

THE FERRY BOAT DISASTER ON THE DEE.

GOVERNMENT INQUIRY.

The inquiry ordered by the Home Secretary and the President of the Board of Trade into the circumstances attending the great disaster on the River Dee at Aberdeen, on Wednesday, 5th April, was opened on Monday morning in the Court House. Captain Harris, R.N., a permanent official of the Board of Trade, presided. Mr Cadenhead conducted the examination of witnesses, and Mr A. E. Smith represented the Magistrates and Town Council. The Court was well filled by the public during the day, and the Provost and Magistrates were present during the greater portion of the examination. Sheriff Comrie Thomson accompanied Captain Harris to the bench, and previous to the opening of the inquiry, stated that it had been instituted on the suggestion of the Sheriff, who is also coroner of the county.

Captain HARRIS said this was the first inquiry of the kind that had been held in Scotland by an inspector of the Board of Trade, and that it would be conducted in a similar manner to inquiries as to losses at sea and railway accidents.

The LORD PROVOST assured the Court that the city authorities would afford every facility for promoting the inquiry.

Mr William Gordon, town-clerk, was the first witness examined. He stated that the Town Council hold the ferry by a royal charter of ancient date, their jurisdiction extending to the centre of the new channel of the River Dee, which is the boundary line of the burgh. The ferry has been let for many years by way of lease, by public roup. Alexander Kennedy, the present tacksman, has a lease of three years from June, 1875. He holds it under the articles and conditions of roup and printed regulations, to which there is attached a penalty for non-observance. The Provost and Magistrates have criminal jurisdiction over the district where the ferry is situated. When the district was handed over to the Harbour Commissioners, the right of ferry and its revenues were retained.

Mr William Hall, ship and boatbuilder, stated that he built the boat in question by specification. She is 25 feet long, 8 feet 10½ inches broad, and 2 feet 4 inches in depth, or above the coiling 1 foot 7 inches. She was fitted with a wheel in order to be drawn by a wire. The top of the wheel was 3 feet 6 inches above the bottom of the boat. The rope was led through the boat at stem and stern, passing under two friction rollers and over the large wheel. The friction rollers were a foot or 15 inches above the bottom of the boat. The boat was built with a shear rising about 15 inches at each end. Her bows were as round as they could possibly be made, and the bottom flat, with battens to sustain chafing on the ground. It was possible, with a good deal of slack, that the wire might get off the wheel, but he had never seen that occur. The boat would carry about 8 tons. When the boat was completed, in consequence of the complaints that had been made as to the danger of the ferry, he tested it with sixty men, and it had 12 inches of side above water. There was standing room for 10 or 15 more. On the day of the accident he made an observation, and found the river running from 6 to 8 knots an hour.

Captain HARRIS—Would you have considered it prudent to send the boat across the river that day with sixty men in her.

Witness—Decidedly not. Examination continued—Sixty men could not easily all have sat down, so that there would have been a good deal of top weight. The specification for the boat witness believed was drawn by Mr Jenkins, assistant to the City Architect, and at first there was no provision for oars. Witness pointed that out, and was told that the boat was to be wrought by wire. He said surely not in the new channel of the river, and was told that it was to be employed in the old channel, and the boat from it taken to the new channel. He then put in rowlocks and supplied two oars, but intimated that if they were not desired he would take them back and not charge for them. These, however, were kept. He measured the wire, and found it 1½ in. in circumference. It was secured at each side to a post. The rope had been joined, and it was badly done. Witness, on being asked on what theory he accounted for the accident, stated that he attributed it to the overcrowding of the boat in the swift current, and, as he had frequently observed, there was a fathom or two of slack rope left between the tackle and the post, and when the tackle was suddenly let go the jerk that succeeded would cause the boat to capsize. When the boat got into the bight of the rope in mid stream, the current would get barked up till it ran over the gunwale, and he believed that she must have capsized up stream.

Joseph Smith—I was on board the ferry-boat which capsized. I was among the first five or six who entered. The boat left the shore, and after proceeding a yard or two she returned to let some people out who had not got off for the crush. We afterwards proceeded again, and returned to let off one of the boatmen. He made some remarks, which I understood to mean that there were too many people on board. He spoke to the tacksman from the boat, and when he landed he entered into conversation with him. That boatman did not come back to the boat. When she came back first more people entered her, and the same occurred on the second return. Before the boat left I did not hear any one say that there were too many people in her. I had seen the boat come and go before the fatal trip. She made very slow work one trip, but I did not apprehend any danger. On the final attempt we went across very slowly. She was running something like half a circle. I was in the bow nearest Torry. The wire rope was close to my feet. When we stopped I was sitting on the gunwale, and took hold of the rope and pulled her. At my end the water was not running in at the hole through which the rope passed. The boat heeled over to one side, and the boatmen asked the people to go to the other side. That order was obeyed, but I did not see what effect it had. The first time I took hold of the rope it was all right, but the second time I found it broken. Immediately after the boat sank, and I found myself in the water. I jumped a little off the boat, and kept myself afloat by a plank. Before the accident there was not consternation among the crowd. The boat turned on her mouth eastward. I think she dipped first at the west side. I sprang for the Torry shore. I think during the short time I was standing waiting for the boat the current sensibly increased in strength. There were more people on the boat when she capsized than on the previous passage. The tacksman was there. He did not interfere with the admission of so many people; but the boatman remonstrated. Before the boat capsized the wire was clean out of the water by the strain both in front and behind.

Donald Sutherland, broker, testified to the crowding, and said he thought the boat would not cross safely. When the boat was in danger in the bight of the rope those on the Torry side slackened the rope. Almost in an instant the boat turned over bottom up, and the rope broke. Witness could not say that there was a general apprehension among the crowd on shore that the boat would be swamped.

James Murdoch, blacksmith, said on the day in question he came back to the Torry boat to return to Aberdeen. There was a large crowd. At that time the wire boat started for Aberdeen fully loaded. My wife, who was with me, proposed we should go by the bridge, as we had lost the boat. I thought we might safely cross, and waited the return of the boat. By this time the current had greatly increased. We went away a little, and when we returned the boat was in the middle of the stream again crossing to Aberdeen. She was crowded, but not more so than I had seen her before. The boat listed greatly to the west side, and she lipped water on three occasions. The boat was at a standstill, and men slackened the rope on the Torry side. It became tight again, and then the boat overturned. I think the boat overturned towards the sea.

William Smith, who supplies water to the shipping, deposed that he saw the boat leave on the fatal voyage. He considered she was overloaded. He refused to enter her, as he thought it unsafe. He never saw the stream running quicker. He was an offerer for the ferry at one time. In his opinion there were 80 people in the boat. He anticipated danger in consequence of the overcrowding and the strength of the stream. The tacksman was standing near the boat collecting fares. Many of those present expressed fears as to the safety of the boat. William Bisset, a seafaring man, said to witness that the boat should not have been permitted to go. The crowd was orderly, and the people were sober. There was no vigorous protest against the boat being permitted to cross. Policemen were standing beside the collecting box, apparently for the purpose of seeing that the tacksman got his money; but many persons evaded the policemen by going over the fence and down the boat causeway, which was crowded. One man said he would not go in the boat after he had paid his fare, and he demanded back his money. The tacksman went on taking money without respect to the number which could get on any one voyage. The water lipped twice into the boat on the fatal voyage before she reached the middle of the stream, but the people were able on these occasions to adjust the balance of the boat momentarily. At the middle of the river the rope was a little slackened, and she then got more broadside on to the current. After going twice from side to side the boat suddenly overturned, and struck the water with the force of a sledge-hammer, so that, in the opinion of the witness, many people must have been killed at once. He believed the boat turned up stream.

William Masson, seaman, had been boatman at the ferry for two months. In the course of the two months the river has had a rapid stream for about seven days. Wednesday, 5th April, was about the middle of that seven days. On Tuesday, 4th April, the ferry-boat was stopped about two o'clock on account of the rapid current. A small boat was then worked with oars, and he helped to pull it. He never saw the wire boat not in use before. The wire was slackened on Tuesday, but was tightened next day as usual. When we did that we were not afraid to work the big boat. We worked her till she capsized, making one voyage about every twenty minutes. In the afternoon of Wednesday witness began to fear that the stream was getting too rapid for her. The stream had been heavier on Tuesday than it was at any time on Wednesday. He crossed every time till the fatal voyage. Before she left Torry on the passage immediately preceding the last, witness proposed to his mate to keep the boat for an hour or two on the Torry side till the stream would slacken. He believed it would do so when the tidal water had flowed out, leaving only the stream itself. John Mitchell was in charge of the boat, and he said they would take the boat from Torry to the Aberdeen side and leave her there for some time, as it would be a pity to keep the people on the south side who were anxious to cross. Witness feared that if the boat was taken to the Aberdeen side the people would force into her, and they would be compelled to work the boat. He had to do what Mitchell desired. In crossing from Aberdeen to Torry, with about forty people on board, great difficulty was experienced from the strength of the current. On reaching the Aberdeen side the boat was filled as quickly as it was emptied. Witness left the boat to ask the tacksman whether the boat could not lie up for an hour or two, and asked him whether it was safe to send it across, but got no answer. Mitchell did not leave the boat. The tacksman gave witness no answer when he spoke to him. The boat was crowded; he could not say the number, but he never saw so many people in her before. He did not say to the tacksman that he would not go in the boat, and he could not say now that his mind was really made up on that point, or whether he would have gone in the boat. The tacksman could easily see for himself the crowded state of the boat. Witness was afraid there were too many people in her. With oars he was sure the boat could have reached some side of the river; but

the wire rope kept her down. He then described what he saw of the voyage, stating that the boat capsized up the stream. He had seen a copy of the rules, but never got them to read. Two oars were in the boat at the time of the accident. About a fortnight before the accident a new galvanised rope was got for the boat; and as it was not long enough, a part of the steel rope—the use of which was discontinued—was spliced to the new rope at the Torry side. The oars and thole pins were in the gunwale at the time of the accident. In reply to questions suggested by Mr Emslie Smith, witness said he should not have liked to have gone in the boat, with the stream as it was at the time of the accident, even with only thirty passengers on board. In answer to Captain Harris he said there was no room to work the oars with eighty people on board the boat.

Alexander Forbes, fisherman, Torry, had crossed by the ferry for twenty years. The wire rope in the new channel of the river was on before last New Year. The current, and sometimes a "beat" of wind right down, somewhat interrupted the ferry, but with four oars the boat might always be pulled. The day before the accident he crossed between ten and eleven o'clock in a small boat, and he did not see the wire boat cross. The big boat would have been safer on Tuesday than it was on Wednesday. Witness believed the big boat would have been quite safe on Tuesday. The current was not half so strong on Tuesday as on Wednesday. He thought the increase was due to the melting of the snow up the country. Two years ago at the Fast, when Fife was tacksman of the ferry, he saw a boat so overloaded just at the river bank that it fairly sank by the stern, but luckily in shallow water. He considered the big boat amply laden in times of current with thirty or thirty-five passengers. Without the wire he believed she might float safely with fifty or sixty men. The fishermen at Torry had often thought it was not right to work the boat in the new channel of the river with wire, and they had been "looking" for some such accident as had occurred, believing that it would arise from the overcrowding of the boat and the force of the current. With thirty persons in the boat witness believed there would have been no difficulty in taking across the boat at the time of the accident.

John Thomson, fisherman, Torry, deposed that the wire rope boat was stopped about three o'clock on the day before the accident, and he believed it was properly stopped in consequence of the current, which was running very strong—four or five knots an hour. The current on Wednesday was much stronger than on Tuesday. It was too strong for the wire rope boat. Many commented on Wednesday that the current was too strong for the boat. He did not know of any but Mr Craig belonging to Torry who went into the wire rope boat on Wednesday afternoon.

Robert Walker, fisherman, Torry, also deposed that the spate in the river was bigger on Wednesday than on Tuesday.

The inquiry was then adjourned.

The Court resumed yesterday at 12 noon. Mr William Hall was recalled, and stated that when the boat was tested she had 62 men in her, and she was rocked from side to side, but without putting her gunwale under water. Allowing ten cubic feet for every adult, which is the limit of the Board of Trade, the boat was built to carry barely 32.

Alexander Fullerton, ferry-boatman, said that he had been in the boat with 30 to 40 passengers. The current is stronger in the new cut than it was in the old. He had seen the rope break from the force of the current; it was more liable to break in the new than in the old channel. The rope was spliced about a month before the accident.

James Smith, engineer, saw the boat filled and leave the landing. Did not apprehend danger to her till she stopped. She had heeled over a little before that. Heard no one express apprehension of danger before the boat left.

George Forbes, bill poster, who was in the boat when it capsized, described the occurrence. Masson, after leaving the boat, spoke to the general crowd, and said the boat was not fit to go, and then he spoke to the tacksman, and asked him if he thought she was fit to go. All he heard from the tacksman was "Come, come," as if telling Masson to go away. Some bystanders jeered a little at Masson. Mitchell expressed some disappointment at Masson leaving. Everybody about the wheel assisted in turning it, and others pulled the wire to assist the boat. Before the boat stopped water was lipping into it. A few females expressed alarm, but everybody got dumbfounded. Everybody was standing in the boat except one woman; there was no room to sit. They were standing on the seats and every part of the boat, close together.

James Simpson, labourer, Hardweird, intended to go by the boat, but changed his mind when he saw the stream. He would not have crossed in it, either with few or many. He knew perfectly well that the boat would not cross, but he did nothing, as he saw the ferryman doing nothing. He had a suspicion of danger before she started. When the boat stopped he saw a man try to cut the wire with a knife. Those on the south side called to those on the north side to cut the wire, and those on the north side called to the south to let go the tackle. The slack was let go on the north side, and the boat went away easy for a few yards, and then was checked and capsized. Had seen wind stop the boat as well as current. Saw Masson leave the boat and speak to the tacksman.

Alexander Christie, labourer, North Charlotte Street, was in the boat on her previous passage to Torry. She was very crowded, but he had no apprehension before starting. She halted for some time, but he did not know whether it was anything wrong with the gear, or from her being over-loaded. Some one helped the ferryman, and she went on. When they got across, Masson declared he would not cross again for an hour. He was urged by the passengers and went.

William Urquhart, engineer, heard a fisher lad on the bank say that he would not cross in the boat for five pounds.

Jane Cay or Craig, fisherwoman, Torry, said the tacksman on Tuesday told the fisherwomen not to cross on the Fast-day, but to go by the bridge. She understood his object to secure as much accommodation for pleasure-seekers, who pay ready money, whereas the fisher folk pay a composition in advance. Witness, who was in the boat which capsized, said she heard Kennedy order the boatmen to bring back the boat after it left, and fill up the boat. Didn't notice Masson leave. When the boat started she heard her husband call out to her from the Torry side, but did not know what he said. When the boat was sticking, saw her husband launching a small boat. Everybody was standing in the boat but herself, and they were all jammed together. Before the boat started she feared that something would happen. Had the boat had oars, instead of a wire, she would have had no fear. When her husband rowed towards the boat it came in contact with the wire. He called to her to jump, but she was afraid. When she was thrown into the water she remained conscious, till her creel hurt her neck, and in trying to get it over her head she went down, and became unconscious.

Alexander Craig, fisherman, husband of the last witness, on the occasion of the accident saw his wife coming down towards the ferry, and called out to her to come round by the Chain Bridge. She did not hear him, and entered the boat. Saw the boat put back, and more people enter her. There were plenty in her before she put back. She also put back a second time, and took in more people. He thought his wife was not safe, and he and his father-in-law got a little boat, and had it afloat before the ferry boat started. When the ferry boat stuck their boat came in contact with the wire, and they got down stream. He called to his wife to jump into the water. Saw the wire slackened and the boat jerked. She almost immediately capsized. She filled with water on the west side, and with the force of the sally she turned over to eastward. His wife sat in the boat till she was floated out of it. He recognised her amongst the others by her creel. There were a good many hanging on to the creel. He took so many into his boat that it was in danger of sinking. He was not afraid of the ferry boat sinking from the number of people in it, but from the force of the current. Had it been rowed by oars he would not have been afraid of it sinking. He had never seen the boat so crowded. She was not so full on the immediately preceding voyage.

Roderick Campbell, plasterer, went in the boat, and had to walk along the gunwale to get to the off end of her. When she was ten or twelve yards into the stream, and the wire was getting strait, he perceived that there was danger. The gunwale was only four or five inches out of the water, and the water was plashing in. It was caused by the "sallying" of the boat. He did not know if the sallying was done intentionally or otherwise. He jumped from the boat when it began to sink towards Torry side. His companion was drowned.

William Smith, salmon fisher, intended to go in the boat, but did not go. He thought he would be better to go by the bridge when he saw the crowd. In reply to Mr Smith, witness said he went over the paling, and there were more went in that way than by the entrance.

Mr Hugh Longmuir, retired shipmaster, volunteered a statement to the Court. He gave it as his opinion that there was less difficulty in preventing overcrowding in a boat propelled with a wire rope than in a boat rowed with oars, because with a turn of the wheel the boatman could clear the boat of the shore.

The Court again adjourned till to-day at eleven o'clock.

ABERDEEN RACES.—Arrangements have been made for a race meeting at the end of May or beginning of June—the time being selected so as not to come in collision with the Highland Society's Show. The erection of the yard will cut up the Links so much that it would not be possible to have a meeting in Autumn. The meeting is to be under distinguished patronage. The names of over thirty patrons have already been sent in.

ENTERTAINMENTS AT ELMHILL HOUSE.—The dulness naturally attendant upon these trying and untimely wintry evenings has been to no small extent agreeably relieved to the dwellers (well on to 500 now) at our Lunatic Asylum by a couple of amateur dramatic entertainments, given within the past fortnight on the neat little stage at Elmhill House. The first of these two performances embraced Mr Craven's charming domestic drama of "Meg's Diversion," with the very laughable farce of "A Quiet Family"—the parts being mostly supported by ladies and gentlemen sometime members of the Lytton Dramatic Society—while the programme of the second entertainment included the well-known and always effective farces of "His Last Legs" and "Turn Him Out," with a musical interlude of songs—the performers, in this instance, being ladies and gentlemen from the Macready Dramatic Society. Without particularising individual efforts, this ought to be said, that the various parts were sustained with spirit and creditable histrionic aptitude, and that both entertainments proved a source of real enjoyment to the large and attentive audiences present.

NEW STREET.—The Street Committee of the Town Council (Police Department) have sanctioned the formation of a new street running southwards from Queen's Road, and proposed to be laid out by the City of Aberdeen Land Association. The street is to be 50 feet wide, and is to be called Forest Road.

ZYMOTIC (EPIDEMIC AND CONTAGIOUS) DISEASES.—The following is the return of cases reported as under the charge of the medical officer of the Small-pox Hospital, Infirmary, Dispensary, Medical Mission, St Nicholas Parish, and Old-machar Parish (city division), during the four weeks ended 25th March, 1876:—Measles, 1; scarlatina, 1; whooping-cough, 3; diarrhoea, 13; influenza, 3; ague, 2; worms, 4; total, 30.