# (No. 335.)

# "OTTERCAPS," (S.S.)

The Merchant Shipping Acts, 1854 to 1876.

In the matter of the formal Investigation held at the County Court, at Sunderland, on the 11th July 1879, before H. C. Rothery, Esquire, Wreck Commissioner, assisted by Commander Visconti, R.N., and Captain Ward, as Assessors, into the circumstances attending the stranding of the British steamship "Ottercaps," of Sunderland, on the Roches des Renards, off the west coast of France, on the 8th June last, whilst on a voyage from Bilbao to Sunderland.

*Report of Court.*

The Court, having carefully inquired into the circumstances of the above-mentioned shipping casualty, found, for the reasons stated in the annex hereto,—

1. That the stranding of the said vessel was due to her having, before reaching Pointe St. Mathieu, been laid on a course which would take her inside the Renards Rocks, and to the course not having been altered sufficiently to the westward, after passing that point, having regard to the great speed at which she was going.

2. That George Benson, the master, is to blame for having kept the vessel too near to the shore, and for having gone at full speed through a dangerous channel like the Chenal du Four without knowing the exact position of his vessel.

For these wrongful acts and defaults the Court ordered the master's certificate of the said George Benson to be suspended for three months from the 11th instant, at the same time recommending that during the period of the suspension he be allowed a first mate's certificate.

The Court made no order as to costs.

Dated the 23rd day of July 1879.

(Signed) H. C. Rothery,
Wreck Commissioner.

We concur in the above report.

(Signed) E. G. F. G. Visconti, Retired Commander R.N., } Assessors.
„ C. Y. Ward, }

*Annex to the Report.*

This case was heard on the 11th July instant, when Mr. de Hamel appeared for the Board of Trade and Mr. Botterill for the captain of the "Ottercaps." Six witnesses having been produced and examined, Mr. de Hamel, on behalf of the Board of Trade, asked the opinion of the Court upon the following questions:—

"1. What was the cause of the stranding of the 'Ottercaps' screw steamship on the Renards Rocks on the 9th June last.

"2. Whether the stranding of the vessel was caused by the wrongful acts and defaults of George Benson, the master.

"(1.) In continuing his vessel at full speed when passing through the Chenal du Four on a dark night;

"(2.) In not making proper allowance for the easterly set of the flood tide;

"(3.) In keeping his vessel too close to the shore; and

"(4.) In neglecting to verify his position by a cast of the lead."

Mr. de Hamel further stated "that in the opinion of the Board of Trade the certificate of the master should be dealt with."

Mr. Botterill having been heard for the captain, and Mr. de Hamel in reply, the Court proceeded to give judgment on the questions that had been submitted for its consideration. The circumstances are as follow:—

The "Ottercaps" is a screw steamship of 966 tons gross and 625 tons net register, and is fitted with engines of 99 horse-power. She was built at Sunderland in the year 1878, and at the time of the casualty was the property of Mr. Heny Thomas Morton and Mr. John Straker, both of Sunderland, Mr. Thomas Jowsey Reay being the managing owner. She left Bibao at 4.30 p.m. of the 7th of June last, with a cargo of about 1,000 tons of iron ore, bound for Sunderland, and having a crew of 18 hands all told. It seems that the master being, as he told us, well acquainted with the navigation, and having on many previous occasions made the voyage, determined to pass through the intricate channels lying between Ushant and the coast of Finisterre; and with that view the vessel on leaving Bilbao was laid on a N. ½ E. course. That course was continued until about midnight of the 8th when Tevennec Light was observed about two points on the port bow. The course was thereupon altered to north, the vessel being kept within the white sector of Tevennec Light until the two lights of Pointe du Raz were in one, when the course was altered to N.E. After running through the red sector of Tevennec Light the course was again altered to N.N.E., and shortly afterwards St. Mathieu Light was observed bearing right ahead. The vessel was continued on a N.N.E. course until about 2 a.m., when the Capucins Light, which is at the entrance to Brest Harbour, was seen away on the starboard beam, upon which the course was altered a little to the westward so as to bring Kermorvan Light to bear N.N.E. The vessel was kept on a N.N.E. course, heading directly for Kermorvan Light, and at about 2.45 a.m. they were abreast of Pointe St. Mathieu, when, according to the master, the course was altered to N. by E. magnetic, with the view of passing between Pointe Kermorvan and the Grande Vinotière. In a few minutes afterwards a buoy was reported on the port bow, upon which the master, knowing it to be the buoy over the Renards Rocks, immediately ordered the helm to be starboarded. The vessel, which was then going at full speed, which we are told was 9 knots an hour, then passed close to the buoy, and in doing so she struck the rock, but without stopping. The master, who had ordered the engines to be stopped, on perceiving that she had come off, ordered them to be set on again, and rounded to in the Anse des Blancs Sablons, which lies just to the north of Kermorvan Lighthouse. On then examining the vessel it was found that the fore tank was full of water, but that all the other tanks as well as the holds were free; upon which the master returned to Brest, where the cargo was discharged, and the vessel having been temporarily repaired, and the hole in the bottom stopped, she proceeded on her voyage, and ultimately arrived in safety at Sunderland.

Now the first and main question upon which the opinion of the Court was asked was, "What was the cause of the stranding?" It seems that Kermorvan Light bears from the Renards Rocks N.N.E. ¼ E., so that a N.N.E. course with Kermorvan Light bearing right ahead, which is the course that the master says he steered until after passing St. Mathieu Light, would be in a direction to pass inside the Renards Rocks. The master also told us that it was low water that morning at about 1 a.m., so that for some time before the vessel struck the flood tide would be running with full force, and until she had passed Pointe St. Mathieu would be setting the vessel to the east towards the entrance of Brest Harbour. After, however, passing Pointe St. Mathieu, which she did at about 2.45 a.m., the master told us that the tide would be setting to the north through the Chenal du Four at the rate of 4 to 5 knots an hour, which added to the speed at which the vessel was going, namely, 9 knots, would be carrying her on her course at the rate of from 13 to 14 knots an hour between Pointe St. Mathieu and Kermorvan. Now the distance between Pointe St. Mathieu and Kermorvan appears from the charts to be about two miles, and as the Renards Rocks lie between them, it would take but a very short time for the vessel, at the rate at which she was going, to get from St. Mathieu to those rocks. It must also be observed that according to the master the compass by which they steered, and which was on the bridge amidships, had both on a N.N.E. and on a N. by E. course a half of a point westerly deviation, so that in order to steer N.N.E magnetic the course by compass would be N. by E. ½ E., and to steer N. by E. magnetic the compass should show N. ½ E. Now Charles Cooper, the man who was at the wheel from 2 a.m. until she struck, was examined before us, and told us that the course steered until after passing Pointe St. Mathieu was N. by E. ½ E. by compass, which would be equivalent to N.N.E. magnetic, which agrees with what the master told us. But after passing Pointe St. Mathieu, Cooper said that the course steered was N. by E. by compass, which would be equivalent to N. by E. ½ E. magnetic, or half a point more to the east than the master stated.

Here then we have a vessel, which until she has passed Pointe St. Mathieu, is steered on a N.N.E. course heading directly for Kermorvan Light, and consequently in a direction which would take her inside the Renards Rocks, the tide all the time setting her strongly to the east. After passing St. Mathieu Point the course is altered, according

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to the master, one point, according to the man at the helm, only half a point to the west, the vessel at the time having the Renards Rocks on her port bow, and going over the ground at the rate of from 13 to 14 knots an hour. The casualty then appears to have been due to the vessel having been kept, before reaching Pointe St. Mathieu, too long upon a course which would take her inside the Renards Rocks, and after passing Pointe St. Mathieu to the course not having been altered sufficiently to the westward so as to take her clear of them. To use a common expression, the master, relying too confidently on his knowledge of the navigation, which as he has told us rendered it unnecessary for him to consult his chart often, tried to run it too fine, and he unfortunately struck upon the rock. He in fact kept too much to the eastward, and nearer to the shore than was either safe or prudent for him to do. It may be that he was looking out for the buoy, which is placed over the Renards Rocks, so as to get a straight course for passing between Kermorvan and the Grande Vinotière, but if he was not quite certain of his position he had no right to be going through so dangerous a channel at full speed, and with a tide running at the rate of 4 to 5 knots an hour. There is no excuse for the master not knowing the exact position of his vessel, for he admitted that, although there were occasional showers of rain, he always kept sight of the St. Mathieu and Kermorvan Lights, and so long as he did so he could always ascertain his exact position without its being necessary to take a cast of the lead. If on the other hand the night had been so dark, or the mist so thick, that he could not have seen the lights, he would, as he admitted, have had no right whatever to have gone through so dangerous and intricate a channel as the Chenal du Four, but should have passed outside of Ushant.

It appears to us that the whole blame of this casualty rests with the master, in whose hands the navigation of the vessel was. At the same time he appears to have been generally attentive to his duties, and to be a steady intelligent man. What we blame him for is for over confidence and recklessness in the navigation of his vessel, which might have caused the loss of the ship and of all on board. Whilst then we are of opinion that we should not be justified in allowing him to escape altogether without punishment we think that a suspension of his certificate for the shortest period sanctioned by the practice of the Court will meet the justice of the case. We, therefore, suspended his certificate for three months from the 11th instant, at the same time recommending that he be allowed during the period of the suspension a chief mate's certificate. No application was made for costs, and none were therefore given.

(Signed) H. C. ROTHERY,
Wreck Commissioner.

We concur.
(Signed) E. G. F. G. VISCONTI, Retired Commander R.N., } Assessors.
" C. Y. WARD,

(No. 447.)