

A city in mourning after fire disaster

By GEOFF MEIN

Cause a mystery

The cause of the Ballantyne's fire remains a mystery. Two main theories were advanced: that a match or burning cigarette was carelessly thrown down, setting fire to material in the basement; or that an electric cable which ran from the first floor into and through the basement was defective.

A Royal Commission set up to investigate the fire found no conclusive evidence to support either theory.

It accepted Keith Smith's claim that he saw no sign of fire when he left the basement after afternoon tea, and that he never smoked on the premises.

The commission did, however, find that several factors helped the fire spread.

Most of the floors were made of timber. Ceilings and wall linings were made of soft fibreboard, roofs were timber-framed, often without fire-stops. There were huge unprotected openings in the brick walls between the various buildings, and most of the stairways and lifts were not enclosed.

The commission found that Ballantyne's management and the fire brigade did not take all steps reasonably possible to warn the staff and public of the fire.

The late call to the fire brigade allowed flammable gases to accumulate, and the brigade failed to take effective action to attack the fire in the first 15 minutes after its arrival.

It was concluded that attempts made to rescue people trapped in the building suffered from lack of competent leadership.

too late. There was a lot of smoke at the beginning, but most of the workers, even after they heard the fire sirens, thought it was a minor fire in another part of the building, or even in a neighbouring store.

Several employees took fire extinguishers and went in search of the seat of the fire. They were baffled by the absence of flames, and their efforts were hampered by smoke clouds billowing through almost every department. Failure of the lights added to their confusion.

Staff in some departments on the second and third floors continued working, oblivious to the danger rising from below.

Eyewitnesses saw female employees leaning out of windows, watching the smoke coming from other departments.

Many were seen to scream and run back as the flames reached the rooms in which they were working.

Lorna Mott was in the shirt workroom on the third floor when she heard the fire engines. She discovered the fire escape full of smoke, and rushed to warn her workmates.

As she left the building, the power failed. She noticed the company secretary, William Hudson, disappearing into smoke to search for other staff members. He did not live to tell his story.

room later told reporters that Mrs Mott's warning had saved their lives.

The fire swept with amazing swiftness through the big block. Within 20 minutes, it was ablaze from top to bottom.

Eight young women in the millinery workroom were ordered to follow Lola Crew along a passage. By the time she reached the fire escape, only one was still behind her. The others had collapsed, overcome by the smoke.

The scene outside the building was summed up by Gordon Walker in his book recalling what was to become Christchurch's blackest day.

"The street was by now a bedlam of noise, generated by the sounds from the fire, the screams of trapped and doomed victims, and hysterical advice and exhortations from a public, some of whose workmates were still caught in the flaming cauldron..."

An unsuccessful attempt to rescue women trapped on the top floor was made by a fireman who climbed a ladder against the Cashel Street frontage of the building. He was forced to abandon the attempt when the ladder caught fire. The women disappeared into the smoke and flames.

Other firemen made frantic



Clouds of smoke hundreds of metres high carried masses of burning material into the easterly breeze; pieces of burnt paper were found as far away as Riccarton Racecourse.

Men from factories, shops and offices in the central city joined the firemen manning hoses in the streets. Their numbers were boosted by soldiers, airmen and visiting sailors, and all but two of the policemen on duty at the central police station.

Crowds surged down Cashel and Colombo Streets to within 30 metres of the intersection before being driven back by the heat.

Fire engines arriving in Cashel Street were continually impeded by the anxious throngs; at one stage, when part of the building was expected to collapse, a hose had to be turned on the crowd to drive them back.

By 4.15 p.m., flames were soaring more than 30m above the building. The roar of the fire and hiss of water was punctuated by the crash of falling iron and girders, and the explosion of large plate glass cracking or caving in.

Officers of the Salvation Army, carrying urns of tea and piles of sandwiches, quietly picked their way through the tangle of hoses and pools of water.

Against a fiery backdrop of crimson and gold, a window display, featuring a large doll and poster of Santa Claus, stood out like an island of immortality. The doll was eventually recovered.

Others were not so lucky, as "The Press" reported:

"The fear that death had stalked along with the flames was substantiated an hour and three-quarters after the fire had broken out, when three bodies, apparently having dropped from upper floors, were seen in what was the furniture section display window..."

"The magnitude of the disaster struck the fire fighters when they entered the main entrance shortly after 6 p.m. Bodies were lying in the smouldering ruins, and up on the steel rafters two bodies were hanging.

"For more than an hour, firemen, policemen and volunteer workers carried from the ruins the remains of charred bodies wrapped in tarpaulins, and two hearses ran a service to the morgue. The... public, happily, were roped off... and saw nothing of the terrible recovery work."

attempts to place ladders against the top storey windows where people were still trapped, but they were beaten back by fierce gusts of smoke and terrific heat.

Bystanders watched in horror as three women jumped from windows on the second and third floors. Two escaped serious injury; the third died in hospital.

Moments later, a director of the firm, Ken Ballantyne, appeared on a balcony round a window on the top floor. He swayed for several minutes, amid surging flames, before a fireman reached him. Loud applause and cheering greeted the rescue. He was one of the last people to leave the building alive.

Several employees later praised Ken Ballantyne, who refused to leave the building when he could have done so safely. He insisted on trying to round up staff in the office part of the building.

After being taken to hospital, he returned to the fire to help. He collapsed again and was taken home, suffering from severe shock.

Reporters from "The Press" described the drama unfolding in the streets:

"For those in neighbouring buildings who heard the screams of women and saw them moving frantically about in the inferno, these minutes will for ever remain seared on their memories. Spectators of fearful panic, with a tragically inevitable end, they were helpless. Any hope of happy rescue of other than those who risked life by jumping — three only took the leap — or climbing to safety, were gone by the time the fire brigade arrived.

"There was none of the excitement that often attracts crowds to a big blaze. On all sides there were expressions of horror and concern for the occupants of the building, rather than comment on the magnitude of the blaze."

By 4 p.m., a huge plume of brown smoke had attracted thousands into neighbouring streets. Business was brought to a standstill in shops and offices within two blocks of the fire.



At Colombo and Cashel.

Employees of the shirt work-