

Investigation into the sinking of fishing vessel on 25 March 2014

AQUARIUS II J307

By

Harbour Master's Department



1.0 Synopsis

On the morning of Tuesday 25 March 2014, the 9.10m long locally registered fishing vessel *AQUARIUS II* was fishing in the vicinity of the Danger Rock Passage. This is located approximately 1 nm south of Noirmont Point on Jersey's South Coast. At approximately 0640 the vessel was overwhelmed by an unexpectedly large wave. The wave crushed and destroyed the wheelhouse, and opened up the deck in this area and flooded the engine compartment. The vessel began to sink rapidly and took the crew down as they had become entangled with loose ropes on deck. They managed to swim free and board the life raft which had floated free and self-inflated by means of its hydrostatic release. Shortly afterwards they set off two hand flares. Debris from the sinking vessel, including the coastal flares pack surfaced adjacent to the life-raft. The crew managed to retrieve this pack. They set off a number of flares which were sighted by members of the public ashore and the crew of a rowing boat, who alerted the coastguard. The St Helier All Weather Lifeboat was dispatched to the scene and rescued the two crew members. They had been in the life raft for approximately 40 minutes and had both sustained injuries. The lifeboat returned to St Helier at 0740 where the two casualties were transferred to waiting ambulances.

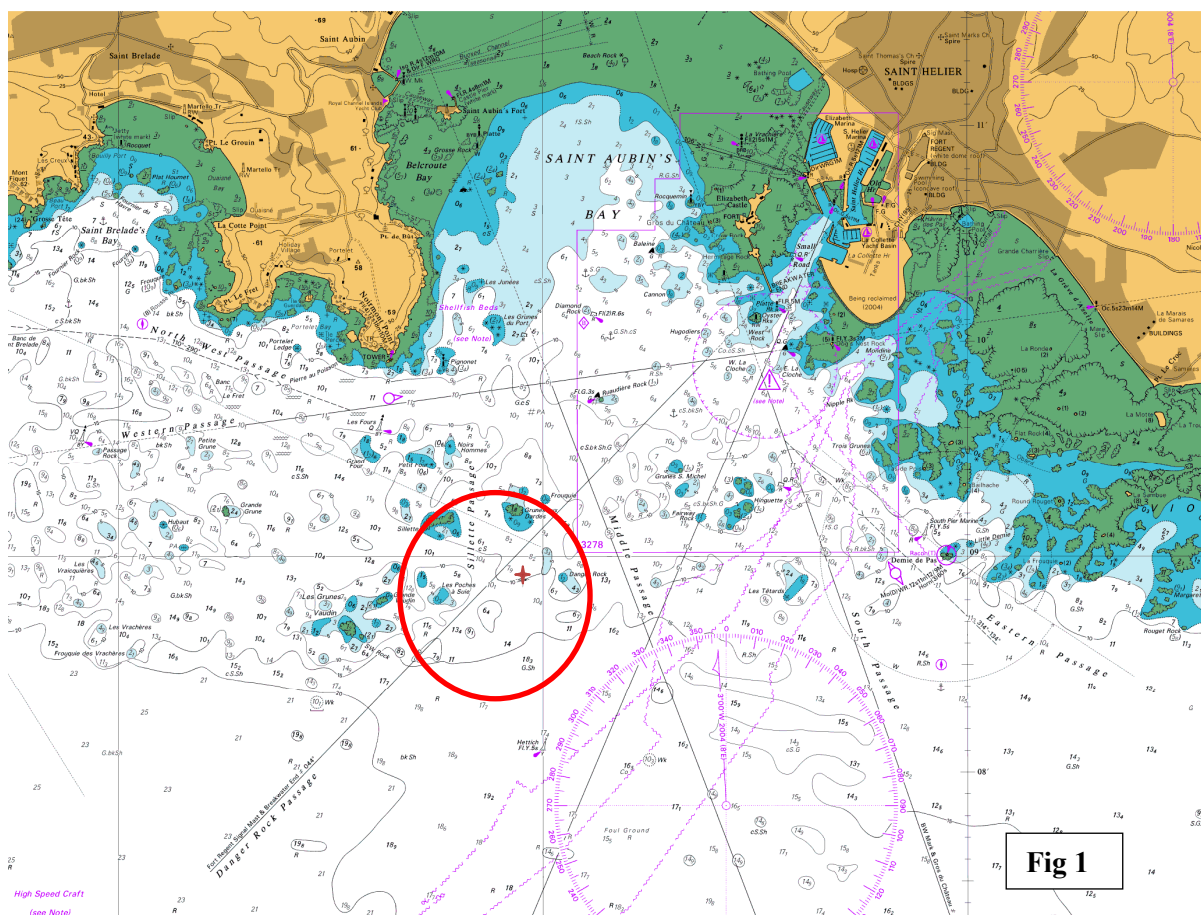


Figure 1 shows the position the life raft was retrieved from. The encircled area shows the general area of operation for *Aquarius II* at the time of the sinking.

2.0 The Vessel

2.1 The fishing vessel *Aquarius II* was built in 1983 of GRP construction and powered by a 90Kw Gardener diesel engine. It was first registered in Jersey in 2001 and has had 5 owners since that time. The current owner had purchased it 14 November 2012. It was inspected on or about the 16 January 2013 by the Assistant Registrar and pronounced in good order with all the required safety equipment present for operating with two crew.

2.2 The vessel is designed for potting and has an open deck with an offset wheelhouse to port. The engine space is located aft of the wheel house and accessed by means of a watertight hatch. A 1.0m lifebuoy is mounted on a bracket on the wheelhouse roof as is a two person life raft. There is a pedestal mounted winch to starboard of the wheelhouse. Integral with this unit are additional engine and helm controls. These allow the winch operator to control the direction and speed of the vessel leaving the second hand to stack or release the pots during normal operations.



2.3 The stainless steel device located just aft of the wheelhouse shown in the picture above (Fig 2) is no longer fitted. It is a whelk sorting unit, known as a Whelk Riddler, which was fitted when the vessel was operated by Heritage Shellfish Limited, the previous owners of this vessel. This unit had been removed when the vessel was sold leaving a clear area between the aft end of the wheelhouse and the engine hatch

2.4 The hull was divided into two watertight compartments. The forward bulkhead runs athwartships in line with the forward end of the wheelhouse structure. The main compartment, which houses the engine occupies the full length of the vessel aft of this bulkhead.

2.5 The after end of the vessel had been modified with an opening through which fishing pots could be shot.

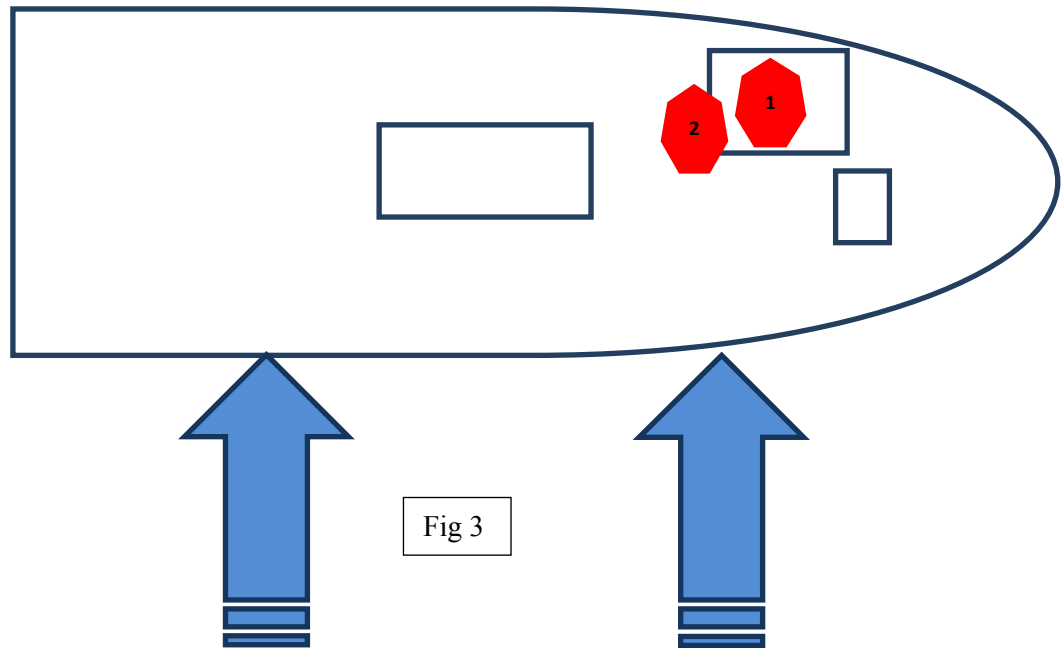
2.6 Although the vessel was built in 1983 we have no records of previous owners and modifications made to it prior to it being first registered in Jersey in 2001. At the time of it being registered the wheelhouse was located aft. At some time between 2007 and 2012 the wheelhouse was removed and a new structure built on the forward port side of the vessel. There have been no reported stability problems with this vessel and certainly the removal of the Whelking Riddler would have improved the stability in some way.

3.0 The Crew

3.1 The skipper, who is also the owner, is 38 year old Gideon Du Val. He holds valid Basic Sea Survival, Fire Fighting Certificates and First Aid Certificates. He has been fishing commercially for the immediate past 2 years and had previously been engaged in fishing commercially when in his late teens. In the interim period he had worked for a number of marine traders.

3.2 The second hand is Gilbert "Gibby" Gordon aged 25. He had recently qualified for the St Catherine's Lifeboat Crew and holds valid safety training certificates issued by RYA and RNLI. His RNLI certificates are STCW 95 Compliant. He has been fishing commercially for 7 years. He had recently purchased his own fishing vessel which he was doing up with a view to operating it himself.

4.0 The Accident



4.1 The vessel had left port at 0540 and headed directly for the area to the east of Sillette Rock and Les Grunes Vaudins Reef. They had already shot a first string and were half way through shooting the second string with approximately 15 pots remaining on deck. The vessel was on an approximate southerly heading in about 12m of water. Gibby Gordon was at the wheel in position 1 inside the small wheelhouse. Gideon was standing in position 2 in the open doorway of the wheelhouse standing clear as the pots were being shot.

4.2 Gibby Gordon was running the vessel slowly at about 20° to the swell which was observed to be 1.0 to 2.0m when he spotted a particularly large wave approaching from the starboard side. He tried to turn the vessel to starboard to meet this wave more bows on. The wave was much larger than those previously observed and the vessel was unable to turn in time. The wave swamped the vessel and destroyed the wheelhouse. Both crewmen were thrown overboard and the vessel began to sink rapidly.

4.4 The life raft mounted on the wheelhouse roof was inflated by the hydrostatic release and the two crewmen swam to it and climbed on board. Since both were injured it took a few minutes to sort themselves out and set off the first flares from the life raft pack. The sea anchor was initially deployed during the inflation process. An amount of debris floated to the surface including the two lifejackets and the coastal pack of flares. The crew managed to retrieve the coastal pack from the water and expended some of them to attract attention to their plight.

4.5 Gideon Du Val sustained minor cuts to his left arm. However Gibby Gordon, who was inside the wheelhouse when it was crushed, suffered a severe laceration to the inside of his right arm, and cuts to his forehead and left arm. He believed he sustained these injuries from breaking glass when the wheelhouse structure was destroyed. Neither crewmember was knocked unconscious, but both were suffering from hypothermia when they were picked up by the lifeboat. Gibby Gordon has suffered some blood loss.

4.6 The weather conditions at the time were benign with SW winds of Force 3 and a slight sea. However there was an underlying 1.5m swell which does build up in the area around Les Grunes Vaudin reef.

5.0 Findings

5.1 Both fishermen were reasonably experienced in these waters.

5.2 Both crewmembers held valid safety training certificates in compliance with the Shipping (Fishing Vessels - Safety Training) Order of 2004.

5.3 The vessel had been inspected 14 months previously and was in good order and fitted with all the necessary safety equipment as required by the Shipping (Fishing Vessels Safety Provisions) Order 2004.

5.4 The vessel was fitted with a two man life raft with a hydro static release. This is not a requirement for Jersey Registered fishing vessels of less than 12m in length.

5.5 The two crew members were not wearing life jackets at the time of the sinking. Had either suffered incapacitating injury, the outcome may have been very different. Advice on "Personal Flotation Devices for Commercial Fishermen" issued jointly by the Fishing Industry safety group (FISG) and the RNLI had only recently been circulated to local fishing associations and posted on the Port of Jersey website. Whilst this is not a legal requirement in Jersey or the UK, it is in the Republic of Ireland.

5.6 Although weather conditions were benign, there was a ground swell of between 1.5 and 2.0m. Local mariners are aware that SW swells do build up significantly in the area of the Sillette and Les Grunes Vaudin, particularly on low water. These reefs dry at between 1.8m and 4.0m (Sillette) Low water was at 06:48 at 3.67m. The sinking occurred at approximately 06:20. The "freak wave" described by the crew was more likely a statistically predictable wave which is not uncommon in this area at certain states of the tide.

5.7 Observers in the Coastguard Operations room, on the morning of 25th observed a number of large curling waves in the area of those reefs up to 0800 on that day. Similar large waves were observed at the same time on the following day when LW was at 08:25 at 3.43m

5.8 There were no reported stability problems with this type of vessel and the modifications made in removing the whelking equipment would have lowered the craft's centre of gravity.

6.0 Conclusions

6.1 The vessel was operating in an area where swells and over-falls are known to exist at certain states of the tide and, in particular, at low water.

6.2 Neither crew were wearing a lifejacket when they were thrown into the water. The life raft undoubtedly saved their lives, however, the outcome could have been very different if either had been incapacitated and highlights the importance of a Personal Flotation Device (PFD) being worn by commercial fishermen. Whilst this is not a legal requirement, it should be regarded as industry best practice

6.3 Both crew members had recently completed their statutory safety training courses and this knowledge and training contributed to their initial actions and survival.

7.0 Recommendations

7.1 Fishing vessels should avoid this area of the Danger Rock Passage at low water periods when there is a large W or SW ground swell because of the risk of encountering larger than average waves. The chart should be marked with the symbol for overfalls either side of the axis of the Danger Rock Passage between Grunes aux Dardes and SW Rock.

7.2 Fishermen should wear life jackets when at sea. Consideration should be given to making this mandatory as is the case in the Republic of Ireland. This incident should be used to reinforce the message recently circulated on the importance of commercial fishermen wearing a Personal Flotation Device (PFD).

2 April 2014