

LOSS OF THE HARTLEY.

In Middlesbrough during the current week there has been concluded an inquiry into a shipping disaster of much more than local interest. The Committee-room in the Town Hall, where the Court sat, was crowded day after day with an eagerly attentive audience. Men engaged in the building, the owning, and the operating of ships came from distant places to learn all there was to be learnt about the circumstances in which the s.s. Hartley was lost. The Board of Trade showed what importance it attached to the matter by joining with the Stipendiary Magistrate, who presided over the inquiry, three expert assessors of exceptional competence.

In British ports and in the narrow seas round about Great Britain many vessels like the Hartley, are in current use. The type carries the sanction of the Board of Trade and of Lloyd's Register. It is designed to meet the peculiar needs of the present competitive age, and for that reason is specially economical to run. Presumably the Hartley had before her, when she put to sea on her fatal voyage, a long career of useful service. And yet, new ship though she was, she never reached her destination. Not only did the Hartley succumb to the fury of the weather; several other vessels of nearly the same kind, and size, and age have suffered the same disaster. Therefore, the question arises: Was the Hartley lost through an unavoidable accident, or did her fate overtake her because she was unsuited to her work? She was a self-trimming collier. She was planned to eliminate the heavy item of trimmers' wages from her loading charges. To facilitate mechanical loading she had extraordinarily large hatchways. Indeed, of her total deck space, roughly one-half was hatchway and only one-half solid deck. When she was caught in a storm a heavy weight of water broke through the rope lashings and the tarpaulin and timber covers which protected the

vast chasms. And once the waves had found a way into her holds it was only a question of minutes before she filled and sank.

The Middlesbrough Court, after hearing all the evidence, made three chief recommendations. It advised an internal structure to shut off the empty part of the hold which is secluded between the deck, the side of the ship, and the slope of the coal mountain immediately under the hatchway. By such means a dangerous shifting of the cargo may perhaps be prevented in other ships when disaster threatens. It also advised the use of watertight bulkheads, so that the flooding of one hold should not lead directly and almost inevitably to the flooding of others. Finally, it advised a more thorough protection and covering of the hatchways against the violence of heavy weather. All these are eminently reasonable suggestions. But their good sense should not be allowed to obscure the essential fact. Above and behind them there rises a wider question urgently demanding an answer. Such a question posed by the first disaster which befell a ship of the Hartley type is repeated with always more thunderous emphasis by each succeeding calamity. Whatever the gain may be in the cutting down of expense—and no one will underestimate the crucial importance of economy in the present-day construction and employment of British ships—ought vessels to be passed as seaworthy whose hatchways are so extensive in proportion to the deck space that the danger of their giving way under an intensified pressure is continually present? But lives count, and the current toll of lives is tragic. Doubtless, in a sense the Hartley was seaworthy. But would it be true to say she was also weather-worthy? Amongst men who understand these things and do not speak at random it is not uncommon to hear her and her sister craft described as seagoing barges. Their continued employment would seem to be a subject which requires the immediate and very serious consideration of the Board of Trade. A frank official statement would set many grave anxieties at rest.



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