

Report of Sub-Committee appointed to ascertain the facts of the  
Stranding of H.M.S. "Conway" on April 14th, 1953.

Present:- Mr. Brian Heathcote (in the chair)  
Captain G. Ayre  
Mr. L. O'Brien Harding  
Mr. A. Rigby Hughes  
Captain A. G. Peterkin  
Mr. Alfred Wilson

Lord Norbury was prevented by illness from attending.

Captain James Nelson was with the Committee for part of the sittings as Adviser.

The Committee heard the following gentlemen, who all took part in the operation:-

Captain E. Hewitt	(H.M.S. "Conway")
Mr. R. J. Jones	(Trinity House Pilot)
Captain Durrant	(Rea Towing Company)
Skipper Brown	(Ahead Tug "Dongarth")
Skipper Cooper	(Astern Tug "Minegarth")
Mr. Miller	(Liverpool Pilot)

Preparation.

Captain Hewitt began to ascertain available data to assist in planning the move from the moorings off Plas Newydd to those prepared off Bangor as early as April, 1952. He consulted many times the Harbourmaster of Caernarvon, Captain Rees Thomas, on both the navigation of the channel and the tidal data. He obtained tidal data also from Dr. Doodson, of Bidston Observatory. The information he obtained was that slack water at the Tubular Bridge was about 10 to 15 minutes before high water at Caernarvon Bar. He planned to make the passage between the two bridges during this period of slack water, so as to be clear of the Suspension Bridge before the Southgoing stream commenced to run. Captain Thomas's recommendation was to be at the Tubular Bridge at 9.25 a.m., and he anticipated slack water for the next 10 to 15 minutes. Captain Hewitt planned to be at the Tubular Bridge at 9.20 to have something in hand. On several occasions he went to the Tubular Bridge and checked for himself that the water slacked there ten minutes before the time given. He had also made a number of passages through the Swellies himself, both at high, slack and low water. He knew from the old log books of the previous passage of "Conway" through the Swellies that she made the passage between the bridges going South in 13 minutes, and decided to allow 15 for the passage North between the same points. He then checked his times in the "Conway" motor boat at  $4\frac{1}{2}$  knots, starting at the time he had planned for the operation, though not at highest H.W. and with a light Easterly wind both outside and in the Straits. He went through without difficulty, turning under the Suspension Bridge. Captain Durrant, Mr. Brooke Smith and Mr. Miller were with him on this occasion. A further passage by boat was made about one hour before low water on Monday, April 13th, by Captain Hewitt and the tugmasters, and it was followed by a final briefing meeting on board "Conway", at which were present Captain Hewitt, Pilot Miller, Captains Durrant, Duff (the Senior Master of Rea Towing Co.), Brown and Cooper. The exact timings were finally fixed, and stress was laid on the critical point of the timetable, which was the time under the Tubular Bridge at 9.20 a.m. It was agreed that the nine cables between the bridges would be covered in 15 minutes, towing at 4 knots, by which time the S.W. running

stream would have attained a rate of 4 knots. This was based on observations by Captain Hewitt and Mr. Miller. Captain Durrant stated that it had been previously confirmed by the local pilot, though no occasion was mentioned in which a full conference of all concerned included the local pilot. The only occasion mentioned in which the local pilot took part was when Captain Durrant, Mr. Miller, Captain Duff and the local pilots (father and son) went down to the water's edge and watched the turn of the tide.

It is pertinent here to quote the extract from the tidal notes on the Admiralty Chart of the Swellies, No.1464 -

"Between the bridges the stream runs to the S.W. for  $6\frac{1}{2}$  hours from 1 hour before H.W. at Menai to  $1\frac{1}{4}$  hours before L.W.; and to the N.E. for  $5\frac{3}{4}$  hours from  $1\frac{3}{4}$  hours before L.W. to 1 hour before H.W. 7 to 8 knots at Springs; 5 knots at Neaps. Slack water  $\frac{1}{4}$  hour at Springs,  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour at Neaps".

On the day in question H.W. at Menai Bridge was 10.53 a.m. If the tidal data on the chart is accurate, slack water, which occurs at the termination of the Northgoing stream, should have been from 9.38 to 9.53 a.m., when the Southgoing stream would commence at 9.53 at Menai Suspension Bridge. It would seem, therefore, that the timing of the passage as planned was correct.

There was some discussion at the final briefing conference as to the disposition of the tugs. It was decided that "Minegarth" should remain astern to give steering power or to bring up, as necessary. The tugmasters confirmed, in answer to questions, that "Dongarth" was fully able to tow "Conway" with "Minegarth" trailing astern against the anticipated 4 knot stream. Pilot Jones stated that he asked for three tugs, but was assured that two were ample for the job. He admitted that his experience of towed ships was negligible. It was also decided, after discussion, that the astern tug should make fast stern to stern, and not tug bow to "Conway" stern. Discussion also took place on whether the astern tug should be slipped at any point and transferred to assist the ahead tug after clearing the Swellies. It transpired that all parties concerned were satisfied as to the ability of "Dongarth" to tow to the scheduled times under the circumstances detailed above, but Captain Durrant and the tugmasters stated at the enquiry that they doubted whether any of their tugs could singly have towed "Conway" through the current they actually encountered.

In addition to the existing marks Captain Hewitt himself laid three extra buoys to assist the navigation of the channel. These proved effective and helpful.

All orders from "Conway" were relayed to both tugs by means of a Marconi 'walkie-talkie', manned in "Conway" by Mr. Miller, who transmitted the orders given by Captain Hewitt and Mr. Jones. At all times interchange of communication was satisfactory between "Conway" and the ahead tug, but messages could only be sent from "Conway" to the astern tug, and not vice versa, the tug acknowledging reception and understanding of messages by whistle signal. A simple semaphore system was agreed in case of failure of the communication system. The need for it did not arise.

#### Operation.

April 14th, 1953, was the second of three successive days of highest Springs during which the operation was possible at that time of the year. At Plas Newydd on that morning it was clear and sunny, with a flat calm and a light breeze. Cables

were hove in at about 6.30 a.m., the ship put on slips and the tugs made fast. At 8.21 "Conway" was slipped.

On board "Conway" were Captain Hewitt in command, with Pilot Jones. Mr. Miller was on the foc's'le head to pass orders to the tugs. The pilot's son, also a local pilot, was in the ahead tug, with Captain Duff in the astern tug. Pilot Jones in his statement gave the wind as N.W. force  $2/3$ , and the drafts of the "Conway" as 21 feet forward and 21 feet 10 inches aft. Captain Hewitt gave the draft as 19 feet 6 inches forward and 20 feet aft. Her displacement was 4,300 tons.

The ship was turned easily and there was still a good following tide. The pilot checked with Captain Hewitt that the time of arrival at the Tubular Bridge was 9.20. The passage to the Tubular Bridge was uneventful, the tugs towing easy to arrive at the Bridge at the agreed time. "Conway" had her bows under the Tubular Bridge at 9.23 a.m. Pilot Jones agreed in his statement that, if anything, "Conway" was early rather than late at the bridge. The ship was headed up for the narrow channel between Prices Point and the Swelly Rock, and Captain Hewitt stated that this is the place where the tide runs most strongly. He remarked that she was not going very fast, but appeared to be making good headway. Pilot Jones gives the time when "Conway" was abeam of Prices Point Beacon, about half way between the bridges, as 12 minutes after passing the Tubular Bridge. Abeam of the Swelly Rock, Pilot Jones states that the wind had veered to the N.E., but this is doubtful; other observers agree that the wind remained N.W. but was increasing in force. He asked for more power, and then suggested to Captain Hewitt that "Conway" should be taken back stern first through the Swellies. The Captain decided against this, and witnesses at our enquiry agreed on the impossibility of this under the prevailing conditions. Clear of Swelly Rock prudent navigation demands that the ship should haul to the Northward in order to get an offing for the centre of the Suspension Bridge. Observers noted what they remarked to be a sheer to port at this time, but this was undoubtedly a deliberate attempt to get the ship into position. "Conway" was now stationary, and the order was given, with Pilot Jones' concurrence, to let go the stern tug and make fast forward. This manoeuvre was clearly foreseen in the preliminary conference. Captain Duff replied that the tug could not get under the port bow of "Conway" under the conditions, so decided to go ahead of the forward tug and tow in line ahead. The manoeuvre was brilliantly executed, but with both tugs towing forward the ship made little headway. The "Dongarth" was now held head and stern by tow ropes, and had little power of manoeuvre in face of the wind and tide. At some time between 10.20 and 10.30 a.m., with both tugs towing ahead but making little impression, when abreast of the Platters Rocks the "Conway" took a sudden and violent sheer to starboard, took charge, and went ashore over the Platters in a matter of seconds. Continuous straining on the tow lines at full speed for a further ten minutes had no result. It was realised that the "Conway" was hard and fast, and, on orders from the ship, the towing hawsers were slipped from the tugs.

#### Observations.

1. Tow Ropes. Captain Hewitt stated that the tow rope from "Minegarth" to "Dongarth" broke, and a second rope was then passed. It would seem from the statements of the tugmasters that two ropes were out between the tugs, an 8" and a 6" rope. The 6" rope broke, but at no time after the "Minegarth" had made fast to the "Dongarth" were the two ships unconnected by tow rope. The break occurred at the last sheer of "Conway", and was in no way contributory to the disaster.

2. Wind. Photographs taken at the time of stranding show the direction of the smoke from the tugs almost parallel to the fore and aft line of "Conway". "Conway" was heading 118° when aground. The wind would seem to be about 300°, i.e. a point W. of N.W. We do not agree that the wind was N.E. at any time during the passage.

An extract from the Liverpool Pilot Log Book on Tuesday, 14th April, is -

8 a.m.	N.W. wind Force 6
10 a.m.	N.W. " " 6
noon	N.W. " " 7

3. Tide. The Master of the astern tug stated that his tug, when light, had a speed of 10 knots. He said, referring to the time when he let go "Conway's" stern, approximately at 10.10 a.m., "I put the telegraph to full speed and she finished up about 400 feet astern of the "Conway". She was going every ounce she could go, but was still going astern. The tide was most severe".

In Captain Durrant's written statement to his Owners (attached) he states that, at about 9.40 a.m., observing the operation from the Suspension Bridge, he made careful observation of the rate of passage of floating kelp borne on the tide, and estimated the stream to be 8 to 10 knots in a Southerly direction. He describes it as having the character of a race. Pilot Jones, in answer to questions, said that as the ship came along the conditions became abnormal. Mr. Miller speaks of the tide as not being a true tide, but a confused mass of water running at a fast speed. Shore observers speak of something in the nature of a bore coming Southwards as the "Conway" took her last sheer.

It is somewhat surprising to us that the party had no knowledge of the stormy conditions prevailing at sea at the time "Conway" was to make the passage. Local knowledge may well have been that, under such circumstances, abnormal conditions might be encountered. It seems clear, from the time "Conway" took to do six cables (9.23 to 10.10), that something very unusual was taking place, possibly a strong undercurrent, which is known to occur in the channel, or that there was little or no stand of tide.

A third tug, sent from Liverpool at about 2 p.m. to assist in towing off, was unable to make the passage owing to weather and was forced to return.

4. Tugs. Had those concerned felt the least alarm about the ability of the tugs supplied to carry out the operation successfully under normal conditions, there was both opportunity and time to rectify matters. All concerned were agreed that the tugs were sufficient for the job, as nothing but a 4 knot tide was mentioned at the conferences. The Admiralty Chart Tidal Notes indicate the expectation of 7/8 knot S.W. running stream, whereas in the Southbound voyage of "Conway" she would not have encountered more than a 5 knot N. running stream. It was not feasible to have one ahead tug on each bow, with one stern tug, owing to the narrowness of the channel. At no material time were the tugs short of coal or without a full head of steam.

5. "Ranger". The "Ranger" was standing by off Bangor with the moorings to which "Conway" was proceeding. Had she been required to come to the assistance of "Conway" these moorings would have had to have been let go, and "Conway" would have been unable to moor at all. In any case, in those waters and under the conditions encountered it would have been impossible for "Ranger" to give any assistance whatsoever.

*R.A.*