

SYNOPSIS

The accident occurred at the Steg Neck lock on the Leeds and Liverpool canal on Wednesday 19 August 1998. The Marine Accident Investigation Branch was informed of the incident by the Health and Safety Executive at 1620 that day but did not take over primacy for its investigation until 20 August. It was investigated by Captain P Kavanagh.

Four carers and four disabled people with learning difficulties were taking a week's holiday on board the narrow boat *Drum Major* on the Leeds and Liverpool canal. They had started their holiday at Silsden on Sunday 16 August and had travelled as far as Foulridge where they turned round and started their return journey on 19 August.

The holiday had been mainly uneventful and the transit of Steg Neck lock should have been like many others they had already undertaken. The carers were handling the boat while the four disabled passengers were seated inside the accommodation.

Drum Major entered the lock as normal but before the top gate was shut, a second narrow boat, *Dan's Drum*, approached, wanting to share the lock and descend together. With both boats in the lock the top gate was shut and the routine of opening the bottom gate paddles to drain the water in the lock started.

Very shortly afterwards it was realised that *Drum Major*'s bow fender had caught between the top of the bottom gate and the balance beam above it and, as the water-level began to fall, the bow remained suspended while the stern dropped to such a degree that it started to take water on board. Steps were taken to try to arrest the situation by shutting the bottom gate paddles and opening a top gate paddle. In opening the top gate paddle, however, water started to pour into the stern of *Drum Major*, and the paddle was quickly closed.

Suddenly the bow came free of the bottom gate. The boat dropped heavily and created a large wave that surged through the lock and swamped *Drum Major*, causing her to fill with water and sink. Attempts to rescue the four disabled people trapped inside were unsuccessful. All four were declared dead at the scene.

The cause of the foundering was an uncontrolled ingress of water into *Drum Major* while she was descending in the lock. A main contributory cause was that she was positioned too far forward in the lock, contrary to the advice provided in the *Waterways Code for Boaters*, which is issued by British Waterways.

The report makes a number of recommendations addressed to British Waterways with respect to the reporting and analysis of accidents and hazardous incidents, the adequacy of narrow boat emergency escape routes, and the fitting of weak securing arrangements to bow fenders of the type on *Drum Major*.