

Potential problems

Luck — rather than good management — has probably spared Christchurch a repeat disaster on the scale of the Ballantyne's fire.

The city's buildings engineer, Bryan Bluck, says by-laws relating to fire prevention in old buildings are not much more effective now than they were in 1947.

After the Ballantyne's fire, tougher regulations were introduced to cover the construction of new buildings, and provision of fire escapes.

But the by-laws were not made retrospective. Most of the buildings constructed before introduction of the 1963 standard by-law (an amended version of which is still in force today) are exempt.

Bryan Bluck says redevelopment has helped. Seventy per cent of the floor space in central Christchurch has been replaced in the last 40 years, and many buildings similar to the old Ballantyne's store have been pulled down.

Most modern buildings are better designed, and have sprinkler systems.

Christchurch's senior fire safety officer, John Sinclair, says

it is unlikely that a fire the size of the Ballantyne's blaze would occur in a shop built to today's by-law requirements.

Sprinklers, emergency lighting and fire alarms are required in all new shops larger than 1000 square metres. Evacuation schemes have to be designed for shops larger than 400 square metres, and evacuation drills have to be held every six months.

But he agrees there is a potential problem with older buildings.

"A Ballantyne's fire in a pre-1963 building is still quite a possibility... The Ballantyne's (type of buildings) of the 1940s still exist because there is no requirement to upgrade them."

Bryan Bluck says the 1963 by-laws are badly written, archaic and ambiguous.

"It is a shocking legal document, now on its eighteenth amendment. It would need another 80 (amendments) until we have a decent legal document."

The Christchurch City Council has lobbied unsuccessfully for what it sees as necessary changes to the regulations.

"For some reason fire evokes all sorts of emotions on (standards) committees, and they can't make any progress."

Bryan Bluck says policing of fire safety by-laws is a joke. Many managers act responsibly, but others are cavalier. Local authorities have few powers to make people adopt proper house-keeping.

"I could take you to a restaurant where the exitway is cluttered with food cases and empty boxes from the kitchen. If it was in a place like New York, he (the owner) would be closed down."

He says courts tend to take the view that local authorities are picking on people.

"Our prime concern is people safety. Yet the by-laws do not include maintenance and house-keeping provisions which allow us to make sure egress (exit) ways are not blocked by apple boxes. We are toothless."

The most significant advancement since the Ballantyne's disaster, apart from the widespread use of sprinklers, is the increased efficiency of the fire service.

The 1947 fire led to a reorganisation of the service, with big improvements in equipment, communications, training and staffing.

Any fire in the central city is now attended by at least two pumps, a snorkel (hydraulically-raised platform), a turntable ladder and an emergency tender.

Debate

There was extensive debate about the possibility of an electrical fault or a carelessly discarded match or cigarette causing the fire.

The commission found it impossible, in view of the expert evidence, to determine whether an electrical fault was the cause of the fire with any degree of certainty. It also found there was no evidence to support any suggestion that the fire may have originated from cigarette smoking.

The findings of the commission resulted in a general overhaul of statutory fire safeguards in New Zealand.

The commission eventually recommended:

- That the Standards Institute's Means of Egress Code be made compulsory throughout New Zealand.
- The immediate installation of fire prevention devices and alarms in large buildings.
- That evacuation drills be made compulsory.
- That the New Zealand Standards Institute be given facilities to complete its Fire Prevention Bylaw and that it be made to apply throughout New Zealand within three months of its coming into force.
- That the Fire Brigade be instituted as one service throughout New Zealand and be brought under the control of commissioners.

- The commission recommended a scheme of instruction, examination, classification, and promotion be instituted for firemen and officers, and that a superannuation scheme be set up for members of brigades



Mr Paul Molineux, at present Director of the Security Intelligence Service, who, as a young law clerk in 1947, helped rescue people from the burning building.

and their salaries adjusted.

But the most important result was the general heightening of fire consciousness in New Zealand.

The commission found that there did not exist, either in the lay mind or the professional mind in New Zealand generally, an adequate knowledge and understanding of fire-precaution principles.

The Press, Nov 18, 1987. p.21.

On the latter date Mr Watson's opening address was devastating. He pointed out that employees, with several notable exceptions, had quite failed to appreciate their danger. He cited cases of some who had seen smoke, had become aware that there was fire, and had calmly continued to their comfortable afternoon tea venue before returning to their respective departments; and of others who, being warned to leave the premises by their respective foremen or forewomen, had failed to do so for a considerable time, and in some cases had returned to their quarters to recover possessions rendered trivial by the developing circumstances. Some of the victims had been seen to be standing at windows, seemingly unaware of the horror that was even then besieging them.

He drew attention to and criticised the delay in calling the Fire Brigade, to the fact that the only fire escape was blocked so early by smoke, to the absence of alarm bells within the building and of any sprinkler system and of any co-ordinated evacuation methods. He then referred to many of those sequences of events which have already been described in this book.

One of the first witnesses was a Mr Keith Owen Smith, who had been the only person in the cellar prior to the discovery of the fire. Because he had left the premises to visit a nearby shop for a talk and a smoke, he was questioned extensively. His interrogation included reference to the deception of his employer by his act and its purpose, and to the fact that he had ignored the arrival of the fire engines in order to prolong his social engagement. He was accused by legal counsel of leaving his cellar post unprotected. That he had left the cellar was certainly true, but Mr Smith had never been employed to protect the cellar. There is no doubt that if he had remained in the cellar the fire would have been discovered much earlier. He told the Commission that, although he was a smoker, he would never have smoked in the cellar because of the amount of combustible material which was stored in it, and further credibility is added to his statement by his action in leaving the cellar in order to smoke a cigarette.

Walker, G. G. The Ballantynes' fire disaster. Gordon G. Walker, 1983. pp. 43-44.