conversation regarding a light took place until after he (the master) returned to the deck about 5.30 p.m.; that the second mate then reported a light which he could not definitely describe and which the master with his glasses in vain endeavoured to pick up. The Court after careful consideration has no doubt that the statement of the officers is substantially correct; that the light deposed to was that on Cape de Gata, but that the master, fully prepossessed by the idea that he had already rounded the Cape, was thrown off his guard; and placing unquestioning confidence in his dead reckoning, the idea of its being in error failed to enter his mind, with the result that in a few minutes after he returned to the deck, or about 5.45 p.m., breakers were seen immediately under the bows of the ship and she took the ground on a bottom of sand and gravel.

Efforts were made by working the engines alternately astern and ahead for some time to get the ship off, but they failed, and the ship canting broadside to the heavy sea, a boat was lowered on the lee (starboard) side, into which the crew got, and left the ship at 2.30 a.m. on the 5th, shortly afterwards landing at the village of San Miguel. The master, officers, and engineer remained for some time in the vicinity, and with assistance from Almeria the vessel was got off on the 2nd January last and towed to Almeria, where it appears she was abandoned to the salvors in satisfaction of their claims against her.

On the opening of the inquiry Mr. Roe put in, and on the conclusion of the evidence submitted for the opinion of the Court, the following questions:—

1. What number of compasses had the vessel, were they in good order and sufficient for the safe navigation of the vessel, and when and by whom were they last adjusted?
2. Did the master ascertain the deviation of his compasses by observation from time to time, were the errors correctly ascertained, and the proper corrections to the courses applied?
3. Whether proper measures were taken at or about 11.5 p.m. of the 3rd December last to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel?
4. Whether safe and proper courses were set and steered after 11.5 p.m. of the 3rd December last, and whether due and proper allowance was made for tide and currents?
5. What was the light seen at or about 5 p.m. of the 4th December last, and whether proper measures were then taken to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel?
6. Whether the lead should have been used before the vessel struck?
7. Whether, having regard to the state of the weather on the afternoon of the 4th December, the vessel was navigated at too great a rate of speed?
8. Whether a good and proper look-out was kept?
9. What was the cause of the casualty?
10. Whether the vessel was navigated with proper and seamanlike care?
11. Whether the stranding of the “South Wales” was caused by the wrongful act or default of the master?

The Court then considered the questions and answers as follows:—

1. The "South Wales" had three compasses. They were last adjusted in 1896 by Messrs. Williams of Cardiff, and were in good order and sufficient for the safe navigation of the vessel.

2. The master from time to time, when opportunities were presented, ascertained the deviation of his compasses by observation; and, according to his evidence, correctly ascertained their errors and properly applied the corrections to the courses.

3. About 11 p.m. on the 3rd December a four-point bearing was taken of the Europa Point Light, a proper measure to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel. The light bore N., and distant six miles.

4. The course was then altered to E. $\frac{1}{4}$ S. magnetic, with a view to rounding Cape de Gata. This course, having regard to the probability of experiencing an E.N.E. current which commonly occurs during westerly winds, was too fine, and the course set, viz., E.N.E. magnetic, at 4.45 p.m. on the following day, was unsafe and improper, inasmuch as the vessel had only run a distance of 142 miles by the patent log, whereas the actual distance from Europa Point to Cape de Gata is 156 miles. An excessive allowance was made for easterly current, but no allowance was made for the current setting to the north of east.

5. About 5 p.m. on the 4th Cape de Gata Light was seen on the starboard bow, and was duly reported to the master. This light he had expected to make on his port bow about 4.30; but although he did not make it, and half an hour later made a light that he at the time did not identify, his apprehensions were not aroused, and he continued on the E.N.E. course, neglecting to take the measures to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel that in the circumstances prudence demanded.

6. Having regard to the soundings, the neglect to use the lead was excusable.

7. From about 11 p.m. on the 3rd December until about 5 p.m. on the 4th, although the vessel, proceeding at full speed, passed within range of several lights, no light or other land object was seen, the land being—according to the evidence—enveloped in haze. From

5 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. the Cape de Gata Light was seen, although not then identified, on the starboard bow; whereas if the vessel had been in her assumed position, the light would have been on the port side. Nevertheless, the vessel was navigated at full speed. But inasmuch as it was then possible to see about four miles out to sea, the Court is of opinion that the speed was not excessive up to 5.30 p.m., although having regard to the haze on the land—the danger side—and the doubt as to the vessel's position that should have been engendered in the master's mind by the unknown light, it would have been more prudent to have reduced the speed. About 5.30 p.m., however, the light became obscured by the land, and the vessel continued at full speed, viz., eight knots, until 5.45 p.m., when she stranded. The breakers were not seen until about two ships' lengths ahead, so that from 5.30 p.m. until 5.45 p.m. the vessel was approaching at full speed an object, viz., the land, which was obscured until the instant before the vessel struck it. The Court is therefore of opinion that from 5.30 p.m. until 5.45 p.m., having regard to the condition of the atmosphere ahead, the speed of the vessel was excessive.

8. A good look-out was kept.

9, 10, and 11. The proximate cause of the casualty was the alteration of the course at 4.45 p.m., before the vessel had run the distance assumed. The disaster, however, could have been averted if the master had given heed to the warning conveyed by the Cape de Gata Light by porting his helm, and so directing the course of his vessel out to sea.

For the foregoing reasons, the vessel was not navigated with proper and seamanlike care, and the master alone is in default. His certificate is suspended for three months.

(Signed) T. W. LEWIS, Judge.

We concur.

(Signed) ANDW. CUNINGHAME, } Assessors.
EDWARD BROOKS, }

(Issued in London by the Board of Trade on the 18th day of March 1897.)

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