

THE SAGA OF MOTORSHIP "BENCRUACHAN"

Ian Lloyd

I remember this case very well as it was one of the first casualties I looked after in South Africa which was before we opened offices there. I was working out of the Antwerp office at the time.

The ship was lying at anchor off Durban and I went out to her in a launch having a look around at her condition before I went on board. She was badly bent and measurements taken later showed her to be bent nineteen feet in way of the change of section between numbers one and two double bottoms which was her weakest point. I was of the opinion that the front section could break off at any time but the people on board didn't seem too worried because I don't believe they realized how bad a shape she was in.

The bulwarks on deck had split in way of the bend and I had the Captain make a trammel and with pop marks either side of the broken bulwarks had an apprentice stand by the trammel to watch for any movement in the ship with instructions to shout a disaster warning if movement was seen. There were dozens of stevedores at risk working in number one hold digging out cargo if the bow should break off. Nos. 1 and 2 holds were not flooded.

Also there was a diving team from South African Diving Services working on fitting canvas around the break using coxes guns so that the forepeak and several other spaces could be pumped out to lighten the ship together with removing cargo from one and two holds. The ship could not get into port with her present draft but I cannot remember what the drafts were.

Thankfully all went well and the ship was sufficiently lightened to enter port.

I do believe that the ship being built in Sunderland on the north east coast of England was the reason the ship stayed afloat and wasn't lost. I am from South Shields a neighbor of Sunderland which is why I could be considered to be partisan.

The east coast of southern Africa is known for "holes in the sea" or "freak waves" as they are sometimes called.

What happens is that when there are storms in Antarctica heavy swells are sent up into the Indian Ocean. These heavy swells meet up with south westerly storms on the South African east coast and if they synchronize, the storms piggy back on the swells and a massive wave is formed with a hole in the sea in front of the wave. This usually happens on or around the continental shelf between Durban and Port Elizabeth. A ship heading south at speed will go down this hole and into the bottom of the wave which then collapses and a massive amount of water falls on the ship. Some ships survive but a lot do not. Some years ago a passenger ship left Durban heading south and was never seen again, not even a body or a scrap of wreckage.

From the damage to the foremast I reckoned the wave was about 75 feet high.

The chief engineer wasn't aware there was anything wrong until he realized he couldn't see the windlass anymore which didn't do his hemorrhoids any good.

When weather conditions are as I have described it is much safer to keep well out to sea and away from the continental shelf which is usually found about ten to forty kilometers off the shore. Unfortunately ship owners do not take kindly to Masters who take their ships out to sea wasting precious time and money.

A Doctor Mallory wrote an excellent paper on this subject and I have a video from the local television station about Freak Waves.

As a temporary repair heavy box sections were built on each side of the ship in way of the bend with beams along the deck.

The forward section holding the forepeak also had several tanks for various liquids with white latex seen leaking from one of the tanks

There was also a lot of damage to the foremast and deck fittings which were repaired as necessary to get the vessel back to Europe. Containers had been wrapped around the mast.

I prepared a repair specification as best I could which was used for various shipyards to quote on with RDM being given the contract.

The ship sailed back to Europe at reduced speed and completed her discharge before proceeding to Rotterdam for repair.

The plan was to cut the bow section off and put it into another dry dock where the damaged section could be removed, a new section would be built and fitted between the two parts of the ship.

Firstly Ben Cruachen was put in a dry dock with its bent bow section overhanging the sill of the dock and the bow marked where the cut would be made. Latex was running out of the tank it was carried in.

RDM meticulously planned the operation even using scale models of the two cranes to be used moving them together with the bow section around the dock complex to the dry dock to be used. At one point the two crane jibs touched each other and a small modification had to be made to the cranes.

The day arrived when the bow was to be removed so I went up from Antwerp for the occasion. The management was a great bunch and we always dined together when I was in the yard in the Captains room. We saw the cutting started and off we went for lunch but we would return before the final cut was made. Things went so well that when we came out the cranes and the bow were moving sedately around the dock yard to the next dry dock. Long lance type cutting torches were being used to keep the workmen away from bow in case anything should go wrong but nothing did and everything worked perfectly.

The repairs were handed over to another surveyor as I had to be off again on my travels and unfortunately RDM lost money on the contract.

The new section was three meters long if I remember correctly.

I can remember the manager's faces but can't remember their names. The only name I do remember is Harry Clement the bill maker and we had some great nights out together when he came down to Antwerp to settle an account. I always kept in touch with Harry until he died of cancer a few years ago.

I had a lot of photos but have only saved eight of the more interesting ones especially three aerial shots of the ship wallowing and looking like it was in a sinking condition.

I have them on slides and can send them to you if you wish but I did not keep the report.

I have a very impressive collection of slides of major casualties which I have also put on to video. The reason they are on slides was to use them when I was giving a talk which was before the advent of laptop computers. I must find a home for them in some ones archives.

Ian Lloyd, Durban, 28th March 2011