

LOSS PUT AT
£500,000

Demolition of Walls
Probable

COLOMBO STREET
ROPED OFF

A conservative estimate of the actual fire damage to buildings and stock was £500,000, the stock alone being valued at more than £300,000. Only the workroom part of the building in Colombo street was owned by J. Ballantyne and Company, Ltd., the rest being leased from the Pratt estate.

Whether the Colombo and Cashel street frontages of the building will have to be pulled down for safety will be determined this morning. The central part of the three sections in Colombo street had a lean of one foot and a half towards the street last night and the building on Cashel street also had a pronounced lean.

Colombo street was roped off and guarded throughout the night and it will remain blocked to traffic until C. S. Luney and Company decide this morning on demolition or strengthening. The anchoring of the frontage into the shell of the building will begin at 7 o'clock and only a detailed inspection will decide whether the lofty walls will have to be pulled down.

The dangerous lean of the Colombo street frontage was quickly reported within an hour by Cr. J. E. Tait, himself a builder and a stonework expert, to the City Engineer (Mr. E. Somers), and later consultations took place with Mr. Luney on the plans to be adopted this morning to determine the safety of the building.

The three electrical circuits connected to the Lichfield sub-station were disconnected when the fire broke out, the blocks affected being Colombo street from Lichfield to Hereford streets, King's lane in Cashel street to Colombo street, and Anderson's engineering works. After getting the approval of the Fire Brigade, the M.E.D. switched on the supply to the blocks at 7.48 p.m.

The Press, Nov 19, 1947. p.7.

Strict Control for Traffic in City

Strict supervision of traffic in the area affected by the fire will be maintained until the restoration of the lights at the intersection of Colombo and Cashel Streets makes possible the re-establishment of a normal flow. Since the outbreak traffic has not been allowed in Cashel Street between Oxford Terrace and High Street, nor in Colombo Street between Hereford and Lichfield Streets.

As diversion of transport is necessary, double-banked parking in Hereford and Lichfield Streets, and in Manchester Street between Armagh Street and Moorhouse Avenue, will be strictly prohibited.

The Star-Sun, Nov 19, 1947. p.1.

GRIM JOB FOR SEARCHERS IN GUTTED STORE

THE grim task of searching for the remains of the victims of the fire was resumed early this morning. It was a pitiful task, and the members of the Police Force, the Fire Brigade, and the Army, who undertook it, worked in purposeful silence. Green tarpaulins were kept handy to shroud the recovered bodies before they were moved to the morgue.

Work was concentrated on the Colombo Street frontage first of all, and not very far in from the windows the men found five bodies early in their search. They were all charred beyond recognition. Later, portions of bodies were found, and these were also placed reverently in the tarpaulins.

At this stage, fairly well into the morning now, the labour squads had not worked deep back into the building, and most of them considered that further bodies awaited discovery when they could venture further in. It was hard, back-breaking work, for progress was made slow by the tangled mass of charred timbers, twisted and blackened roofing iron, water-soaked cinders to a depth of up to three feet, and the almost unrecognisable remnants of merchandise.

On several occasions the men were working in sectors where fire was still smouldering and they had to desist while a hose was turned on the place. There was always the danger of falling timber and iron, but the Army took steps to minimise this risk by bringing in a supply of steel helmets, and also working gloves, from Burnham. Several of the men suffered minor cuts, but members of the St John Ambulance Brigade were standing by, as they had done right through the night, to give assistance.

Occasionally coins were picked up by the searchers. Sometimes personal possessions were found, for example, a spectacle case. Unfortunately, this last, well blackened, carried no marks by which its owner could be identified. The fact that charred office records were found where one of the squads was working this morning suggested that the bodies they removed might be those of members of the office staff.

Many Inquiries

Barriers well down Colombo and Cashel Streets kept members of the public back, but police and soldiers who were on guard there were besieged by anxious inquiries from relatives and friends of the missing. They were gently informed that identification of the bodies would be extremely difficult.

Through the cold hours of the night, police, firemen, Army personnel, and volunteers stood by, and continued the work of directing the

water on to stubborn sections where flames still showed or where hot embers smouldered.

Salvation Army Praised

No praise can be too high for the members of the Salvation Army, who last night and again this morning distributed hot tea and food to the workers. And the Army also played its part in this direction. Meals were provided at Poulsen Street for any who required them, and at 3 a.m. to-day a hot meal was served to the hundred helpers. Lieutenant-Colonel F. L. Davis, who was in charge of the Army effort, travelled to Burnham and arranged for a hot mid-day meal to be brought in to those who were still working in the fire area.

Police, Army, and Fire Brigade officers combined to-day in praise of all who had assisted. Some of the volunteers, soaked through and almost asleep on their feet, had to be forced to stop and go somewhere to sleep. Members of other retail firms in the city were prominent in this regard, as well as men of H.M.N.Z.S. Bellona, who were taken for a well-deserved meal at Poulsen Street after their gallant work.

The mute mourners behind the barriers seemed reluctant to move to-day while there was hope of any news, even although they feared it would be bad news.

"It breaks my heart to approach those barriers and see the women's faces," said one soldier who had been working at top pressure inside the wrecked building.

The Star-Sun, Nov 19, 1947. p.3.