

2. Ballantynes fire.

Introduction; Christchurch Fire Brigade.

At around 3.35 p.m. in the afternoon, an employee of the company noticed smoke drifting up the stairs from a cellar in the building. He went to investigate and encountered hot smoke in a section of the basement. There were no signs of flame, nor could he hear the sound of burning. Returning to the ground floor to get a fire extinguisher, he asked for the Fire Brigade to be called, and then returned to the cellar.

At the Central Fire Station in Lichfield Street an exchange telephone call was received at 3.46 p.m., the female voice on the telephone stating "I was told to notify you that there is a fire in the cellar of Ballantynes."

The general alarm sounded and two pumping appliances and the salvage van turned out. The Tilling-Stevens 28-metre extension ladder, which would normally have responded to a call in the high-value area of the city was held back on this occasion. This was decided by the Duty Officer because the Officer in Charge of the appliance was off station, and also because the appliances were responding to a cellar fire.

The first appliance (No. 11, Ford V8) had proceeded three blocks down Lichfield Street to check this entrance to the premises, but finding no sign of fire, the appliance moved around into Colombo Street and pulled up just south of the buildings. Smoke was seen coming from an enclosed alleyway and over the verandah of Congreve's Building, the most southerly of the Ballantyne buildings fronting Colombo Street. The other two appliances arrived shortly afterwards (No. 1, Dennis and No. 3, Dennis salvage van), having come via High and Cashel Streets.

A delivery was run from No 11 into the alleyway and one man donned a Roberts breathing apparatus set and made entry to find the seat of the fire. The Officer in Charge of this appliance and the Officer in Charge of the incident were both present in the alleyway during this early effort to locate the fire.

At the time, Ballantyne's premises comprised eight buildings covering a one-acre site in the business heart of the city. The buildings were constructed of brick, with wooden floors on wooden and unprotected rolled steel joists (R.S.J.). The three distinct buildings fronting Colombo and Cashel Streets had stone facades and had been constructed at different times. As the business had expanded, access was provided by means of openings from one building to another.

Congreve's Building, the most southerly in Colombo Street, was of three floors and it was in the basement of this building that the fire is believed to have started.

Goodman's Building, situated next door, on the north side, was of four floors with a basement, and Pratt's Building, of three floors, also with a basement, extended to the corner of, and around into Cashel Street.

While the Brigade had been endeavouring to find and localise the cellar fire, the outbreak had been quietly spreading by means of two lift shafts and super-heated gases and smoke had been rising to upper floors. At about 4 p.m., the fire "flashed over" and the buildings erupted in a mass of flame, trapping some staff on upper floors.

The Tilling-Stevens ladder turned out at 3.59 p.m. on the return to the Station of the Officer in Charge of the vehicle.

Third Officer J. Burrows, the Officer in Charge at the fire, had sent a fireman to find a telephone and transmit a "Brigade Call". This man had difficulty making contact with the station as many Christchurch people were by now also calling in about the fire. The fireman's call was received at 4 p.m. when a further appliance was turned out from Central, and the alarms were sounded at the suburban stations.

Appliances raced to the scene from Sydenham, St Albans, New Brighton, Sumner, Belfast and Islington Freezing Works. An appliance was dispatched from Wigram Air Force Base and two from Burnham Military Camp. The Woolston appliance and one Army machine stood by at the Central Station to cope with any further calls.

Meanwhile the fire had grown to tremendous proportions, with flames leaping 30 metres above the building and sending a huge column of smoke into the sky.

Two young female employees had jumped through the smoke and flames from a second floor window in Pratt's Building in Colombo Street. Both were injured when they landed on the verandah and were lowered into a jumping sheet by firemen. Another woman also jumped from a second floor window in Cashel Street, sustaining serious injuries from which she died at 7.45 p.m. that evening.

Mr Kenneth Ballantyne, joint managing director of the company, had to be helped down a carpenters ladder to the verandah from a second-floor window.

The 9-metre Ajax ladders carried on the first two appliances to arrive at the scene were not long enough to rescue girls trapped in the millinery workroom on the fourth floor of Goodman's Building had also been unsuccessful because of a shortfall in ladder length.

On this occasion, the ladder was manhandled on to the top of the verandah but still could not reach the third floor. Eventually it caught alight and collapsed into the flames.

When the Tilling-Stevens ladder arrived on the scene it was not used for rescue but set up as a water tower in Cashel Street, near the Colombo Street corner. Both streets were a maze of overhead tramway and electrical wiring which restricted access to upper floors from the roadway.

As more appliances arrived, hose lines were got to work from surrounding streets until thirty jets were pouring water on to the flames. At the height of the fire, 231 men were involved. The fire was not surrounded and brought under control until about 5.30 p.m. Crews worked for hours to cool the buildings and make entry to start the recovery of bodies from the scene.

A shocked silence hung over the city as the death toll steadily mounted to a horrifying 41.

The fact that a fire could race through one of the city's biggest department stores, trapping staff, during a normal working afternoon, with the Fire Brigade in attendance, created an aura of shock and apprehension throughout the country.

Ironically this was the second occasion a building had been gutted on this site. In 1888, Hobday's two-storey building on the corner of Cashel and Colombo Streets was destroyed, the same site occupied by Pratt's Building at the time of the 1947 fire. By coincidence, the Fire Brigade had also controlled a serious basement fire in E. C. Reece's building next door in 1917, confining the damage to the basement area.

A civic funeral service was held in the Christchurch Anglican Cathedral on November 23, followed by a mass burial service at the Ruru Lawn Cemetery. Thousands of citizens attended the service in the Square, paid their last respects along the route, or visited the cemetery itself. Army station wagons were used to transport the caskets, while thirteen Army trucks carried the many wreaths and tokens of respect.

In 1948, the Government appointed a Royal Commission to investigate all aspects of the fire. The Commission comprised Sir Harold Johnston K.C. (retired Supreme Court Judge) Chairman, Mr A. W. Croskery (President of the Federation of Labour), Mr A. J. Dickson (Auckland City Engineer) and Mr C. A. Woolley (Superintendent, Wellington Fire Brigade). It sat for 65 days hearing 186 witnesses whose evidence occupied 3527 pages.

When the Commission brought down its recommendations in August, certain points related to the upgrading of Brigade equipment which the Fire Board acted upon immediately. Other areas concerned change to the Fire Service generally, some of which was not finally implemented until the nationalisation of the Service in 1976.

Phillips, A.A. Always ready.

New Zealand Fire Service, 1985. pp.77