

SYNOPSIS



On 16 July 2005 at 2220 (BST), in near darkness, two powerboats collided near Castle Point, St Mawes, resulting in the death of one of the helmsmen.

On the day of the accident, *Carrie Kate* was operated by a friend of the owner. This helmsman had held a 'quay-quay' licence for 2 years, issued by the Isles of Scilly Council, which entitled him to operate a vessel with fewer than 12 passengers between certain quays of the Isles of Scilly.

Carrie Kate was a 6.5m powerboat. She was propelled by a petrol inboard engine, via a stern-drive, enabling her to reach speeds of between 38-41 knots. There were no flares, lifejackets or VHF radio carried onboard, and her only navigation light was a red and green combined sidelight on her bow. The pole-mounted all-round white light, a non-permanent fitting which plugged into the starboard quarter, was broken and not onboard the vessel at the time of the accident.

The helmsman of *Kets* had been a fisherman for 11 years. Having grown up and fished out of St Mawes, he was very familiar with the local waters. He was one of four owners, who had bought *Kets* in April 2005.

Kets was a 4.55m Dell Quay dory, powered by an outboard engine which was controlled from a conning position on the starboard side. The vessel was capable of well over 20 knots. Again, no safety equipment was carried and the vessel had no navigation lights, as the owners did not intend to use *Kets* in the dark.

Carrie Kate visited several harbours in the Fal estuary on the day of the accident. The helmsman consumed alcohol throughout the day, and the St Mawes harbourmaster had noted the vessel due to the excessive wash she had created when departing the harbour earlier in the day. In the evening, *Carrie Kate* had again visited St Mawes, this time with four people onboard. At 2220 they departed St Mawes for the return trip to Falmouth. It is unclear whether the helmsman switched on his navigation light.

The helmsman of *Kets* had crossed to Falmouth from St Mawes, and from about 1800 onwards consumed alcohol. At 2215 the helmsman, his brother and a friend started their trip back to St Mawes. The sun had set at 2123, the weather was fine with little wind, and there was nearly a full moon.

At about 2220 those onboard *Kets* saw a bow wave and boat dead ahead. The helmsman turned *Kets* to port, but too late to avoid a collision with *Carrie Kate*. The helmsman of *Carrie Kate* had seen nothing but clear water ahead until *Carrie Kate* hit the starboard bow of *Kets*, riding over her and hitting the helmsman's console. The stern-drive of *Carrie Kate* was virtually sheared off as it hit the side of *Kets*. The helmsman of *Kets* was killed in the impact, his brother was flung into the water but fortunately remained conscious, and the other passenger remained in the boat but was knocked unconscious. Both vessels ended up stopped in the water.

Nobody was injured on board *Carrie Kate*, and they raised the alarm using a mobile phone. They were unable to assist the other vessel as they had no propulsion. The man in the water managed to swim to *Kets* and climb back aboard. The lifeboat arrived 10 minutes after the accident and the fatally injured helmsman was evacuated by helicopter shortly after.

Carrie Kate's helmsman was breathalysed after the accident and the alcohol in his body was found to be twice the legal limit permitted when driving a road vehicle. The helmsman of *Kets* was found to be over twice the legal limit also.

Analysis-

The tragic accident occurred because neither of the helmsmen saw the other vessel in enough time to take effective avoiding action. Contributing factors were:

- The speed of the vessels;
- The lack of navigation lights;
- The training and experience of the helmsmen; and
- That both helmsmen were navigating while under the influence of alcohol.

The COLREGS require that vessels proceed at a safe speed, taking due account of traffic density, visibility and the presence of background lights at night. They also require that appropriate navigation lights are exhibited between sunset and sunrise. This accident occurred an hour after sunset. It is thought highly unlikely that even the single navigation light on *Carrie Kate* was illuminated, thus both vessels were unlit. Although both helmsmen were described as experienced boatmen, their knowledge and application of the COLREGS was inadequate for operating high speed craft at night in a busy area of water.

In the UK, leisure craft users require no qualifications, although training is recommended. The RYA National Powerboat Scheme provides appropriate training at various levels where students learn the rudiments of the COLREGS and the benefits of carrying lifesaving equipment; both areas that were deficient in this case. How extensive this lack of essential knowledge is in the leisure industry, is difficult to quantify, as there is little statistical information collected on leisure accidents.

The key effects of alcohol consumption pertinent to this accident are: reduced peripheral vision, poor night vision, deterioration of judgment and slower reaction times. These factors are all key to navigating a high speed craft in near darkness. There are currently no national laws against recreational users navigating on water while under the influence of alcohol. Had there been such a law, both helmsmen might have thought twice before drinking and driving their water craft.

Local Fal estuary issues with respect to speed limits, unlit craft and bye-law approval were also raised during the investigation.

As a result of the recent MAIB investigation into the high speed grounding of the powerboat *Sea Snake*, which resulted in the loss of three lives, and this investigation, a recommendation has been made to the Department for Transport (DfT) concerning the

introduction of an alcohol limit for leisure users. The DfT is also recommended to improve the harbour bye-law approval process. The local harbour authorities have been recommended to review the standard of leisure boat activities in their area.