

SYNOPSIS

This accident was notified to the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) by the Thames Barrier, Woolwich Control Centre at 2240 on Monday 4 October 1999. The investigation started early the following morning.

The Class V passenger vessel *Symphony* operates with a deck crew of three, plus a catering and entertainment crew of 12. She left her berth at Embankment pier at 2000 on 4 October with 103 passengers on board, for a dinner cruise on the Thames. She was following her normal route upstream to Albert bridge when the collision occurred.

At about 2015, *Symphony* cleared Westminster bridge and was approaching the centre arch of Lambeth bridge. While manoeuvring, the starboard Schottel unit failed to respond to the controls. All indicators on the wheelhouse console, plus those in the engine room, showed normal. The master reduced speed on the starboard unit and went full astern on the port Schottel unit. Despite these efforts, the vessel's forward starboard quarter struck the bridge support. As the flood tide had started to swing the vessel, stern first in an upriver direction, the passengers were moved to the port side in case the collision caused any glass panels on the starboard side to shatter. *Symphony*'s starboard quarter then came into contact with the northern abutment of number two arch of the bridge. As she continued to pass through the arch, the aft starboard side of the wheelhouse made contact with the underside of the arch, damaging the wheelhouse structure and smashing the forward and starboard side windows.

As *Symphony* passed through the arch, the master regained control and navigated the vessel over to the south side of the river, tying up on Lambeth fire brigade pier. Neither passengers nor crew were injured. Port of London Authority (PLA), who had been informed of the incident by the master after the first contact, arranged for a police launch to attend, and advise as to injuries, damage etc until their duty launch could arrive on scene. *Symphony*'s master had arranged for *Hydraspace Alpha*, another of the company's vessels, to attend and at about 2040, she arrived at the pier. There were 92 passengers plus 12 catering crew, who transferred for the trip back to Embankment pier. Eleven passengers chose to leave the vessel at Lambeth and make their own way back to the pier. At about 2100 the PLA launch arrived, followed shortly afterwards by owner's representatives. Following an inspection of the vessel and discussions involving owners and the PLA, the master voluntarily provided a series of breath tests, a number of which proved positive. At 0100, *Symphony* was towed to Gravesend for repairs.

A subsequent investigation confirmed that there had been a steering failure on the starboard Schottel unit. The drive shaft for the feedback potentiometer had sheared, disabling the wheelhouse indicator. Under this condition, although the propulsion unit continued to operate, the lack of any stop signal from the feedback potentiometer caused the steering unit to rotate slowly throughout 360°. With no wheelhouse indicator, the master did not know the steering unit was rotating (or in what direction). The propulsion control and alarm system gave no indication as to what the failure was.

Following the investigation, although the cause of the accident was mechanical failure, the master was dismissed due to the positive breath tests. His alcohol level while in control of a vessel contravened both company and PLA regulations.