

(No. 7527.)

"VECTIS" (S.S.).

The Merchant Shipping Act, 1894.

IN the matter of a Formal Investigation held at the Moot Hall, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 6th days of April, 1912, before FREDERICK PAGE, M.A., M.D., D.C.L., and GEORGE HARKUS, Esquires, two of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace, acting in and for the City and County of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, assisted by Captains W. L. MAIN and JOHN TAYLOR (Nautical Assessors), into the circumstances attending the loss of the British steamship "VECTIS," of Sunderland, through stranding on the Reny Rocks, eastern entrance of Plymouth Sound, on the 5th day of February, 1912.

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 loss of the vessel was caused by improper navigation on the part of the chief officer, Thomas John Roberts, who was, at the time, incompetent through intoxication to perform his duty. As he held no certificate, the Court orders him to pay the sum of £10 towards the expenses of this Investigation. The Court censures the master, George Hurst, for failing to detect the condition of the chief officer, before leaving him in charge of the bridge.

Dated this 6th day of April, 1912.

FREDERICK PAGE, }
GEORGE HARKUS, } Judges.

We concur in the above Report.

WM. L. MAIN, }
JOHN TAYLOR, } Assessors.

Annex to the Report.

This was an Inquiry into the circumstances attending the loss of the British steamship "Vectis," of Sunderland, and was held at the Moot Hall, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 6th days of April, 1912, before Frederick Page, M.A., M.D., D.C.L., and George Harkus, Esquires, assisted by Captains W. L. Main and John Taylor (Nautical Assessors).

Mr. Burton appeared for the Board of Trade, Mr. Lancaster represented the owners, Mr. Roger Clayton the master, while the chief officer appeared in person.

The "Vectis," Official Number 76835, was an iron screw steamship, built at Sunderland in the year 1877, by Mr. James Laing, and was of the following dimensions:—Length, 212·5 feet; breadth, 30·55 feet; and depth in hold, 15·95 feet. She was schooner-rigged and fitted with two compound surface-condensing engines of 90 horse power, constructed by Mr. G. Clark, of Sunderland, in the year 1877.

She was of 906·95 gross, and 567·48 net registered tonnage, and was owned by the "John George Hill Steam Shipping Company, Limited," Messrs. John William Witherington and Harry Poore Everett, both of formerly 27, Quayside, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and now of Exchange Buildings, Quayside, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, being appointed managing owners on 8th July, 1903.

The vessel, which was engaged in the coasting-trade, was purchased by her present owners in June, 1903, for the sum of £4,250, and it was stated that, since that time, the sum of £3,735 11s. 6d. had been expended upon her in respect of damage and upkeep, and she was valued by her owners, at the time of the casualty, at £5,000. Bearing in mind, however, the vessel's age and the high insurance premium paid, this value appears to the Court excessive. She was insured in all for £5,850, Lloyd's premium being £12 12s. 0d.

41.
She was, on the voyage in question, in good condition and well-found, and fitted with lifeboats and lifesaving appliances in accordance with the Act.

She had three compasses particulars of which are hereinafter given, and the master had on board an Admiralty chart of the port of Plymouth, and a blue-back chart of the English Channel with the accompanying sailing directions.

The master, George Hurst, who held a certificate of competency as master No. 015994, had been in the vessel since the 8th January this year, while the chief officer, Thomas John Roberts, who held no certificate, had been in her since 1905, as second mate up to the 3rd February, 1907, and subsequently as chief officer. He was a native of Plymouth, and had resided there all his life except when at sea. His sea experience dated from 1873, and he was well acquainted with the waters in the vicinity of Plymouth, having fished out of that port for several years.

The "Vectis" arrived at Plymouth on 3rd February last, with a crew of 16 hands all told, and a cargo of 1,100 tons of coal which she discharged at the New Quay in Sutton Pool, completing her discharge about 5.10 p.m. on the 5th February.

During the time the vessel lay at the quay discharging, the various members of the crew had, at different times, been on shore getting their stores, and, in particular, the chief officer, who, as already stated, resided at Plymouth, left the vessel with the master's consent on the 3rd, and went home. He returned to the ship on the morning of the 4th, and, after staying on board about an hour, again went home, coming back about 9 a.m. of the 5th, but going ashore soon after noon with instructions from the master to resume his duty in good time before the ship was finally discharged. He did not however return till about 5.40 p.m., when the vessel was being unmoored.

The master stated he did not notice anything wrong with him, but told him to "hurry-up." The pilot, Charles Little, who held no licence, but was regularly engaged by the owners to take their vessels out of Plymouth Harbour, came on board about 5 p.m. About 5.50 p.m. the "Vectis" cast off, and proceeded under her own steam into the Sound where orders were received for her to go in ballast to Swansea. The pilot took the vessel out between the Melampus Buoy and the New Grounds Buoy, and, having put her upon a S.W. by W. course for the Western Channel, the Breakwater Light being then two points on the port bow, he left soon after passing the Melampus Buoy and returned to the shore in his own boat, landing at the Hoe about 6.40 p.m., proceeding at once to despatch the master's sailing telegram which he handed in at 6.50 p.m. At the time of sailing the weather was dark, but clear, with some sleet, but all the lights were clearly visible.

When the pilot left, the master was on the bridge, the chief officer forward, superintending the crew clearing up the deck and securing the anchor, while the second officer was, together with one of the A.B's., at the wheel. The master steered for the New Grounds Buoy, passing it close to on the starboard hand, and then stood for the breakwater which was passed at a distance of about a quarter-of-a-mile. A course was then set S. by W. $\frac{3}{4}$ W. (by compass), making S.S.W. (magnetic), for the Knap Buoy, the vessel going at half speed. When abreast of the Knap Buoy the master altered the course to S. $\frac{3}{4}$ W. (by compass), making S. by W. (magnetic), keeping this course for about two cables when it was again altered to S. $\frac{1}{4}$ E. (by compass), making S. (magnetic).

The engines were then put "full speed ahead." At this time, as the master was giving the course, the chief officer came on the bridge having apparently finished the work forward. The master remained on the bridge for about a minute and then went to his cabin aft to lay off his course for the Lizard, telling the chief officer the course the vessel was then on, and to maintain that course until he returned and to keep a good look-out forward, to which the chief officer replied, "All right, Sir." As the master went aft he observed the Breakwater Light about three-quarters-of-a-mile off bearing N.E. by N. $\frac{1}{2}$ N. about two points on the port quarter.

Before this, the second officer had left the wheel to superintend the clearing up of the after-deck, and, just after the master went below, he streamed the

log. When the chief officer took charge of the bridge, E. C. Matthews, A.B., was at the wheel, and John Moore, A.B., on the look-out on the fore-castle-head.

The weather was still dark, but clear, with occasional slight sleet, and all lights were visible including those of the men-of-war inside the breakwater.

The chief officer had not been in charge of the bridge long when, according to Matthews' evidence, he gave the order to hard-a-starboard and then steadied the vessel when her head was E. by S. In a few minutes he gave a further order to starboard bringing the vessel's head to E.N.E., upon which course she remained until she stranded about 6.55 p.m. The man on the look-out, Moore, stated he noticed a light right ahead which he at once reported to the bridge, the chief officer replying "All right." Soon after, he saw breakers and rocks ahead which he immediately reported, at the same time singing out "Full speed astern!" Receiving no reply, he called out "Is anyone on the bridge?" the chief officer then replying "What's up?" Moore rejoined "Rocks and breakers ahead; full speed astern," and, almost immediately, the vessel struck on the Renny Rocks at the eastern entrance of the Sound. Turning from the deck to the engine room where both first and second engineers were on duty, the engines had been running "full speed ahead," from the time the master gave that order after steadying the vessel on the south (magnetic) course. About three minutes before the vessel struck the order came from the bridge, "Stand by," and, in a minute, "Full speed ahead." Feeling the shock, the chief engineer waited for orders, but getting none, he went on deck leaving the second engineer in the engine room. On the bridge he found the master who had just rushed up from the cabin, and who, on hearing that the engines were still running ahead, told him to stop them, which was done at once.

Now the chief officer's story is as follows:—He said that only three or four minutes elapsed from the time he went on the bridge until the stranding; that the master did not give him the course; that the binnacle lights were burning dimly, rendering it difficult to read the compass, and that he had no time to see what course the vessel was on; that he had a look round and saw two lights about half-a-point on the starboard bow which he took to be those of a launch or pilot cutter, and that he told the man at the wheel to starboard a point in order to go under the boat's stern, and, beyond that, gave no orders to the helmsman; that the man on the look-out sang out twice but that he did not make out the first report, and that the second report was "breakers and land ahead;" that he ordered the engines "full speed astern," and that the vessel then struck and he discovered that the lights he had seen were shore-lights on Renny Fort. Resuming the master's story:—About 15 minutes elapsed after leaving the bridge and his feeling the shock. Rushing on deck he found the chief officer was not on the bridge and that the vessel was heading E. by S. $\frac{1}{2}$ S. (by compass), and that the Breakwater Light bore N.W. $\frac{1}{2}$ W. (by compass). He at once stopped the engines which were running ahead, and ordered the boats to be got ready and swung out. He found that the vessel was making water rapidly, there being three or four feet in the forehold, and it was up to the tunnel aft, the engine room being also flooded. The vessel was hard-and-fast on the rocks and there was a heavy ground swell with broken water, the tide being about full. Blue lights were burnt and rockets fired, but no assistance came from the shore. While the starboard lifeboat was being swung out, a fight occurred between the chief officer and an A.B., Burnside, who had been lying in his bunk, drunk, since the vessel left the port. It arose in consequence of the chief officer throwing overboard the man's kit which he was endeavouring to put in the boat. As the pumps were of no use, and the master deemed it unsafe to remain on board, he ordered the crew to leave the vessel, telling the chief officer to go in the port lifeboat which was the first to leave. That officer, however, refused to go, saying he knew what a small open boat was, and the master could not prevail upon him to leave the ship. The second officer accordingly took charge of the boat which left about 9 p.m., the master leaving in the second boat about an hour later. He last saw the chief officer about 9.30 p.m. on the fore-castle-head where he had apparently gone to fetch a lamp.

Before leaving the vessel at 10 p.m., the master searched the ship fore-and-aft for the chief officer and sang out for him, but got no response. He noticed

two ropes hanging over the bow and came to the conclusion that the chief officer had left the ship with their aid, her head being then high and dry as the tide was falling rapidly, and it was quite possible to land on the rocks.

Both boats reached the harbour in safety without loss of life.

Next morning, about 11 a.m., the master and crew returned to the vessel across the rocks having been towed to the vicinity by a tug-boat, and the chief officer, who was then aboard, put a ladder over the bow to enable them to get on deck. The ropes were not then hanging over the bow.

In reply to the master's enquiry where he had been, he replied that he had remained on board all night. It was seen that the telegraph then stood at "full speed astern," though, according to the evidence, except that of the master, it was standing at "full speed ahead" at the time of the casualty. The suggestion was that the chief officer had made the alteration before the master and crew returned to the vessel.

Efforts were subsequently made to get the vessel off but without success, and she was eventually abandoned and became a total wreck.

The casualty was due to improper navigation by the chief officer while in charge of the bridge. When the master went below, the vessel was in a safe position, and all the chief officer had to do was to carry out the master's instructions and see that she kept her course. Instead of doing so, he brought her round under her starboard helm and ran her ashore. Such conduct could only be attributed to his being incapable to perform his duty, and the Court had no hesitation, on the evidence, in finding that he was, at the time, under the influence of drink. The master, second officer, and second engineer stated that they saw nothing wrong about him except that he was very "excited" after the casualty.

But the chief engineer, the helmsman, Matthews, and look-out man, Moore, who had all ample opportunity of observing his condition, stated, unequivocally, that he was drunk, and that, too, appears to have been the openly expressed opinion of the fore-castle-hands. And his general behaviour was that of a man who had lost control of himself. As he was an uncertificated officer, the Court could only express their view of his conduct by ordering him to contribute something towards the expenses of the inquiry, and, in fixing that at the comparatively small sum of £10, they had regard to his pecuniary circumstances, allowing him, at his request, seven days within which to raise the money.

The Court had to seriously consider the position of the master in entrusting the temporary command of the bridge to the chief officer. But they came to the conclusion that, though he ought to have detected his condition, possibly it was not so obvious at that time as it subsequently became. The Court accordingly refrained from dealing with his certificate, but censured him for his neglect in that respect.

At the conclusion of the evidence, the following questions were submitted on behalf of the Board of Trade; Mr. Lancaster, Mr. Clayton, and the chief officer addressed the Court, and Mr. Burton replied:—

1. What was the cost of the vessel to her owners? What was the value when she sailed from Plymouth on the 5th February last? What insurances were effected upon, and in connection with, her?
2. 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?
3. 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 course applied?
4. Was the vessel supplied with proper and sufficient charts and sailing directions?
5. Was the position of the vessel correctly ascertained when abeam of the Breakwater Light at or about 6.30 p.m. on the 5th February last? Was a safe and proper course then set and steered, and was due and proper allowance made for tide and currents?
6. Was the vessel on a safe and proper course when the master went below at or about 6.35 p.m. on the 5th February last? Was this course subsequently altered by the mate, and, if so, was such alteration justifiable, and was it a safe and proper alteration?

7. Did the master leave proper and sufficient instructions with the mate before going below at or about 6.35 p.m. on the 5th February last? Were such instructions, if any, carried out by the mate? Was the mate incompetent through intoxication to perform his duty?

8. Was a good and proper look-out kept?

9. Where did the vessel strand? What was the cause of the stranding and loss of the vessel?

10. Was the vessel navigated with proper and seamanlike care?

11. Was the loss of the steamship "Vectis" caused by the wrongful act or default of the master and mate, or either of them?

To which the Court replied as follows:—

1. The secretary of the owners stated that they purchased the vessel, which was built in 1877, for the sum of £4,250, in June, 1903. He further stated that, since the purchase, the sum of £3,735 11s. 6d. had been spent upon her in respect of damage and upkeep, and that he considered she was, at the time of the casualty, worth £5,000. Having regard, however, to the age of the vessel and bearing in mind the high insurance premium paid (£12 12s. 0d.), the Court considers the value excessive.

The following insurances were effected upon, and in connection with, the vessel:—

	£
On hull and machinery	4,550
Freight and disbursements	1,000
Premiums reducing monthly	300
Total	£5,850

2. The vessel was supplied with three compasses, viz.:—A pole compass above the upper bridge by which the courses were set, a steering compass in the wheelhouse on the lower bridge, and a third compass aft. They were in good order and sufficient for the safe navigation of the vessel, and were last professionally adjusted off the Wear, by Messrs. Moss and Muir, on the 30th April, 1911.

3. 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. He, however, kept no compass error-book, and, on the voyage in question, no opportunity was afforded of taking observations.

4. The vessel was supplied with proper charts and sailing directions.

5. The position of the vessel was correctly ascertained at or about 6.30 p.m. of the 5th February last when the Plymouth Breakwater Light was abeam

distant about a quarter-of-a-mile. A safe and proper course was then set by the master and thereafter steered, viz.:—S. by W. $\frac{1}{4}$ W. (by compass), making S.S.W. (magnetic), and due and proper allowance was made for tide and currents.

6. When abreast of the Knap Buoy the master altered the course to S. $\frac{1}{4}$ W. (by compass), making S. by W. (magnetic), and, shortly after, about 6.35 p.m., just before going below to lay off his course on the chart for the Lizard, to S. $\frac{1}{4}$ E. (by compass), making S. (magnetic). Both these alterations were safe and proper. The mate, who relieved the master on the bridge soon afterwards, gave the order to the man at the wheel to hard-a-starboard and steadied the vessel when her head was E. by S., and, in a few minutes, gave another order to starboard, bringing the vessel's head to E.N.E., upon which course she remained until she stranded at about 6.55 p.m. These alterations were not justifiable and were not safe and proper.

7. The master left proper and sufficient instructions with the mate before going below, viz.:—To keep the vessel on the S. (magnetic) course until he returned to the bridge. These instructions, as will be seen by the answer to the last question, were not carried out by the mate who was, while in charge of the bridge, incompetent through intoxication to perform his duty.

8. A good and proper look-out was kept on the fore-castle head, but not on the bridge.

9. The vessel stranded on the Reny Rocks at the eastern entrance of Plymouth Sound, the stranding and loss of the vessel being caused by improper navigation on the part of the mate.

10. After the master left the bridge the vessel was not navigated with proper and seamanlike care.

11. The loss of the steamship "Vectis" was caused by the wrongful act and default of the mate, Thomas John Roberts, who had no certificate. The Court accordingly orders him to pay the sum of £10 on account of the expenses of this Investigation. The Court is of opinion that the master, George Hurst, should have detected the condition of the mate before leaving him in charge of the bridge, and censures him for his neglect in that respect.

FREDERICK PAGE, }
GEORGE HARKUS, } Justices.

We concur.

WM. L. MAIN, }
JOHN TAYLOR, } Assessors.

(Issued in London by the Board of Trade on the
26th day of April, 1912.)