



THE MERCHANT SHIPPING ACT, 1894

REPORT OF COURT

(No. S.425)

s.t. "Michael Griffith" O.N. 145118

In the matter of a Formal Investigation held at The Town Hall, Fleetwood, on the 27th, 28th and 29th days of April, 1954, before Mr. J. V. Naisby, Q.C., assisted by Captain C. A. Hancock, D.S.C., Mr. F. Bee, and Mr. W. J. Nutton, M.I.N.A., into the circumstances attending the loss of the steam trawler "Michael Griffith" with all hands.

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 Court is unable to find the cause of the loss but the most probable cause was exceptionally heavy weather.

Dated this 30th day of April, 1954.

J. V. NAISBY, *Judge.*

We concur in the above Report,

C. HANCOCK }
F. BEE } *Assessors*
W. J. NUTTON }

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The Court's answers to the Questions submitted by the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation are as follows:—

- Q. 1. By whom was the s.t. "Michael Griffith" owned at the time of her loss?
- A. The Clifton Steam Trawlers Limited, Siding Road, Fleetwood.
- Q. 2. When, where, and by whom was the "Michael Griffith" built?
- A. 1919; Beverley; Cook, Welton & Gemmell Limited.
- Q. 3. Did the "Michael Griffith" sail from Fleetwood at about 12.30 a.m. on the 30th January, 1953, under the command of Skipper Charlie Singleton with a crew of 13 all told on a fishing voyage to the West of Scotland?
- A. Yes.
- Q. 4. Was the trawler "Michael Griffith" seaworthy, well found, and properly equipped for the fishing voyage when undertaken?
- A. Yes.
- Q. 5. What wireless equipment did the "Michael Griffith" carry, and what was the approximate range thereof?
- A. Radio Telephone, Transmitter and Receiver 100 miles in good weather in daylight, about 400 miles during the hours of darkness.
- Q. 6. What navigational aids were carried by the "Michael Griffith"?
- A. Direction Finder. Seavisa and Seagraph.
- Q. 7. Were the lifesaving appliances carried on board the "Michael Griffith" adequate and in satisfactory working order?
- A. Yes.
- Q. 8. Had the "Michael Griffith" left Fleetwood at about noon on the 29th January, 1953, and returned to port because of some defect in the after-feed pump delivery valve chest?
- A. Yes.
- Q. 9. Was the defect in the after-feed pump delivery valve chest satisfactorily repaired before the "Michael Griffith" resumed the fishing voyage at about 12.30 a.m. on the 30th January, 1953?
- A. Yes.
- Q. 10. When, where and by whom was the "Michael Griffith" last seen?
- A. About 2310 hours on the 30th January, 1953. A few miles to the Southward and Westward of Skerryvore. By those on board the steam trawler "Aigret".
- Q. 11. What was the weather, wind and sea at the time the "Michael Griffith" was last seen?
- A. Snow squalls. N.W. gale about Force 9. Very rough sea.
- Q. 12. Was a distress message from the "Michael Griffith" heard on board the trawlers "Wyre General" and "Velia" on the 31st January, 1953?
- A. Yes.
- Q. 13. If such a distress call was heard, what was the message and what action was taken on receipt of the message?

- A. "All ships - "Michael Griffith", 7 to 8 miles South of Barra Head - full of water - no steam - am helpless - will some ship please come and help us".

This message was received in full by the "Wyre General" and in part by the "Velia".

The message was relayed to shore stations. Both trawlers were a considerable distance from the position given.

- Q. 14. Was a search in the position mentioned in the "Michael Griffith's" distress call made by several trawlers, and was anything ever seen or heard of the "Michael Griffith" as a result of that search?

- A. Yes, by three trawlers. Other trawlers and shore stations kept a wireless watch for further messages. Nothing more was seen or heard.

- Q. 15. Was the Barra lifeboat launched, and did her crew make a search of the area referred to in the "Michael Griffith's" distress call? Did the Islay lifeboat also search?

- A. Yes. Yes.

- Q. 16. Was a search also made by one of H.M.S. Destroyers and two aircraft without avail?

- A. Yes.

- Q. 17. Was a lifebuoy, identified as one of the "Michael Griffith's" lifebuoys, found near the entrance to Loch Foyle on the 7th February, 1953? Was a second lifebuoy from the "Michael Griffith" found in the same vicinity shortly afterwards?

- A. Yes. Yes, about a fortnight afterwards.

- Q. 18. What was the cause or probable cause of the loss of the "Michael Griffith" with all hands?

- A. The Court is unable to find the cause of the loss, but the most probable cause was exceptionally heavy weather.

ANNEX TO THE REPORT

The "Michael Griffith" was a steam trawler built of steel by Cook, Welton & Gemmill Limited at Beverley in 1919, but had been substantially reconditioned in 1947 after War service. She was of the type known as the "Castle type". Her gross tonnage was 282 and her registered dimensions: 125.5 feet x 23.5 feet x 12.7 feet. She was owned by the Clifton Steam Trawlers Limited of Fleetwood, and her designated manager was Mr. J. T. C. Charnock.

The watertight bulkheads in the vessel were abaft the fore peak, between the fish room and the bunkers, and forward of the after peak. She had a raised fo'c'sle; her bridge was about amidships and her engine and boiler rooms abaft the bridge. The fo'c'sle was 21 feet long and she had steel bulwarks all round the ship abaft the fo'c'sle.

Her machinery openings were protected by steel casing 4 feet high and she had a bar keel.

Steering was by hand gear. She was propelled by triple expansion engines taking steam from one single-ended cylindrical type boiler with three furnaces, the machinery being built by Amos & Smith Limited of Hull.

She was classed +100A1 at Lloyd's and had passed her last special survey in June, 1951. The vessel had been regularly inspected by the Fleetwood Steam Trawlers Mutual Insurance Association Limited's surveyors.

The pumping arrangements were as follows:—

- (1) Two ram pumps driven off the main engines for the bilges,
- (2) A bilge injection on the main circulating pump,
- (3) One steam ejector,
- (4) One donkey pump for general service,
- (5) One donkey pump for boiler feed.

In addition, there were four hand pumps on deck.

The vessel was fitted with four freeing ports on each side of the ship, one of which was 24 inches x 10 inches, the other three being 18 inches x 9 inches. There were six scuppers on each side of the ship.

The "Michael Griffith" was equipped with a radio telephone transmitter and receiver with the batteries carried in the wireless room, which was inside the wheel house. She was also equipped with a direction finder and echo sounding apparatus.

Her lifeboat and lifesaving appliances were adequate and in good order.

The vessel left Fleetwood on the 29th January, 1953, for a fishing voyage off the West Coast of Scotland, commanded by Skipper Singleton and manned by a crew of thirteen hands all told.

No wireless operator was carried and there was little evidence as to the ability of those on board of her to operate the radio telephone, but it seems clear that the skipper, at least, was competent so to do and there is no reason to suppose that there was anything wrong with her radio telephone apparatus as messages of considerable strength were received under bad conditions at a distance of at least 85 miles.

Shortly after the "Michael Griffith" sailed, trouble developed in the after-feed pump delivery valve chest and the vessel returned to Fleetwood to have the trouble remedied. The Court is satisfied that the cause of the trouble was that the spindle on the top of the chest had been screwed back too far for the purpose of allowing the valve to lift further, with the result that the valve was enabled to lift off its seating, thereby enabling pressure to be brought upon a joint in the pipe leading to the pump and causing leakage. The leakage from the joint was discovered by the engineers of the vessel but it was not until she reached port and the Assistant Engineer Superintendent of the Owners boarded the vessel and made some investigation that the real cause of the leakage was discovered.

Once the real cause of the leakage was discovered, repair was a comparatively short and simple matter. The valve chest was taken ashore, a new valve fitted, and the spindle adjusted. After the valve chest had been replaced on board the vessel a test was made, and the Court is satisfied that the repair was satisfactorily and efficiently done. About 12.30 a.m. on the 30th January, the "Michael Griffith" again left Fleetwood, and the Court is satisfied that on this occasion the vessel was in every way fitted for the voyage on which she was proceeding.

About 8 p.m. on the 30th January, the "Michael Griffith" was seen by those on board the steam trawler "Aigret" which was then some 20 miles W½S. of Dubh Artach Light. The "Aigret" which had been fishing in that vicinity, had ceased to fish because of weather conditions, and was apparently remaining on her fishing ground waiting to see what the prospects were of resuming fishing. Some short time afterwards, in view of the weather report received, the skipper of the "Aigret" decided that fishing would be impossible for some time to come, and to seek

shelter, for Skerryvore which was nor'ard, without a quite close visibility to somewhere a few miles vore. Du wind which veered and probably the position. The wind probably had increased squalls, with abilities and Griffith" on the 31st Jan 30 feet, with or seen of 9.23 a.m. "Velia", v south'ard telephone sent out by what was p the steam long way message was was 7 to 8 without ste ship come

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shelter, for which reason he set a course to the East of Skerryvore. During this time the "Michael Griffith", which was apparently intending to fish farther to the northward, was seen to be proceeding on her voyage without any apparent difficulty, and in fact, she passed quite close to the "Aigret" and her stern light remained visible to those on the bridge of the "Aigret" until somewhere about 11.10 p.m. when she must have been a few miles to the southward and westward of Skerryvore. During the evening of the 30th January, the wind which had started from about south-west, had veered and increased in force, and about 11 p.m. was probably a north-westerly gale of about Force 9, in the position in which the "Michael Griffith" then was. The wind continued to veer and by midnight was probably somewhere between N.N.W. and North, and had increased to Force 10. There were heavy snow squalls, with a rough or very rough sea. The probabilities are that in the area where the "Michael Griffith" might be expected to be in the early hours of the 31st January, the height of the waves was at least 30 feet, with a confused sea. Nothing more was heard or seen of the "Michael Griffith", except that about 9.23 a.m. on the 31st January, the steam trawler "Velia", which was at least 85 miles away to the southward and eastward, picked up on the radio telephone part of an S.O.S. message which was being sent out by the "Michael Griffith". At the same time, what was probably the full message was picked up by the steam trawler "Wyre General" which was also a long way away from the "Michael Griffith". The message was to the effect that the "Michael Griffith" was 7 to 8 miles south of Barra Head, full of water, without steam, and helpless, and ended "Will some ship come and help us".

It is not considered necessary to go in detail into the action taken on receipt of this message by the two trawlers in question. It is sufficient to say that the "Velia" obtained the full text of the message from the "Wyre General", and that the message was passed immediately to shore stations as a result of which three trawlers - the "Braconbank", the "Wardour", and the "Sata", all of which were much nearer the position given by the "Michael Griffith" than either the "Velia" or the "Wyre General", immediately proceeded to the area given, in order to search for the "Michael Griffith", and render what assistance they could. Having regard to the weather conditions prevailing, and the position in which the trawlers were when they received the information, the Court is of opinion that all those three trawlers and their crews were exposed to grave risk while undertaking this search, and the action of their skippers and crews in responding

so promptly to the call for assistance is highly commendable, and well in keeping with the traditions of the British Merchant Navy and Fishing Fleets.

As a result of the information passed to the shore stations and from them to the coastguard and Wreck Service Stations, the Barra Lifeboat was launched and proceeded to the area given in the message from the "Michael Griffith"; and some time afterwards the Islay lifeboat, which had been launched to answer another distress call, also proceeded to the area. Two members of the crew of the Islay lifeboat were overcome by fumes and lost their lives while assisting in the search for the "Michael Griffith". H.M.S. "Tenacious" also searched the area and two Royal Air Force aeroplanes also conducted a search of the area - one of them for 10½ hours. The Court wishes to express its appreciation of the efforts made by all the aforementioned.

The Court is unable to find the cause of the loss of the "Michael Griffith", but the most probable cause was exceptionally heavy weather. In the position in which the "Michael Griffith" would seem to have been on the morning of the 31st January, the wind was a north-westerly gale of Force 10 with squalls of hurricane force, and there is every probability of a very high confused sea. From the wireless message, it seems certain that the vessel was without any power of propulsion and had a considerable quantity of water in her. Which was a consequence of the other must remain a matter of conjecture, but it seems rather more probable that the loss of steam was due to the ingress of water owing to the vessel being struck by an exceptionally heavy sea.

The Official Log of the "Michael Griffith" disclosed that boat drills had not been carried out as they should have been. In the opinion of the Court, it is of vital importance that this matter should receive attention not only from skippers of trawlers but also that Owners should have someone in their organisation charged with the duty of scrutinising entries in the Official Log to make certain that the Regulations are complied with in the spirit as well as the letter. It is not considered that this failure had any bearing on this casualty.

J. V. NAISBY, *Judge*.

C. HANCOCK }
F. BEE } *Assessors*
W. J. NUTTON }