

MAIB

MARINE ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION BRANCH

Fishing Accident Report

Loss of fishing vessel *Ellie May*



Photograph courtesy of Davie Tait

On or about 12 August 2007, the steel hulled, 9 metre fishing vessel *Ellie May* sank while trawling in the Moray Firth, Scotland. The skipper, who was the only person on board, lost his life.

Ellie May was based in Fraserburgh and was equipped for trawling. She had a low freeboard and is reported as often having water on her deck while underway. The space under her main deck was open with no subdivisions from the stern to a bulkhead under the wheelhouse.

She had been much modified from new with the addition of a net drum and associated trawl gear. There is no evidence that her stability was assessed following any of the modifications made.

At the time of the accident, as he had done for several years during the summer months, the skipper was fishing for prawn, at night, from the ports of Burghead and Cromarty.

On this occasion, the skipper had left Burghead advising local fishermen that he was going to fish out of Cromarty for a few days. Thus, no alarm was raised until several days after the accident when the skipper had failed to contact his family as expected.

A major search was undertaken, but no trace of the vessel was found until another fisherman fouled his net on an obstruction which was found to be the wreck of *Ellie May*. The skipper's body was recovered from the wreck by police divers a few days later, and an MAIB ROV survey was undertaken to establish the likely causes of the vessel's loss.

The weather at the time of the accident was wind force 4 with a slight to moderate sea. Analysis of the evidence suggests that the vessel suffered rapid downflooding while trawling, causing her to heel to port and trim by the stern as she sank. This is supported by a number of facts and findings:

- No "Mayday" was heard
- Debris from the wheelhouse was found on the port side of the vessel's deck and in the port quarter
- Loose items of gear from the deck were observed to be lying on the seabed on the port side
- She was found with her trawl fully deployed, winch out of gear, engine in gear and apparently at full speed.
- A hatch cover for the under deck space was found off
- The skipper was reported as being concerned about water ingress and as having problems with the bilge pump for the space.

This tragic accident highlights the vital need for owners and skippers to be aware of the stability and ensure the watertight integrity of their vessels. It is yet another addition to the sad statistics for this sector of the industry, in which 70 lives and 50 vessels have been lost due to capsize or foundering since 1989.

SAFETY ISSUES

WATER INGRESS

The potentially fatal result of water entering and remaining below deck, especially in low freeboard vessels, is tragically demonstrated by this accident. The vessel was lost so suddenly that the skipper appears to have had no time to react to the situation before the vessel sank.

STABILITY

This accident highlights, yet again, that many owners and skippers of fishing vessels under 15m are unaware of how modifications and additional fixtures can adversely affect the stability of their vessels.

Skippers are strongly urged to:

- **Ensure that below deck spaces remain watertight and that the bilge pumps and bilge alarms on their vessels are properly maintained and operational at all times.**
- **Have the stability of their vessels checked by a properly qualified person and re-checked whenever alterations are made to the vessel.**

This accident was the subject of an MAIB Preliminary Examination, a summary of which can be found on MAIB's website at: www.maib.gov.uk

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