

(No. 6414.)

“ROBERT ADAMSON” (S.S.).

The Merchant Shipping Act, 1894.

In the matter of a formal investigation held at the Moot Hall, Newcastle-on-Tyne, on the 3rd and 4th days of September, 1902, before NICHOLAS HENRY MARTIN and JOHN DUGUID WALKER, Esquires, two of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace, acting in and for the City and County of Newcastle-on-Tyne, assisted by Captains A. ANDERSON and W. COWIE (Nautical Assessors), into the circumstances attending the stranding of the British steamship “ROBERT ADAMSON,” of Sunderland, on the Pearl Rock, Straits of Gibraltar, on the 29th day of July, 1902.

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 of the vessel was due to the careless navigation of the master in setting an improper course from Europa Point, making insufficient allowance for the inset of the tide, and neglecting to properly verify his position. The Court finds the master, Septimus John Heaton Blacklin, alone in default, and hereby suspends his certificate, No. 06364, for the period of six months from the date hereof.

Dated this 4th day of September, 1902.

N. H. MARTIN, } Judges.
JNO. D. WALKER, }

We concur in the above Report.

ABSM. ANDERSON, } Assessors.
W. COWIE, }

Annex to Report.

This was an inquiry into the circumstances attending the stranding of the British steamship “Robert Adamson,” and was held at the Moot Hall, Newcastle-on-Tyne, on the 3rd and 4th days of September, 1902, before Nicholas Henry Martin and John Duguid Walker, Esquires, assisted by Captains A. Anderson and W. Cowie (Nautical Assessors). Mr. Burton appeared for the Board of Trade, Mr. Dixon Jacks represented the owners, Mr. R. Sheriton Holmes the master, while the second officer appeared in person.

The “Robert Adamson,” of Sunderland, official No. 104,358, was a steel screw steamship, built at Sunderland in the year 1895, by Messrs. Short Brothers, Pallion, and was of the following dimensions:—

Length 335.1 ft., breadth 42.15 ft., and depth in hold 25.45 ft.

She was schooner-rigged, fitted with triple expansion engines of 250 horse-power, constructed by Messrs. George Clark, Limited, at Sunderland, in the year 1895. She was of 2992.42 gross, and 1931.94 net registered tonnage, and owned by Messrs. John Adamson and John Thomas Mail and others, whose names are transcribed in the vessel's register; Messrs. Adamson and Mail being appointed managing owners on the 19th September, 1895.

She was on the voyage in question in good condition and well-found, fitted with life-boats and life-saving appliances in accordance with the Act.

The vessel had three compasses, particulars of which are hereafter given, the courses being set, and the vessel steered, by the standard compass on the upper bridge.

The master was supplied with Admiralty Charts of the Mediterranean and the accompanying sailing directions. He had only been in the vessel a few weeks, having been sent to Constantinople from this country to take charge of her, owing to the death of the former master.

The “Robert Adamson” left Algiers for Rotterdam at 3 a.m. on the 27th July last, with a crew of 28 hands all told and no passengers, under the command of Mr. Septimus John Heaton Blacklin, who held a certificate of competency as master, No. 06364. She had a full cargo of grain and wood, and her draught of water on leaving was 22 ft. 11 ins. fore and aft. The master stated that he took observations from time to time for the purpose of verifying his compasses, and that, in particular, observations were taken the day before the casualty on westerly courses, upon which he found the standard compass correct.

According to the evidence, the weather on leaving Algiers was thick and hazy, and the engines were eased occasionally.

At 3.20 a.m. of the 29th, Europa Point Light was sighted about half a point on the starboard bow, but the land was said to be obscured by fog.

The master and second officer were on the bridge and a four-point bearing was taken of the light, placing the vessel about a quarter to half a mile therefrom. The Court is not satisfied that the bearing was taken in a satisfactory and reliable manner, but, in view of subsequent events, has no reason to doubt that the position given was approximately correct. A course was then set W.S.W. (magnetic) the master allowing as he said half-a-point for current. There was some discrepancy in the evidence as to whether or not this course was continued up till the stranding at 4.5 a.m. The master stated it was, but, according to the second officer, the course was altered, after leaving Europa Point and before sighting Carnero Point Light, to W. by S. ½ S., then in about five minutes back to W.S.W., again to W. by S. ½ S. for a few minutes and then finally the W.S.W. course was resumed.

The helmsman corroborated the second officer as to the fact of the alterations, though he stated the temporary alterations were to S.W. by W. ½ W.

However this may be, the Court is of opinion that the W.S.W. course was not safe and proper and that the allowance made by the master for the inset into the bay was insufficient, especially having regard to the fact that the tide was at the time fully half-flood.

The vessel proceeded at full speed making eight to eight and half knots, the master remaining on the bridge, while the second officer was on and off as occasion required.

Carnero Point Light was sighted about 3.40 a.m. about three points on the starboard bow.

A four-point bearing was taken of the light giving, when abeam, according to the master's evidence, a distance of two to two and a half miles, and, according to the second officer, one mile. Running this bearing took some six or seven minutes, and, as the speed of the vessel was about eight knots, it clearly shows that the master was entirely in error as to the distance. This points to one of two conclusions, either that the master was careless regarding his navigation, or that he attempted to deceive the Court by placing the vessel further off than she actually was. One of the A.B.'s estimated the distance of the light when abeam at three-quarters of a mile and the high land over the light was clearly seen by those on deck. Another point as to which there was a discrepancy in the evidence was as to whether or not the Europa Point Light was visible while they were crossing the bay.

The master and second officer stated that they did not see it, but three of the A.B.'s, who appeared to the Court to be exceptionally capable and competent men, all depose to having seen it, two of them being emphatic that they observed the red sector. Having regard to the undoubtedly negligent manner in which the master conducted the navigation of the vessel and to the fact that the second officer was on and off the bridge attending to various duties, the Court accepted the story of the men, which was the more likely as the vessel at, and for some time prior to, the stranding was within range of the red sector.

Besides, the weather must have been comparatively speaking clear, as not only was the high land above

Carnero Point Light plainly seen, but also the riding lights of the vessels in the bay. But whether or not the master saw Europa Light after he took his departure from the Point, the fact remains, that in a short run of five miles he was approaching a known danger at full speed in fairly clear weather and failed to recognise the warning afforded by the light on Carnero Point placed there for the express purpose of guarding the Pearl Rock.

The four-point bearing was completed about 3.55, and, at about 4.5, the vessel suddenly struck on the rock, proving that the second officer and A.B. were correct in their estimation of the distance from Carnero Light and that the master was entirely out of his reckoning. The engines were put full-speed astern and continued till about 5.20, when they were finally stopped.

Soundings were taken round giving 16 ft. to 27 ft., signals for assistance were made and the pumper put on. But the water continued to increase till about 11 a.m. when the fires were drowned out. Previously the first and second officers had been sent to Gibraltar for assistance and at 9.30 the tug "Hercules" came alongside and they at once commenced to lighten the ship.

During the day the water increased and the vessel bumped heavily. A consultation was held with Lloyds' agent, with the result that the crew, with the exception of eight volunteers, were sent ashore.

The next day the master returned to the ship, and it was finally resolved to abandon her to the salvors, which was done. A representative of the owners arrived overland, to whom the master stated he handed the whole of the ship's documents. The vessel, which had sustained very material damage, was subsequently floated and taken to Gibraltar Bay, where she now is. No lives were lost.

At the conclusion of the evidence the following questions were submitted on behalf of the Board of Trade. Mr. Holmes addressed the Court for his client, and Mr. Burton replied:—

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) Were proper measures taken to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel at or about 3.30 a.m. of the 29th July last? Was a safe and proper course then set and thereafter steered, and was due and proper allowance made for tide and currents?

(4) Were safe and proper alterations made in the course after 3.30 a.m. of the 29th July, and was due and proper allowance made for tide and currents?

(5) Were proper measures taken to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel after sighting Carnero Light at or about 3.45 a.m. of the 29th July last?

(6) Having regard to the state of the weather after 3.30 a.m. of the 29th July, was the vessel navigated at too great a rate of speed?

(7) Was a good and proper look-out kept?

(8) What was the cause of the casualty, and was the vessel seriously damaged thereby?

(9) Was the vessel navigated with proper and seaman-like care?

(10) Was serious damage to the s.s. "Robert Adamson" caused by the wrongful act or default of the master and second officer or of either of them?

To which the Court replied as follows:—

(1) The vessel had three compasses, viz., a standard compass on the upper bridge, by which the courses were

set and the vessel steered, one on the lower bridge, and a third on the poop. They were in good order and sufficient for the safe navigation of the vessel, but there was no evidence to show when or by whom they were last adjusted.

(2) The master stated he ascertained the deviation of his compasses by observation from time to time, that the errors were correctly ascertained, and the proper corrections to the courses applied. No documentary evidence was produced, as the ship's log and the compass error-book were, with the other ship's papers, handed by the master to the owners' representative at Gibraltar, and, at the time of holding the inquiry, had not been forwarded to this country.

(3) The master and second officer stated that a four-point bearing of Europa Light was taken and completed at 3.30 a.m. of the 29th July, placing the vessel at a distance of a quarter to half a mile therefrom when abeam. While it appears to have been taken in a somewhat perfunctory manner, the Court is not prepared to doubt the accuracy of the position stated to have been ascertained. The course W.S.W. (magnetic) then set was not safe or proper, as insufficient allowance was made for the inset of the tide while crossing Gibraltar Bay.

(4) Though there is some discrepancy in the evidence on the point, the Court accepts the master's statement that no alteration was made after leaving Europa Point.

(5) The master and second officer stated that a four-point bearing of Carnero Point Light was taken and completed at 3.55 a.m., placing the vessel, according to the master, two to two and a half miles off, and, according to the second officer, one mile off. Having regard to the time taken in running the bearing, it is evident that the vessel was much closer to the land than the master stated, and this should have warned him that he was in immediate danger.

(6) The vessel was not navigated at too great a rate of speed.

(7) A good and proper look-out was kept from the fore-castle head, but not from the bridge.

(8) The cause of the casualty, by which the vessel sustained serious and material damage, was due to the careless navigation of the master in setting an improper course from Europa Point, making insufficient allowance for the inset of the tide, and, when in danger, failing to take advantage of the warning afforded by the red sector of the Europa Point Light, which was visible prior to, and at the time of, stranding.

(9) The vessel was not navigated with proper and seamanlike care.

(10) The Court finds the master, Septimus John Heaton Blacklin, alone in default, and hereby suspends his certificate, No. 06364, for the period of six months from the date hereof.

On the application of Mr. Holmes, the Court consented to recommend that the master be granted a chief mate's certificate during the period of suspension.

N. H. MARTIN, }
JNO. D. WALKER, } Justices.

We concur.

ABSM. ANDERSON, }
W. COWIE, } Assessors.

(Issued in London by the Board of Trade, on the 3rd day of October, 1902.)

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