(No 5584.)

"DUNCOW."

A PRELIMINARY Inquiry was held at the Marine Board Office, Port Pirie, on Wednesday, the 16th June 1897, before T. N. STEPHENS, Esq., J.P., President, and Captain J. H. GIBBON, and J. H. PHILLIPS, Esq., J.P., Wardens of the Marine Board of South Australia, into the circumstances connected with the abandonment of the British ship "DUNCOW" off Cape Couëdie, Kangaroo Island, on the 25th May 1897.

The "Duncow," registered at Liverpool, official No. 78,806, is a full-rigged ship, built of iron, at Sunderland, in 1878, 1,635 tons net register, owned by John Houston & Co., of Liverpool, and under the command of F. A. Graves, who holds a certificate of competency as master ordinary No. 021964, issued by the Board of Trade in 1893. It was stated in evidence that the ship was well found, carried two lifeboats and a gig, had three bower anchors and 300 fathoms of cable, and a crew of twenty-six hands all told—viz., the master, two certificated mates, boatswain, carpenter, sixteen A.B.'s, one O.S., three apprentices, and cook and steward, and these were all available at the time of the casualty.

She left Puget Sound on the 28th February, bound for Port Pirie, South Australia, with a cargo of 1,800 tons of lumber, including a deck cargo of about 70 tons, and was drawing 21 ft. 5 ins. on an even keel. No passengers were on board. The master was not aware whether the ship cargo or freight had been insured, but he had obtained extra insurance on the deck load. At 5 a.m. on May 22nd, Cape Wickham, King Island, Bass Strait, was recognised abeam, about three miles, and a course was shaped to round Cape Borda on the western extremity of Kangaroo Island. The wind was northerly until noon on May 24th, when it had fallen calm, and the vessel's position was 39° 38′ S., 139° 10′ E.

About 8 a.m. on 25th May, the wind being strong and the sea heavy, sail was shortened. At noon the weather was clear, with strong breeze and high sea, the ship making 10 knots. At 10 p.m. the night was overcast and cloudy, with rain squalls and no stars visible; one hand on the foretopgallant yard, another on the forecastle head on the look-out, the master and the first mate on the poop. At 11.50 p.m. the look-out aloft called out, "Put your helm hard down, there is land right ahead." The master at once felt that the vessel was in the vicinity of Cape Couëdie, and immediately brought her to the wind on the port tack, and made more sail. One point of land was weathered, and the Casaurina Islets were seen (one ahead and another on the port bow), but not the passage between, a thick heavy rain squall obscuring everything. Both anchors were therefore let go, each with 75 fathoms of cable, in 14 fathoms, and the vessel brought up about ¾ of a cable length off the cliffs, which for many miles along the coast are nearly perpendicular, and from 300 to 400 ft. high. Clewed up and made everything fast, and stood by until the morning.

At daylight, May 26th, it was seen that no landing was possible. Blowing hard from southward, the vessel straining and pitching, and no chance to get her out all day or during the night. On May 27th, at 4 a.m., wind was S.S.E., no indication of change, and ship in same position. At 9 a.m. the barometer falling, still blowing hard, the deck load was jettisoned. The port lifeboat was stove in by the sea, and then cut adrift—it had previously been in bad order. At 4.30 p.m., wind S.W., an attempt was made to club-haul the ship, but it failed owing to the last link of the cable getting jambed between the windlass and capstan spindle, and to the wind suddenly shifting to S.S.E. All sail was clewed up and made fast, spare bower anchor let go with wire hawser; meanwhile, however, the vessel had dragged nearer the cliffs. On the 28th May, the weather not improving, and the barometer falling, it was decided to abandon the ship, the stern of which was then within about her own length off the cliffs. A rough raft was made and floated astern to try and effect a landing. This failing, oil was used over the bow, and the starboard lifeboat launched with the mate and five hands, the whole of the remainder, with life-belts on, going over the stern to the lifeboat, which was slacked as near to the cliffs as prudent, but landing found impossible. The boat was then pulled between the mainland and Casuarina Island (oil again being used and found very beneficial), and no landing on the west side of the island being practicable, Cape Borda was passed during the night, and pulling continued until daylight on the 29th May, when a landing was effected on the rocks at Smith Bay, on the north side of Kangaroo Island, after a pull of twenty-two hours over a distance of upwards of forty miles. The crew left the lifeboat and walked across the island to Kingscote, a distance of about seventy-five miles, obtaining food and shelter from settlers on the way. On arrival the master telegraphed to the agents, who despatched a tug, which picked up all hands at Kingscote, and proceeded to the abandoned vessel, which was found just where she had been left six-and-a-half days previously. The tug made fast and towed the ship to Port Pirie, which was reached on the 5th June. An examination made by the diver showed that the vessel had sustained no damage.

The master had his own chronometers and charts. The two chronometers were two-day instruments, one having been in the ship nineteen years, and the other about two-and-a-half years. The charts used were Lauries', until approaching the land, and then an Admiralty chart.

The master estimated the towage expenses at between £400 and £500, and that, in addition to about 70 tons of deck cargo, three bower anchors, 225 fathoms of cable, sails, standard compass, a steel hawser, two lifeboats, and a considerable quantity of gear had been lost.

The Board are of opinion that, under the circumstances related, and the ship having got into the perilous position indicated, the master was justified in abandoning her for the protection of the lives of the twenty-six persons on board. They consider, however, that he committed errors in judgment—firstly, in not allowing sufficient for the easterly set of current known to exist south of Kangaroo Island, and secondly, in running on to a dangerous coast in weather that would not permit the land, which is high, to be seen until close to, especially as no land or lights had been seen since leaving Cape Wickham; further, even if his reckoning, according to the evidence, had been correct, the course was a dangerous one, inasmuch as the ship would probably have fetched the land at the western end of Kangaroo Island, somewhere near Cape Bedout or West Bay, where there are dangerous rollers (marked on the chart), and where the Cape Borda light is obscured.

Attention is directed to the fact that, although the starboard lifeboat was an excellent one, and safely carried all hands, the port lifeboat was not in good condition when the vessel started on her voyage, and was no better when the position of the ship and the circumstances showed not only the necessity for a sufficient number of boats, but that they should also be always kept in a condition fit for immediate use.

Under the circumstances above mentioned, the Board do not intend to take any further action in this case, but the master is cautioned to be more careful in future.

JOHN DARBY,
Secretary, Marine Board.

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