Synopsis

The accident was notified to the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) by South Coast Shipping Co Ltd at 0900 on 27 October 1997 and an investigation commenced the same day. It was carried out by Captain Nick Beer.

During the early morning of 27 October 1997, mv *Sand Kite*, a 98m long trailing suction dredger was inbound in the River Thames and making for a berth about half a mile upriver of the Thames Flood Barrier. She was loaded with approximately 3,300 tonne of sand and gravel. While trying to navigate through one of the barrier's spans in thick fog at 0648, she collided with one of its concrete piers. Although she was holed and started to take water immediately, she was moved astern and clear of the designated navigable span before coming ahead in an attempt to pass through an adjacent span. As she did so her bow sank and came to rest on the river bed on top of the housed barrier gate. The gate was effectively put out of commission until such time as the vessel was successfully refloated and the majority of her lost cargo removed.

At the time of the accident, the barrier's navigation and fog lights were switched on and functioning correctly. *Sand Kite* was equipped, manned and certificated in accordance with international, national and local regulations.

The investigation has concluded that the accident occurred as a result of a navigational error by the master. This was partly caused, and compounded by, poor bridge team management. The investigation also concluded that the Port of London Authority (PLA), through its officers at the Thames Barrier Navigation Centre (TBNC), did not exert sufficient control over the river traffic in the hour before the accident.

On 16 January 1998 MAIB made interim recommendations to the PLA concerning the operation of its Pilotage Exemption Certificate (PEC) system. This report makes further recommendations to the PLA concerning the operation of the TBNC, and to the owner of *Sand Kite* concerning bridge management and training on its vessels.