

SYNOPSIS



On the evening of 11 January 2000, the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) was informed that a fishing vessel was missing, feared lost, south-east of the Isle of Man. This was confirmed the following morning, and an investigation began immediately. The missing vessel was the 19.43m Scottish scallop dredger *Solway Harvester*.

Following a short period spent in harbour over the New Year holiday, *Solway Harvester* sailed to resume fishing on 6 January 2000. She returned briefly to the Isle of Whithorn early in the morning of 10 January to land her catch before sailing, once again, for the scallop beds north of Wales. By 1800 the next day, she had sunk in a position south-east of the Isle of Man. The weather was very bad and her crew of seven drowned.

Subsequent events included a search for the wreck, an underwater survey, the recovery of the bodies by the Isle of Man authorities and, eventually, the salvage of the vessel. MAIB inspectors carried out extensive interviews, a very detailed examination of the wreck and a range of model tests.

Although the wreck showed signs of damage, the investigation was able to explain the reason for this from the information gathered during the underwater survey and the forensic examination of the hull. The flattened stem was found to have been caused by the seabed when she hit it bow down and nearly inverted. There was compelling evidence that she had capsized to starboard and had inverted before sinking.

There was no sign whatsoever of a collision.

The evidence gathered during the investigation indicated *Solway Harvester* began to take water into her fish room through open ice scuttles while she was underway during the late afternoon of 11 January 2000. She was, at that time, heading for shelter in the lee of the Isle of Man. It was a foul night, and a strong south-westerly wind was blowing. She stopped and, with the way off her, came beam to sea and started to roll heavily. The floodwater in the fish room reduced her stability to such an extent that she became vulnerable to a capsize. The heavy rolling in large waves caused her cargo of bagged scallops and loose gear to shift and this, together with the reduced stability, caused her to capsize at about 1745.

The investigation found that her bilge alarm was not functioning prior to the accident. Without this, it is probable that those on board were unaware she was taking water into the fish room until, probably, a few minutes before the accident. It also found that the bilge pumping arrangements were not working as intended.

With about 6 to 9 tonnes of water in her fish room, evidence of a shift in weight on board, the failure of her watertight integrity and the effects of heavy rolling meant she lost her stability. A capsizing was inevitable.

During the trial in the Isle of Man, an alternative theory was put forward by the defence. This suggested that *Solway Harvester* could have capsized because the scallop bags, stowed in her fish room, shifted without the presence of water. This dry capsizing scenario has been carefully evaluated, but is not considered sustainable by the MAIB; it would not, in any case, affect the conclusions or recommendations of this investigation.



Solway Harvester (photograph courtesy of Peter Brady)