

SYNOPSIS

At 1007, on 15 May 2004, the sail training vessel *Lord Nelson*, owned and managed by the Jubilee Sailing Trust, made heavy contact with London's Tower Bridge. The MAIB was notified, and an investigation began that day.

Lord Nelson was on passage up the River Thames, and was intending to pass under Tower Bridge and then turn around and pass under the bridge again, before berthing at West India Dock, as part of a public relations exercise. Included in her crew were 17 disabled persons.

Earlier that morning, she had picked up a pilot at Gravesend for the passage. The pilot had been issued with a Pilotage Service Order by the administration department of Port of London Authority (PLA) pilots, which showed the times of Tower Bridge lifts at 1000 and 1030 respectively. During the pilot/master exchange which followed, no discussion took place concerning the arrangements of the bridge lifts. The pilot was under the assumption that they had been booked by the master or by the Jubilee Sailing Trust in accordance with published procedures. By contrast, the master believed the PLA pilots had made the arrangements. In fact, no bookings had been made.

Twenty minutes before *Lord Nelson's* ETA at Tower Bridge, the pilot made several attempts to contact the bridge control room by VHF radio, but received no reply. A short time later, he responded to a weak VHF radio transmission, which he believed to be from Tower Bridge. Now under the impression that the bridge control room was manned, the pilot continued the passage. Further attempts were made to contact the bridge, again without success. A request was also made to Woolwich Radio for them to make contact, who informed them a short time later, when *Lord Nelson* was a distance of 2-3 cables from the bridge, that a bridge lift had not been arranged.

A decision was then made to abort the bridge transit. However, despite several engine manoeuvres, and assistance from a PLA launch, they failed to prevent *Lord Nelson* from being set towards Tower Bridge by the flood tide, and she eventually made heavy contact with its southern buttress. As a result of the accident, *Lord Nelson* sustained damage to her port side. Fortunately, there were no injuries.

Several factors contributed to the accident including:

- The raising of Tower Bridge not being booked in accordance with published procedures.
- No contingency plan having been put in place for the bridge transit.
- The starboard anchor was not used to prevent the vessel coming into contact with Tower Bridge.
- PLA staff not confirming, in advance, the expected bridge lifts.
- No regulated requirement for early and clear communications between pilots/masters and Tower Bridge control room staff.
- Responsibility/procedure for bridge/lock transits not being clearly identified in the Jubilee Sailing Trust's company procedures.

Recommendations have been made to The Port of London Authority and the Jubilee Sailing Trust.