

**Ballantyne's Fire**

UNDERWENT  
TERRIBLE OP  
es licking out

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FROM DAMAGED BY DANGER  
with unsearched parts of the building deemed unsafe if it  
had been recovered of Ballantyne's ruins of Ballantyne's

## 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*

# 29 KNOWN DEAD

## BALLANTYNE'S BUILDING DESTROYED

### 20 Missing; All Bodies Not Yet Recovered

#### EMPLOYEES TRAPPED IN BLAZE

In one of the greatest fire tragedies in the history of New Zealand, 28 perished, one died from injuries, and 20 other persons, including a baby, were officially reported missing. The disaster occurred when fire, in one hour, swept yesterday afternoon through the one-acre block of the three-storey drapery store of J. Ballantyne and Company, Ltd. Another four persons were reported as "doubtful," the possibility being held that they may not have heard the broadcast call to report in the evening.

The fullness of the tragedy will probably not be known for several days, but recovery operations were suspended at nightfall with the knowledge that other bodies were lying in the smouldering shell. The bodies recovered so far were taken from the ruins inside the main entrance and in a part of the Colombo street frontage. With a greater part of the debris yet to be searched, remains of bodies were visible in the ruins, hanging from rafters and lying on the top of a fire escape.

Of the staff of 300 employed by the firm, the exact number missing last night was not known, and there is a possibility that an unknown number of customers may also have been trapped in the flames.

Only the danger of the collapse of the Oamaru stone walls of the store caused the recovery work to be suspended, and it will not be resumed until the shell is made safe or demolished. The death roll must, therefore, be indefinite until a check is made on every person who was known to have been in the building or who was possibly in the building.

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

## ACRE OF STORE DESTROYED

### Fierce And Swift Fire

#### DISASTER WATCHED BY THOUSANDS

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

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#### Fire Debris Falls Far from Scene

With smoke rising a mile into the air, masses of debris were carried over the southern and western parts of the city from the fire. Pieces of tarred roofing felt fell in Ngahere Street, Riccarton.

Strangest of all was an unscorched Ballantyne's docket which fluttered into the garden of a house in Puma Street, in the Riccarton State housing block a mile and a half from the fire. Fragments of charred paper fell at Riccarton racecourse.

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*The Star-Sun, Nov 19, 1947. p.4.*

## WOMAN'S FATAL INJURIES

### JUMP FROM THIRD STOREY

#### TWO HAVE LUCKY ESCAPE

Two of the three office employees who jumped from third storey windows on Colombo street had fortunate escapes from serious injury, and the Christchurch Hospital last night reported that their condition was satisfactory. The third woman was seriously injured, and died in the hospital at 7.45 p.m. She was:

Mrs Violet May Coady (or Coady), address unknown.

The injured women were:—

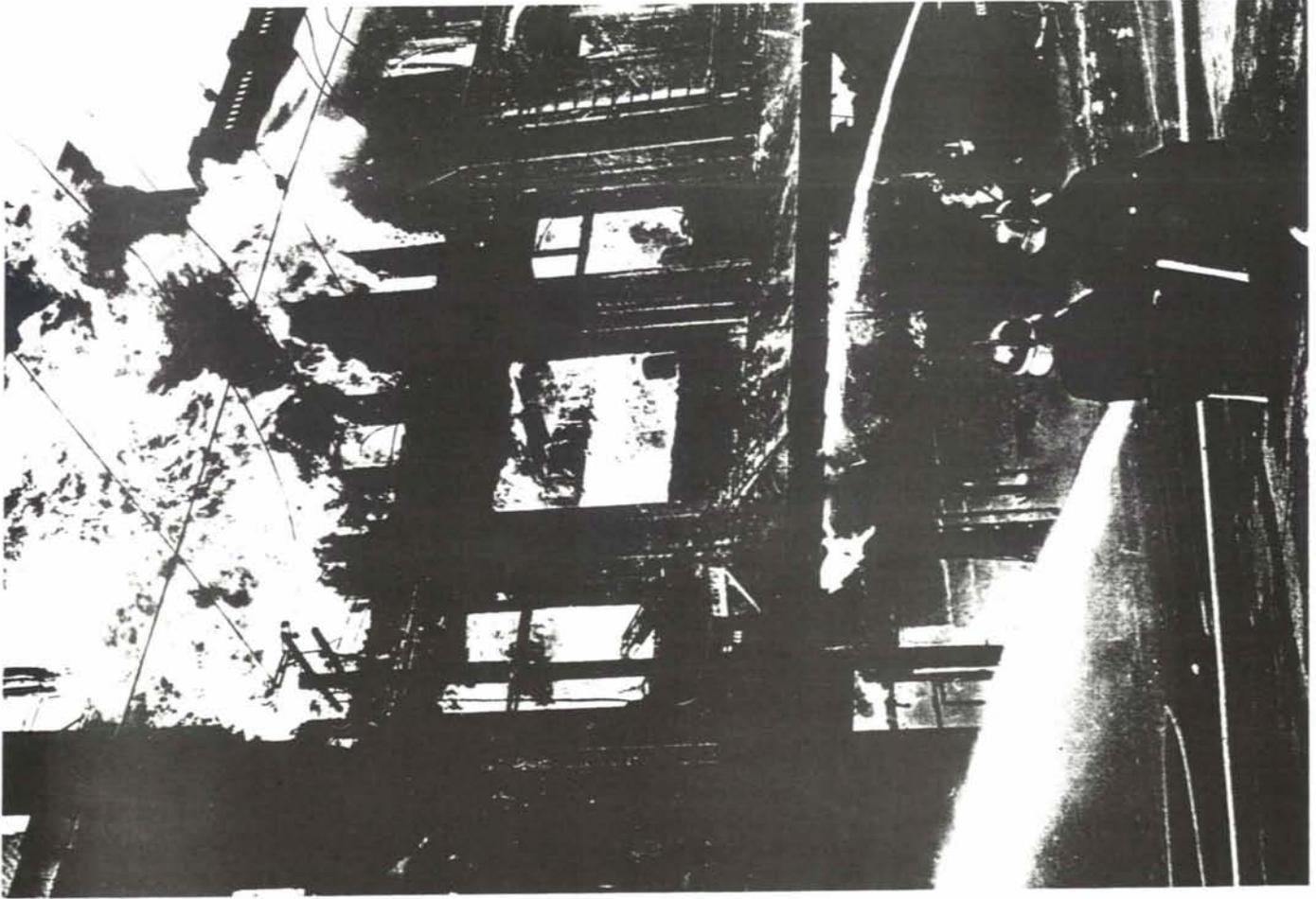
Mrs Nancy Gladys Nash, aged 25, of 71 Conway street, Spreydon.

Miss Lois M. Kennedy, aged 20, of 4 Swanns road, Richmond.

Miss Kennedy's fiance, who works near Ballantynes, ran to the building when he heard that a fire had broken out, and was in time to help firemen lift Miss Kennedy from the veranda on to which she jumped. Mrs Nash was a close friend of Miss Kennedy, and the two decided to jump when they found that all exits from the administrative offices were blocked by flames.

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

4. Ballantynes fire.



A dramatic scene as firemen direct their jets on the furniture department.  
N.Z. Weekly News, Nov 26, 1947.



Battling with the flames: tense firefighters in action.  
N.Z. Weekly News, Nov 26, 1947.

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.*

## Police Carry On Search to Find Victims

WITH forty-seven people missing, believed dead, two injured, and property loss of more than £500,000, disaster struck with incredible swiftness late yesterday afternoon to destroy Ballantyne's entire store on the corner of Cashel and Colombo Streets.

It was the city's greatest tragedy. Striking like wild-fire, the flames were right through the acre block within fifteen minutes of the alarm at 3.46 p.m., trapping staff and shoppers at the busiest time of the day.

Piteous scenes were witnessed as people jumped from upper floor windows, or appeared, briefly, only to fall back into the flames.

A gigantic maelstrom of flame leaped 300 feet into the air for more than half an hour, punctuated with violent, surging outbursts as parts of the roof and floors fell in. Flames spouted from windows all round the block and sealed the way of escape for many.

The full degree of the disaster was not realised until towards 6 p.m. when a party of police was able to enter the gutted building from Colombo Street and seek the remains of several victims. After dark, until operations were suspended at 8.30, the gruesome task of recovering the bodies continued.

Again this morning, parties were at work, particularly in the south-east corner of the building, where many bodies were intermingled with debris from the upper floors.

After this debris had been cleared, many more remains were found near the main entrance to the shop, and about the entrance half-way down the Colombo Street frontage.

No one was able to account for the amazing rapidity with which the flames engulfed the building.

Although he would not hazard a guess on the origin of the fire this morning, the Superintendent of the Christchurch Fire Brigade (Mr A. Morrison) said that it appeared to him to have started in the cellar or basement.

Deep as the tragedy was one aspect made it even more so. Two of the missing persons, Miss J. M. Lloyd, the youngest daughter of Mr and Mrs S. C. Lloyd, of Papanui, and Mr W. S. McKibbin, only son of Mr and Mrs V. J. McKibbin, of Cashmere, had intended to announce their engagement last night.

Those classified in the official list as doubtful casualties had not been transferred to the main list of missing persons this afternoon, but no word had been obtained of their whereabouts, and it was considered possible that they also were among the victims.

The remains of two, or possibly three persons were found about the centre of the building this afternoon. This brings the total of known dead up to thirty-six or thirty-seven.

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

## LAST SURVIVOR OF FIRE UNDERWENT TERRIBLE ORDEAL

Seared by flames licking out from the blazing cauldron behind him, the last man to escape from the third storey at Ballantyne's yesterday had two hoses played on him to protect him until a ladder could be set up. His rescue brought a cheer from spectators massed in Colombo Street, who had earlier seen two girls escape from the same floor.

Describing the scene as "ghastly," Mr C. D. W. L. Sheppard said that the man who endured the ordeal was Mr Kenneth Ballantyne, a director of the firm. Of the girls who escaped, one fell or jumped to the verandah above the show windows. The other, heeding the urgent calls of the firemen, waited for a ladder.

Speaking of the startling suddenness with which an apparently minor outbreak became a blaze in a matter of minutes, both Mr L. W. Payne, a city business man, of Mersey Street, and Mrs J. Murphy, of Leinster Road, who was about to enter the building, said that girls in the top storey obviously had no idea of their danger.

"They seemed to be taking only a casual interest," said Mr Payne. "Then the smoke, billowing out from below, practically hid them, and they screamed 'Help!' and waved their handkerchiefs."

Up to that time Mrs Murphy thought that smoke coming out of an upper window was merely from a machine working there, but she found the door of the shop shut and could not enter.

### Fall To Verandah

Climbing on to the window ledge, the two girls, screaming for help, apparently did not hear the shouts of firemen rushing to hoist a ladder to them. One either jumped, or fell, to the roof of the verandah above the show windows.

"She fell behind the ridge of the verandah," said Mr Payne, "and only her legs were visible. A civilian went up a ladder and dropped her to people on the road."

This girl appeared to be severely injured, and was one of those removed by an ambulance, said Mr Sheppard.

The other girl stayed where she

was, and firemen played hoses on her until a ladder was placed in position for her to escape.

Then there was a groan from the crowd when a man was seen waving his handkerchief through the smoke almost obscuring a third-storey window. In searing heat, which could be felt fifty yards away, firemen charged across the street, placed a ladder up to the verandah, and swarmed up it to place a second ladder in position for the rescue.

### Hosed by Firemen

Spectators were appalled to see that it was too short. As the man crouched grimly on the ledge, firemen played two hoses on him to afford what protection they could.

Almost obscured by smoke, the firemen worked frantically to get a longer ladder up, as flames billowed from the first floor windows. The trapped man was obviously on the point of collapse, but held out pluckily, and there was a cheer of relief as he came down.

His rescue was effected none too soon, for only minutes later, accompanied by a menacing crackle, sheets of blue flame swept along the shop front as power lines burned out.

The lines snapped with sharp reports, and spectators on the opposite footpath scattered in fear as the white, electrical flames flared out against the orange mass of the burning building.

Civilians and servicemen were quick to do what they could to help the firebrigadesmen in the almost hopeless task that confronted them. and an officer of the R.N.Z.A.F. was one of the first volunteers to lend a hand with a lead of hose at the intersection of Colombo and Cashel Streets.

On the Cashel Street frontage another Air Force man, Mr F. S. Davis, who is stationed at Wigram, made gallant efforts towards saving whoever he could. Braving the intense heat, he mounted a ladder to the first floor and burst into the tearoom.

"I tried to tell the men and women what to do, but they just looked at me," he said afterwards. "They did not take any notice, and just seemed bemused. I managed to get two girls out of the building, but the firemen would not let me go back again."

When the fire had gutted most of the lower part of the building, and the top floor was a roaring furnace, a girl was seen at one of the windows, said spectators.

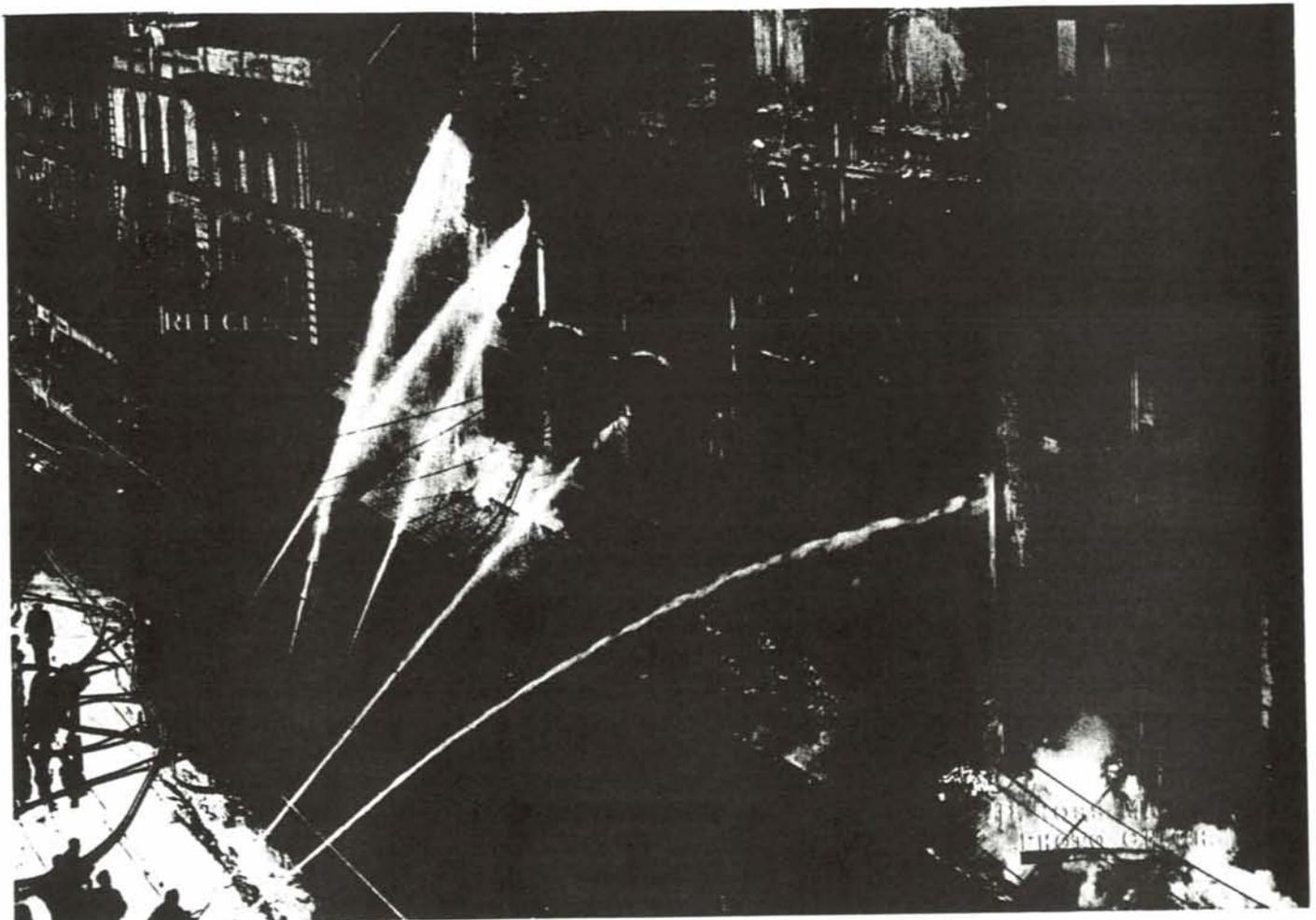
She screamed pitifully, swayed backwards and was not seen again.

*The Star-Sun, Nov 19, 1947. p.4.*



Phillips, A.A. Always ready. New Zealand Fire Service, 1985. p.79.

Above: A further view looking north along Colombo Street between Tuam and Lichfield Streets. (G.J. Thompson)



The three Ballantynes buildings which front Colombo Street can be identified in this view, after the flames have died down. The buildings (from left) are Congreves (3 floors), Goodmans (4 floors), with Pratts (3 floors) just visible. Reece's premises, the scene of a basement fire in 1917, are to the left. (D.R. Mackay)  
Phillips, A.A. Always ready. New Zealand Fire Service, 1985. p.81.

## MANY VOLUNTEER WORKERS

### SERVICEMEN AND CIVILIANS

#### CROWD KEPT BACK BY HOSE

Although generally the public stood well back from the fire, a hose had to be turned on a crowd at the corner of Cashel and Colombo streets to drive them away. At the time the collapse into the street of Ballantyne's building was likely.

The hose was also used to disperse a crowd which had gathered on the veranda of the shop opposite Beath's corner. Collapse of the veranda would have added to the problems of keeping order, fighting the fire and waiting for emergencies.

It was a hushed crowd which waited at Lichfield street and in Colombo street beyond Kincaid's to the north beyond the Grand Hotel in Cashel street and to the east, in Cashel street beyond Bates' building for confirmation of the fears that tragedy had stalked with the fire. As rumours trickled through of the mounting death roll, the crowds became silently horror-stricken.

All the men at Military District and Army Headquarters were detailed to help at the fire and two engines were brought from Burnham to the city. A fire engine from Wigram was also brought in and members of the Air Force assisted the City Fire Brigade. Naval ratings helped with the fire hoses throughout the fire.

#### Tributes to Assistance

Men from every Army establishment near Christchurch, airmen from Wigram, and sailors and Royal Marines from the two warships in Lyttelton were foremost among the willing helpers at the fire yesterday afternoon and last evening. A great tribute to their work was paid by the superintendent of the Fire Brigade (Mr A. Morrison) and the superintendent of police (Mr H. Scott).

Sailors from the Bellona and the Arbutus who were on leave in Christchurch maintained the tradition of the British Navy in being the first to help in any disaster. Many tossed their jackets on to the footpaths, and rushed to the assistance of firemen handling the hoses, while others helped the police to control the crowds.

*The Press, Nov 19, 1947. p.8.*

#### TELEPHONE EXCHANGE OVERLOADED

A few minutes after the fire at Ballantyne's store started yesterday, telephone lines throughout the city were paralysed as the maximum number of calls the central exchange can handle was reached. By 4.30 p.m. it was impossible to make a telephone call from most city offices and it was not until 5.30 p.m. that the volume of calls reached a normal size. Police officers, officials, and business men from buildings near the fire were embarrassed throughout this time by being deprived of the use of the telephone when it was most needed.

*The Press, Nov 19, 1947. p.8.*

## SEARCH AMONG RUINS DELAYED BY DANGER FROM DAMAGED WALLS

With unsearched parts of the gutted building deemed unsafe for workers, recovery of the remains of victims of Ballantyne's fire was postponed this morning while the debris was cleared.

It is believed that there may be more bodies in the building, particularly in the rear portions, and round the entrance on the corner of Colombo and Cashel Streets, where it is still too dangerous to work.

Pumps clearing the basements of water were nearing the end of their task this morning.

There may be bodies in the tangle of girders, beams, twisted piping, and workroom machinery littering the basements.

Great baulks of charred timber, a foot or more square, and between thirty and forty feet long, and steel girders weighing several tons, were wrenched out of the wreckage this morning, to clear the way for completion of the search.

With a big Army crane used as a winch from Colombo Street, the wreckage was pulled out into the roadway from the main entrance block, on the corner of Cashel and Colombo Streets.

Chunks of masonry, roofing iron, twisted piping, and assorted debris crashed down as the heavy beams came clear. Second floor joists, rafters, and other materials from the upper part of the block had fallen on to the heavier beams supporting the first floor.

Searchers were ready to comb this section of the building yesterday afternoon, but it was deemed unsafe until the precariously-balanced top-hammer had been removed. Some of the big baulks of timber had fallen at an angle, and it was feared that

if they were removed parts of the walls would fall, but this did not happen this morning.

#### Draining Basements

Before the pumping out started, the basements had between six and eight feet of water in them. By mid-day, the level was down to a few inches, and the pumps were having trouble with cinder and paper-choked intakes.

Operations were again under the direction of the City Engineer (Mr E. Somers), who had at his disposal more than 100 men, drawn from the City Council, the Public Works Department, and the Army.

Heavily pedimented, and bulging ominously, the remaining and higher three-storey section of the Colombo Street frontage has been worrying salvage workers since the afternoon of the fire, for it appeared to be ready to fall at any time.

#### Held by Cables

Yesterday afternoon, this was pinned back to remaining steel floor joists with wire ropes, and to-day was declared to be safe. The Oamaru stone and brick structure may be felled at the week-end. The Cashel Street frontage, though bulging a foot out of plumb at its centre, is deemed to be reasonably safe.

Although the overhead power cables were in place yesterday afternoon, trams were not able to run past the building this morning because of the salvage operations.

Late yesterday afternoon, the strong-room door, perched high up on a wall visible from Colombo Street, was prized open by hydraulic jacks and heavy timbers. As soon as air was admitted, the oven-hot interior burst into flames. Firemen quickly subdued the blaze.

It was thought that someone might have taken refuge in the strong-room, but this was not the case.

*The Star-Sun, Nov 20, 1947. p.3.*

## 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.*

## Other Buildings Threatened

Whitcombe's building, opposite Ballantynes in Cashel Street, was at one time thought to be alight from cinders. Just when the situation looked critical, the wind shifted from south-west to east, and the danger passed.

Hundreds of pounds worth of damage was done to plate-glass and other windows in buildings facing Ballantynes. Many of the ground-floor display windows and first-floor, tea-room windows in Beaths were cracked, and one of the display windows in Hannah's shoe store in Cashel Street could not withstand the heat.

Efforts to stop the fire spreading westwards in Cashel Street were effective, although the walls of Mr Francis Curtis's jewellery shop were charred, and fires threatened to start in the roof of Bates's china shop.

Most of the valuable stock was removed from Bates's and taken to safe keeping in shops opposite.

It was in the south-west corner of the block, where Ballantynes adjoined the premises of E. Reece, Limited, ironmongers, and Andersons, Ltd., engineers, that the firemen were less successful. Here, fighting amidst a maze of narrow alleyways, and up precipitous ladders to roofs, their job was made hazardous as well as difficult.

With the fire breaking so rapidly, the firemen who tackled this job literally took their lives in their hands. At one stage, it appeared as if the fire would break into Anderson's pattern shop, but a brick wall and copious drenchings from hoses kept the fire at bay.

Reece's were not so fortunate, for here, the dividing wall collapsed and the fire broke into the ground floor of the shop, doing extensive damage to the sports department. An upstairs office was damaged by water as firemen broke through it to flood adjoining roofs.

The last section of Ballantynes roof, that over the western part of

the tea-rooms in Cashel Street, collapsed with a roar at 5.30 p.m.

Volunteer crews helped the regular firemen, and at the peak of the blaze, when thirty leads of hose were pumping 6000 gallons of water a minute into the fire all round the block, upwards of 200 men were engaged.

Soaked to the skin and bone-weary from their gruelling task of holding the great, straining jets of water, some of these men took two-hour spells of duty under the most rigorous conditions. Volunteers, working in ruined civilian clothes, stood shivering in the evening chill after being relieved. Later, arrangements were made for the men to get changes of clothing.

Police, besides keeping the curious in check, had to cope with distracted people who were seeking relatives who had either worked in or were thought to have been customers in the store.

It was not until the fire started to die down, about 5.30 p.m., that the full horror of the fire became apparent. With hoses still playing on masses of glowing embers, a party of police entered the shell to search for the fire's victims.

Inspector P. C. Felton, Senior-Sergeant G. Taylor, and two constables went into the ruins midway along the Colombo Street frontage. The horrifying evidence was plain to them that many had died in sight of the street as they tried to escape from the main exits.

Though their search could extend little beyond the fringes of the building, they saw enough to give an early report indicating the magnitude of the disaster.

As darkness fell, emergency lighting was slung across Colombo and Cashel Streets, and the grim task of extricating the burned was begun. The remains were taken to the morgue.

Firemen continued to hose the wreckage, and at 8.30 it was decided, in view of the danger of further falls of stone and debris, to cease rescue operations for the night.

*The Star-Sun, Nov 19, 1947. p.4.*

## Lights in Ballantyne's Failed, But Assistants Continued Their Duties

A second after the passenger lift in the front of Ballantyne's store stopped at the ground floor on the afternoon of the fire, there was a loud report, and the lights in the building went out, said one of the four women who were in the lift on its last run.

Before she left the lift she said to the lift operator, "You have a fire here."

His reply was, "Yes, it's down below. The fire brigade is outside."

As the woman walked from the lift, smoke from the upper floors was filtering down to the ground floor. Shop assistants were still at the counters serving customers.

Every month, this woman and three of her friends met in town for afternoon tea, and on Tuesday after-

noon they had chosen Ballantyne's. As they walked out of the tearooms they remarked on the presence of smoke, which seemed to be coming from the furnishing department, just off the landing at the top of the stairs.

"It was strange that people were still being served with afternoon tea," she said. "We saw that there was a fire in the building and went straight for the lift. People were still going into the tearooms then"

*The Star-Sun, Nov 20, 1947. p.3.*

## PEOPLE URGED NOT TO VISIT THE MORGUE

Because there is not the slightest chance of any of the bodies being identified, officials and one parent this morning appealed to relatives of the missing people to refrain from visiting the morgue at the Christchurch Public Hospital.

"There is no possibility of the bodies being recognised," said the pathologist at the Christchurch Public Hospital (Dr A. B. Pearson). In his request to the people not to view the bodies he was joined by the Medical Superintendent (Dr A. D. Nelson) and the chairman of the Hospital Committee (Sir Hugh Acland).

These sentiments were reiterated by the District Coroner (Mr H. P. Lawry) and the Superintendent of Police (Mr H. Scott).

Only one parent went through the morgue this morning. He was Mr Robert Hayman, of 23, Mayfield Avenue, whose daughter was among the missing.

"After viewing the bodies most easily recognised, I agree that identification is out of the question," he said. "I would advise people not to go there, and to spare themselves from a most harrowing experience."

The total number of bodies in the morgue early this morning was thirty-four, five having been brought in early on. Two hearses were being used.

Mr Lawry said that he did not think that it would be possible to make any definite decision regarding the inquests until the full extent of the tragedy had been ascertained. It seemed that they would have to wait and see if the number of bodies recovered tallied with the number of people posted as missing.

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

## A Lucky Girl To be Late

P.A. WELLINGTON, This Day.

It sometimes pays to be unpunctual as Miss Mary Wootton of Christchurch ("Miss New Zealand") discovered on Tuesday afternoon. It was learned in Wellington that Miss Wootton had made an appointment for a fitting at Ballantynes store about 4 p.m. on Tuesday.

Had she been a little earlier instead of five minutes late the consequences might have been serious. As it was she arrived to find the store in flames.

Ballantynes had been making a three-piece ensemble, their gift to "Miss New Zealand."

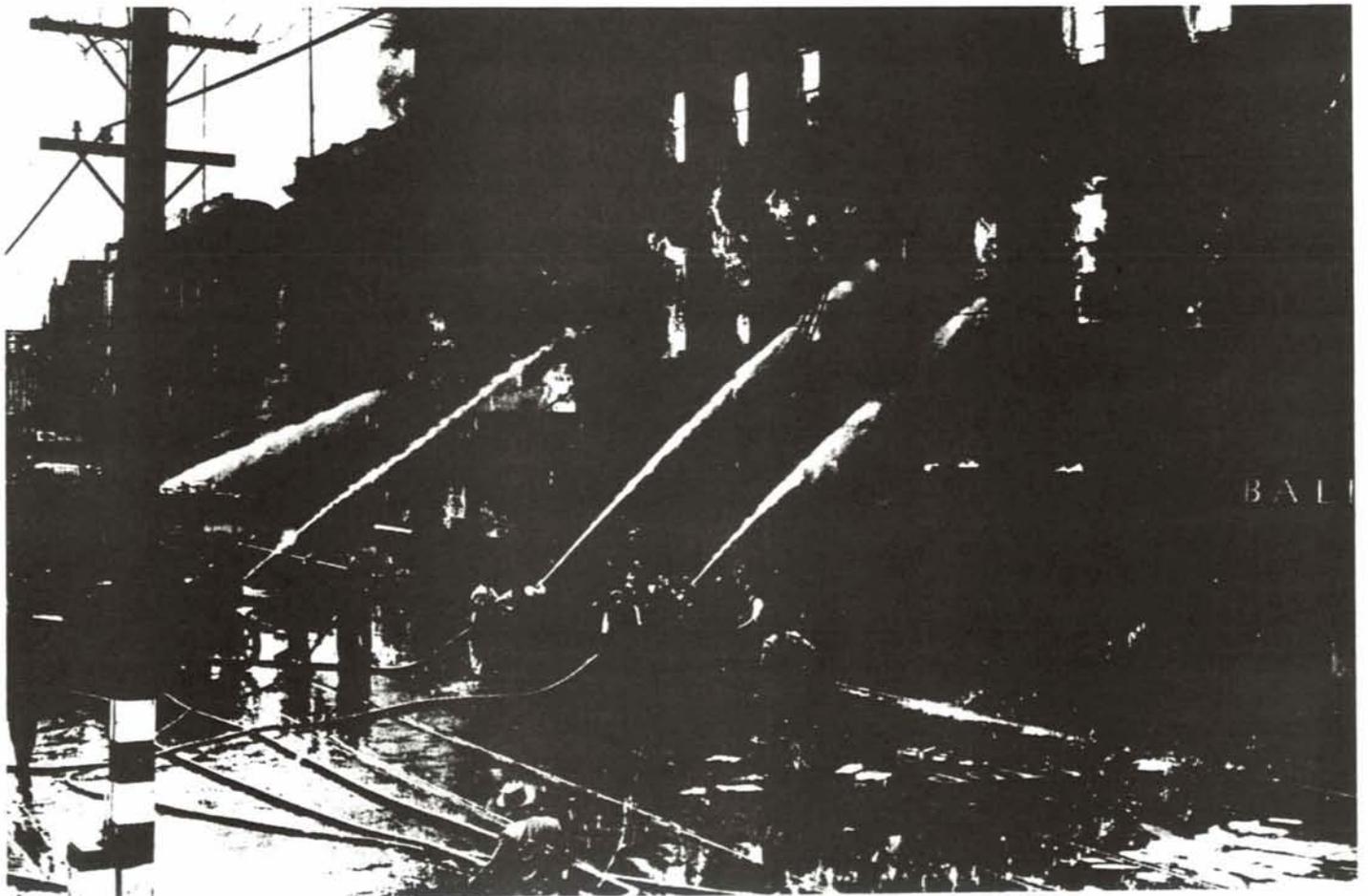
*The Star-Sun, Nov 20, 1947. p.3.*

10. Ballantynes fire.



*Above: Jets are brought to bear on the Colombo Street frontage. The Tilling-Stevens ladder can be seen at left. (R. Stokes)*

*Below: Fireman and helpers brave the intense heat in an effort to contain this fire. (R. Stokes)*



# Recovery of 39 Bodies

## SEARCH TO CONTINUE

Searchers amongst the rubble and twisted wreckage of Ballantyne's building yesterday recovered the charred remains of another 11 victims of the disastrous fire on Tuesday afternoon. The total number of bodies recovered is 39, bringing the death-roll to 40, as a young woman died in hospital on Tuesday night from injuries she received when she jumped from a third-storey window.

Forty-one persons are listed as missing, and of these 19 are definite. The other cases are unchecked.

The building was not considered safe for searchers yesterday morning, and a conference of engineers decided that part of the building fronting Colombo street should be demolished. After demolition work was finished the search continued until dark.

A large body of soldiers, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel F. L. Davies, did most of the clearing and searching work yesterday, and they were kept on the job until midnight. They worked in relays on the strongroom, entry to which was forced during the afternoon. The strongroom door was buckled, and a hydraulic jack was used to force an entry. Records and machines were in good condition, but the heat caused a small outbreak of fire, and some papers were charred. Water was played on the strongroom, and late last night the contents had been removed by the soldiers.

At one time it was thought that there might be some persons who had taken refuge in the strongroom, but no bodies were found.

Few firemen were on duty at the building yesterday afternoon and last evening, but the brigade did not receive its well-earned rest, as engines had to be sent to three calls. Soldiers manned hoses and played water on the smouldering ruins, while City Council and Public Works Department employees cleared away the rubble so that the police could continue their search.

Sixty soldiers to-day will co-operate with the police in a thorough search of the building in an endeavour to find all the bodies so that an inquest can be held.

Tramway Board workmen were busy replacing overhead wires last evening, and street lights were burning on the east side of Colombo street. The City Engineer (Mr E. Somers) said yesterday that it might be possible for trams to run through Colombo street to-day.

Throughout the day large crowds assembled at all the cordons. Even when there was heavy rain last night, and when there was little that could be seen except the rays of searchlights, the crowds stayed in the streets.

The Minister of Labour (Mr A. McLagan) and the Leader of the Opposition (Mr S. G. Holland) made a special air journey to Christchurch yesterday. They visited the morgue and saw the bodies of victims, and attended a conference with representatives of the firm, Government departments and the City Council.

*The Press, Nov 20, 1947. p.6.*

## Government to Set Up Commission to Enquire into Fire

Parliamentary Reporter.  
WELLINGTON, This Day.

The Government is to set up a commission to make a full investigation into the whole of the circumstances of the tragic fire in Christchurch on Tuesday. This was announced in the House of Representatives yesterday by the Minister of Internal Affairs (the Hon W. E. Parry), who said that the commission would be given all the powers necessary for a complete investigation of the whole matter.

The normal provisions of the Fire Brigades Act, 1926, empowering the Christchurch Fire Board to arrange a coronial investigation did not altogether suit the circumstances of this case in view of its magnitude, and for that reason the Government had decided to make it the subject of a full investigation by the commission, added Mr Parry. He would take an early opportunity during the next few days of announcing further particulars concerning the commission.

*The Star-Sun, Nov 20, 1947. p.3.*

## Tragedy Dims Enthusiasm For Wedding

Joy and enthusiasm over the wedding of Princess Elizabeth has been completely overshadowed by the city's disastrous fire on Tuesday.

The Government has decided that there will be no celebrations and with some official exceptions, the flags of the city were to-day flown at half-mast.

Normally, Government buildings would have been draped with bunting and strings of flags, but in deference to the atmosphere of grief only single flags will be flown. As the Government officially represents the Crown, these will be at full mast.

Interest in the Royal wedding has been greatly reduced, and one woman said to-day that she had heard only one person make any reference to it, even to listening to the wedding broadcast.

The Dean of Christchurch (the Very Rev A. K. Warren), said that the bellringers of the Christchurch Cathedral had made arrangements to ring a peal in celebration of the wedding. This was to have been recorded for re-broadcasting, but in view of the city's tragedy, it had been cancelled.

Churches have offered special prayers, and at the Durham Street Methodist Church a special intercessory period was observed at a farewell to Dr Irving Benson, of Melbourne.

"I do not think the people are even thinking about the wedding," was another opinion. "The great tragedy of the fire has overshadowed everything."

*The Star-Sun, Nov 20, 1947. p.3.*

# CIVIC FUNERAL IN CHRISTCHURCH

## Burial of 41 Victims of Fire

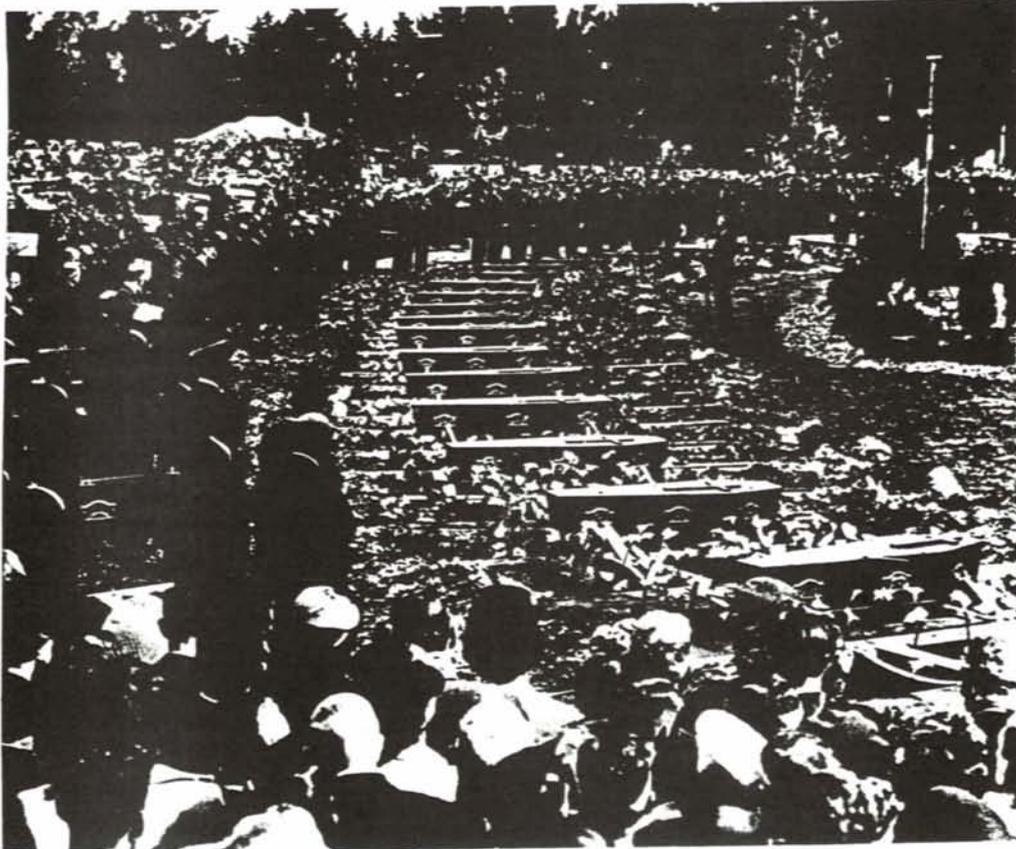
### SERVICES AT CATHEDRAL AND GRAVESIDE

Christchurch yesterday afternoon mourned the 41 victims of the fire which destroyed the acre-block of J. Ballantyne and Company, Ltd., last Tuesday. While 1000 filled the Cathedral in the heart of the city, many hundreds outside joined in the civic service, and all along the three-mile route of the funeral procession to the Ruru Lawn Cemetery thousands stood. People in homes all over New Zealand listened to the radio broadcast.

It was probably the greatest crowd ever assembled in Christchurch, the only comparable numbers gathering on a very different occasion: celebration of victory in the Second World War. Yesterday a great hush descended on the city. The people's mood expressed not only grief but also respect for the dead and sympathy with the bereaved.

It was a city's tribute to those who had been their fellows and had worked for a firm whose traditions were almost as old as the community which mourned.

*The Press, Nov 24, 1947. p.6.*



King, M. *After the war.* Wilson and Horton, 1988. p.33.

### SAFETY ROPES

Sir.—In replying to the letter written by John L. Checkley in "The Press" this morning, I would like to say that his idea of ropes as a safety measure may be all right in theory. I was a nurse in training at the Nelson Hospital when our nurses' home was destroyed by fire on the morning of October 31, 1938. Each nurse had a fire escape in her bedroom, stapled to the floor, which only had to be thrown out of her window. However, this was not practical as the fire commenced in the basement, and the upper storey windows, being directly above the ground floor windows, did not permit of one ladder being used. Many were injured jumping for their lives. I wonder why some of the spectators at Tuesday's fire did not have the presence of mind to obtain mattresses or strong sheets from the store opposite?—Yours, etc.,

CAROL RALPH-SMITH.  
November 21, 1947.

*The Press, Nov 24, 1947. p.2.*

## BALLANTYNE'S BUILDINGS

### DEMOLITION WORK CONTINUED

#### GOODS SALVAGED FROM BASEMENTS

Demolition work at Ballantyne's building was continued yesterday according to the plan prepared by the contractor and engineers. Large blocks of masonry from the top part of the building fronting Colombo street were loaded on to lorries by the Army's big mobile crane.

Men worked all day salvaging goods from basements, and some of the articles recovered appeared to be only slightly damaged by fire and water. Rolls of carpets, rugs, and linoleum were amongst the salvaged goods, and there was a quantity of battered metalware toys. Electrical equipment and workroom machinery were also recovered.

A meeting of the staff of Ballantyne's was held yesterday morning, but the business discussed was not disclosed. A director of the firm (Mr R. H. Ballantyne) said yesterday that there was nothing further to report. When asked about the insurance on the buildings and stock he said: "It is being discussed by the committee."

Clerical and stores staff were busy yesterday in the temporary office premises set up in the undamaged packing department's building in Lichfield street.

Electricians worked on the automatic traffic lights on the corner of Colombo and Cashel streets, but late yesterday afternoon the lights were not functioning, and a traffic inspector was directing the traffic.

The plate-glass window in Beath and Company's shop which was broken when demolition work started was replaced yesterday afternoon.

*The Press, Nov 26, 1947. p.6.*

# PEOPLE'S VOICE

VOL. V., No. 12

AUCKLAND, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 1947

PRICE 3d.

## FIRE TRAGEDY MUST NOT BE REPEATED

### DANGEROUS POSITION LAID BARE

New Zealand mourns at the Christchurch fire tragedy in which so many lives were cut off in the disaster at Ballantyne's drapery store.

To the relatives and friends of the unfortunate people who lost their lives, the "People's Voice" extends its deepest sympathy.

It feels, however, that sympathy is inadequate and that it is necessary to take practical and immediate measures to minimise the possibility of such a tragedy happening again. It is five years since the terrible tragedy at the Seaciff Mental Hospital in which many lost their lives. There is no reason, unfortunately, for confidence that another such tragedy as that which occurred at Ballantyne's might not occur again in some part of New Zealand at any time.

#### MANY DEATH-TRAPS EXIST

Enquiries and observations made by the "People's Voice" reveal that an extremely dangerous position exists in the cities of New Zealand. Many large stores and other buildings are unduly subjected to fire hazard and, in the event of fire breaking out, would be death-traps. The "People's Voice" does not desire that there should be undue alarm over the position, but it is obvious that quick action must be taken to minimise fire risks in many important buildings, particularly of the older type.

The danger is particularly acute in older buildings which were not built according to the requirements of modern fire regulations. It would be impracticable to abandon all these buildings, but it is certain that much could be done even in these older buildings to minimise the risk attendant on fire.

#### FIRE ESCAPES LACKING

The absence of fire-escapes at Ballantyne's, which was obvious even to people outside Christchurch, from newspaper accounts and photographs, is only too common to buildings in Auckland, Wellington and other cities. Comment was made to the "People's Voice" concerning the large establishment in Queen Street, Auckland. It was pointed

out that there were no fire-escapes leading from the windows facing Queen Street. A similar position exists elsewhere. In some of these cases it was obvious that lives might be lost on a scale comparable or worse than at Ballantyne's.

While the ultimate solution lies in the building of modern concrete structures without inflammable floors and walls and fittings, much could be immediately done by conforming to the regulations regarding fire-escapes, by installing automatic sprinklers, by compulsory fire drill and other such measures.

#### COMMISSION MUST BE EFFECTIVE

The commission of enquiry which has been promised by the Hon. W. Parry will doubtless go thoroughly into the circumstances surrounding the fire at Ballantyne's, and the "People's Voice" does not wish to pre-judge the issue. The whole question of fire hazard, however, is one of acute and immediate importance to the working class and to the general public. Commissions of enquiry in the past have been set up on various questions under pressure of disaster or public opinion and their findings have remained a dead letter.

This must not happen again. The shop assistants' unions, the



The above photograph shows the Cashel Street frontage of the drapery establishment of J. Ballantyne and Co., Christchurch, where so many lives were lost in a disastrous fire. Readers will note that, as in so many other similar buildings, there are no fire-escapes on this frontage. See article on this page. (Green and Hahn, photograph)

Clerical Workers' Union, the Storemen and Packers' Union, and other unions of workers, cannot allow this matter to be dealt with in a superficial manner.

These unions, and the Federation of Labour, should be given representation on the commission which is being set up by the Minister of Internal Affairs, Hon. W. Parry.

### French Workers Fight Fascism's New Threat

LONDON.—While Truman and other Wall Street politicians try to rush through the Marshall plan to buy up Europe, the French and Italian Governments have launched an attack on the trade unions, Communist Parties and other organisations which aim to preserve their countries' independence.

But French and Italian democrats, schooled in the underground struggle against the Nazis, are hitting back in a wave of strikes and demonstrations greater than anything their countries have known since 1848.

The French reaction began its offensive with the arrest and savage sentencing of Marseilles workers who were taking part in a peaceable demonstration against increasing prices.

The Ramadier Government then launched a deliberately provocative raid against the Soviet P.O.W. repatriation camp at Beauregard, near Paris.

#### ARCOS RAID RECALLED

This raid, reminiscent of the famous Arcos raid in London in 1927, is obviously designed to force a breach of relations between Russia and France.

The camp was being maintained in Paris, by agreement with the French Government, to repatriate the thousands of Soviet P.O.W.'s

with a scare story about the "Reds" plotting to attack France.

Under cover of the panic thus created, the Socialist Ramadier aimed to make way for "strong measures" which might in turn be expected to prepare the way for Fascist de Gaulle.

De Gaulle would do the main job of smashing all French resistance to Wall Street's plan to enslave France and seize her strategic bases and colonial resources for a war against the Soviet Union.

Reynaud was the sword-dust Caesar who undermined France's defences in 1940, allowing traitor generals to open the gates to the Nazis and appointed Petain as vice-Premier, from which position he opened up talks with the German generals. De Gaulle, Reynaud appointed himself as his

### Bruce Skilton Turns Tables On "Standard" Editor

"The 'Standard's' allegation of Communist trickery in the issuing of an election ticket cannot be supported by facts," said Bruce Skilton, District Secretary of the Communist Party in Wellington. "The Communist ticket, in marked contrast to the ticket issued by the Labour Party, plainly indicates that it is issued by the Communist Party.

On one side the ticket bears the names of the Communist candidates, Mrs. C. Birchfield and W. Ara, with the slogan 'Communist for Leadership.' On the other side it is headed 'How to Vote on November 19th,' 'Communist Recommendations.'

In the case of the City Council, voters are advised to 'vote for Communists and thirteen others.' The names of thirteen other candidates are then set out in alphabetical order, with the two

reason for the wild charges made in the 'Standard's' editorial attack on the Communist Party. The Labour



Party should be the last to accuse the Communist Party of trickery, for the Labour Party is the only organisation in Wellington standing candidates to issue a ticket that does not bear its name or a clear indication of its origin. These are your candidates' is the caption on its ticket, and a list of candidates for the various bodies is then set out.

"One cannot but agree with the Mayor, Mr. Appleton, when he said: 'The Labour candidates in Wellington are ashamed of their political label for they had issued a list on an anonymous ticket.'

"As the Labour candidate for the Mayoralty, Mr. N. R. Seddon, was forced to publicly admit 'any band

# 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.*

The  
BALLANTYNES'  
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DISASTER  
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*The Press, Dec 28, 1983.*

### Ballantyne's fire book

Sir.—As a sister of one of the 41 victims who perished in Ballantyne's fire on November 18, 1947. I am very distressed to see a sizeable advertisement in "The Press" today for a book on the disaster by G. G. Walker. Who is he that he hopes to make money out of others' misfortune? All that had to be written was recorded in the newspapers at the time, and for the many months of anguish relatives suffered while the commission of inquiry was held afterwards. Some mothers never recovered from the shock and grief and no relative wants to be reminded of that terrible day when their loved ones did not come home from work.—  
Yours, etc.,

M. I. MAWSON.

December 28, 1983.

*The Press, Dec 31, 1983. p.12.*

### Ballantyne's fire book

Sir, — Regarding M. I. Mawson's letter of December 31: losing a sister in Ballantyne's fire is a sad memory they will have to live with for the rest of their days. The tragic event will never be forgotten by those who lost family or friends (and I lost two friends). The suggestion that Mr G. G. Walker "hopes to make money out of others' misfortune" is completely out of character with this man, who is kind, generous to a fault and a very happy person — big of stature and mind. I feel the point of the book is to vindicate the firemen of the day. Mr Walker is hardly likely to become a millionaire with this publication, as I, with all due respect to him, fail to see it becoming a best seller. It is a valuable interesting reference book, with a view to this terrible tragedy never recurring. — Yours,

VALMAI I. HERN.

January 1, 1984.

Sir.—I wish to thank Mr G. G. Walker for his enlightenment on the Ballantyne's fire. This type of book must take many hours of research and work and is not the type of book to bring in great revenue, so it is good to know in this day and age there are still people who are willing to give so much of their leisure time to bring truth to the fore. Another aspect is knowing this will not happen again and that Government or Royal commissions can no longer cover up the truth, and our firemen will no longer have the blame laid at their feet as was the case of Mr Burrows. Many people may feel sorrow having the facts laid bare, but we know that the integrity of firemen will now be guarded and lives and property better protected. Having read the book I feel Mr Walker has great feelings for all the families involved.—Yours, etc.,

BRENDA SMITH.

December 30, 1983.

*The Press, Jan 7, 1984. p.12.*

# 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.

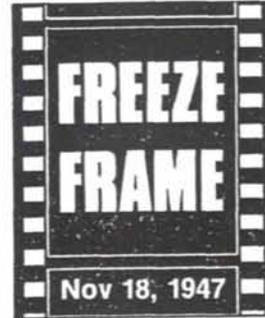
Eight young women in the millinery workroom were ordered to follow Lola Crew along a passage. By the time she reached the fire escape, only one was still behind her. The others had collapsed, overcome by the smoke.

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."

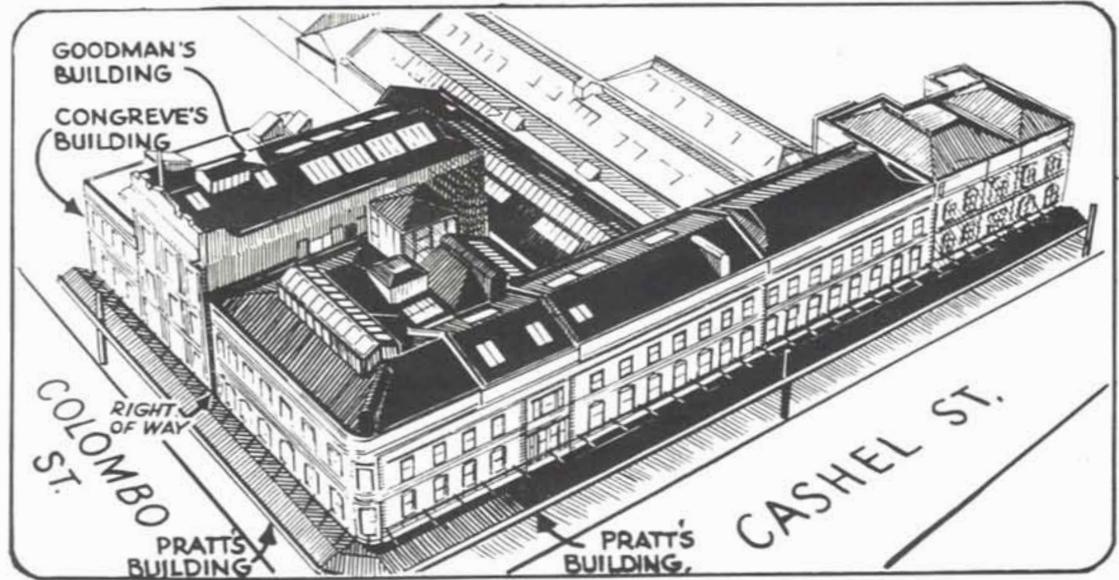
By 4 p.m., a huge plume of brown smoke had attracted thousands into neighbouring streets. Business was brought to a standstill in shops and offices within two blocks of the fire.



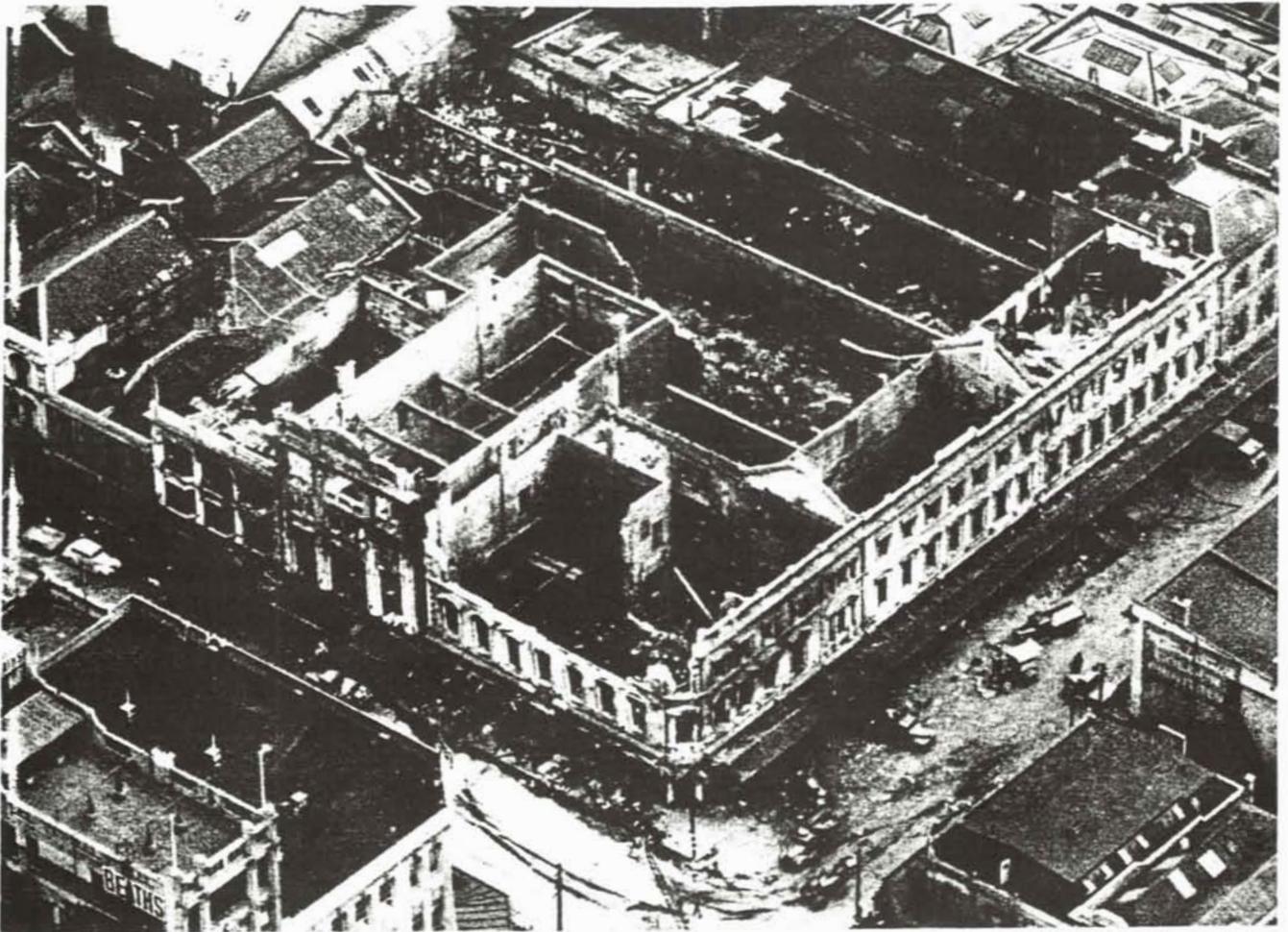
At Colombo and Cashel.

Employees of the shirt work-

An artist's drawing showing Congreve's building where the fire is thought to have begun, Goodman's building with the millinery workroom on the top floor and Pratt's building where the credit and accountancy offices were situated.



Morris, B. *New Zealand's darkest days*. Wilson and Horton, 1987. p.35.



Block of one acre destroyed. A view from the air.  
*The Press*, Nov 26, 1947. p.5.

**Cause of the fire.**

51. Mr. Nicol, who speaks with undoubted authority, was faced with the charge that some fault in the cable or installation of electric power was the cause of the fire. Each defect or fault was carefully weighed by him. Without excusing the fault, he examined each with meticulous care, to ascertain its possible effect. He came to his conclusion that none of the faults singly, or together, could have caused the fire. We are satisfied he reached his conclusions not to defend electric energy as a whole, but as an expert whose findings would be scrutinized by able electrical engineers in this country and beyond it.

He was supported by the evidence of other expert witnesses. There was no evidence in respect of the general electrical installation in the building which would lead to the belief that this, in any of its parts, was the cause of the fire. It becomes quite clear in our opinion it is impossible for us, in view of the expert evidence, to determine that electrical fault was the cause of the fire with any degree of certainty.

52. We have already stated that there is no evidence, once the alibi of Smith is accepted, that the fire was occasioned by the carelessness of any employee. Indeed, the evidence showed that Ballantynes strictly enforced this rule against smoking, and there was no evidence to support any suggestion that the fire may have originated from such a cause.

53. We must, therefore, answer the first question by saying that the evidence did not disclose the cause and origin of the fire.

**Response of the staff.**

58. It is true that members of the staff with any degree of authority may have been under the impression that strict observance of stringent rules against smoking and carrying matches rendered fire risk negligible. The action of the directors in failing to maintain in proper order the automatic Vigilant alarm system, that was at one time installed in Pratt's building, is inexplicable after they had been warned by the firm which installed it that unless it were properly maintained they would have to remove it, and eventually did so. A curious blindness to fire-risk, as far as we can see, can alone explain the failure of the directors to install some warning-device, a fire-sprinkler system, or some alternative fire-prevention method, in addition to the fire-extinguishers on which sole reliance was placed.

If the sprinkler system had been in existence, on the reports which have been submitted to us, the fire would, in all probability, have been put out in the cellar itself, or at least contained there.

Without evacuation drill, without warning-devices, without advice to employees on the steps to be taken in the event of fire, without an automatic connection with the fire brigade, and with employees—many of them young women—numbering some 458, orderly movement, even communication between various departments, can hardly have been expected, and contradictory instructions—some to stay, some to evacuate—took the place of efficient order and movement.

59. There is evidence that one of the staff, in a position of some authority, advised female employees to report back to their departments on the upper floors. Such advice was given, it is said, at a time when the smoke from the fire was spreading through the whole building.

60. There is evidence that some of the employees were so ignorant of the layout of the premises that they were unaware of alternative methods of exit from one department to another.

61. It is quite understandable that, when the fire was first discovered, the information passed casually to members of the staff in various parts of the building remote from the cellar that there was a fire in one of the cellars would not be unduly disturbing, and perhaps the nature of the news that leaked through would induce employees, and indeed the managers, to think that fire in one of the cellars would not be serious.

The volume of smoke, however, coming from the cellar and escaping into the open air, upper floors, and adjoining parts of the premises should have warned executive officers within two or three minutes after the arrival of the fire brigade that the fire was serious and the need for evacuation urgent.

62. In the case of premises as large as those of Ballantyne's, involving the employment of some 458 employees, of whom over 300 were women, it seems clear the provision of a number of fire-extinguishers should not be the only measure taken to prevent and stop the spread of fire. The responsibility for this condition of affairs rests on the controllers and managers of the business. The inevitable result was that, when fire did break out and showed signs of developing into a major fire, the executive officers found themselves not only without adequate equipment to deal with it, but with lack of devices to warn their employees of the existence of fire, or a plan to evacuate them from the building when it became necessary.

## Report of the Royal Commission.

### SHORT SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

#### ORDERS OF REFERENCE (1) TO (8)

1. We have been unable to find the cause and origin of the fire.

2. In our opinion, all steps reasonably possible, under the circumstances then obtaining, were not taken to warn the staff and the members of the public on the premises of the existence and seriousness of the fire, and that all reasonably possible steps under the circumstances were not taken to provide for their safety and escape, firstly by the management of Ballantynes and later by the fire brigade.

3. Special circumstances contributing to the rapid spread of the fire were :—

- (a) The very large fire areas with large unprotected vertical and lateral openings :
- (b) The high fire load in relation to the construction of the building :
- (c) The late call to the fire brigade which allowed inflammable gases to accumulate before the arrival of the brigade :
- (d) The failure of the fire brigade to take effective action to attack the fire in the first ten minutes after its arrival, thereby allowing a further accumulation of dangerous and explosive gases :
- (e) The inflammable nature of much of the stock and soft fibre board used throughout the building.

The fire hazard could have been reduced by—

- (i) The installation of an automatic sprinkler fire-alarm system :
- (ii) An automatic fire-alarm system directly connected to the fire-station :
- (iii) The provision of adequate fire-doors :
- (iv) The total prohibition of the use of untreated soft wood fibre board :
- (v) The provision of standpipes throughout the building with hoses attached :
- (vi) The enclosure of lift-shafts and stairways by smoke-stop partitions.

4. In our opinion, there was a breach of the Christchurch City By-laws in so far as permits were not obtained for the execution of certain works, such as the making of openings in interior walls and the use of soft wood fibre board for partitions and wall coverings. Inasmuch as no requisition was served on Messrs. Ballantynes by the fire brigade, it cannot be said that there was a breach of the Christchurch Fire Board Fire Escapes By-law, 1930. We think the use of soft fibre board in Ballantynes was a breach of the by-law forbidding its use, and the breach was not cured by the consent given.

5. In our opinion, the Factories Act and its regulations are inadequate in so far as they set a standard of protection against fire very far below that set in standards approved by expert opinion and adopted in other countries.

We think the Fire Board Fire Escapes By-law is similarly defective, and so far as existing buildings are concerned the by-law has been practically inoperative, inasmuch as it provides that nothing need be done unless the Superintendent of the Brigade, after inspection, serves a notice on the owner setting out what he is required to do.

Since the 1938 amendment of the Municipal Corporations Act, the Christchurch City Council has been in a position to replace the Fire Board's By-law, but nothing has been done. We believe the Christchurch City By-laws are inadequate and that the administration of the by-laws and regulations has been irregular and ill administered. There appears to us to be no justification for the Council's over-riding its own by-law and granting permission to Ballantynes to make extensive use of untreated soft wood fibre board.

We draw attention to the absence of regulations framed to regulate construction in relation to floor areas.

6. We believe the adoption of the New Zealand Standard Code of Building By-laws, Part VII (Means of Egress), as prepared by the New Zealand Standards Institute, should be made compulsory to all buildings in New Zealand.

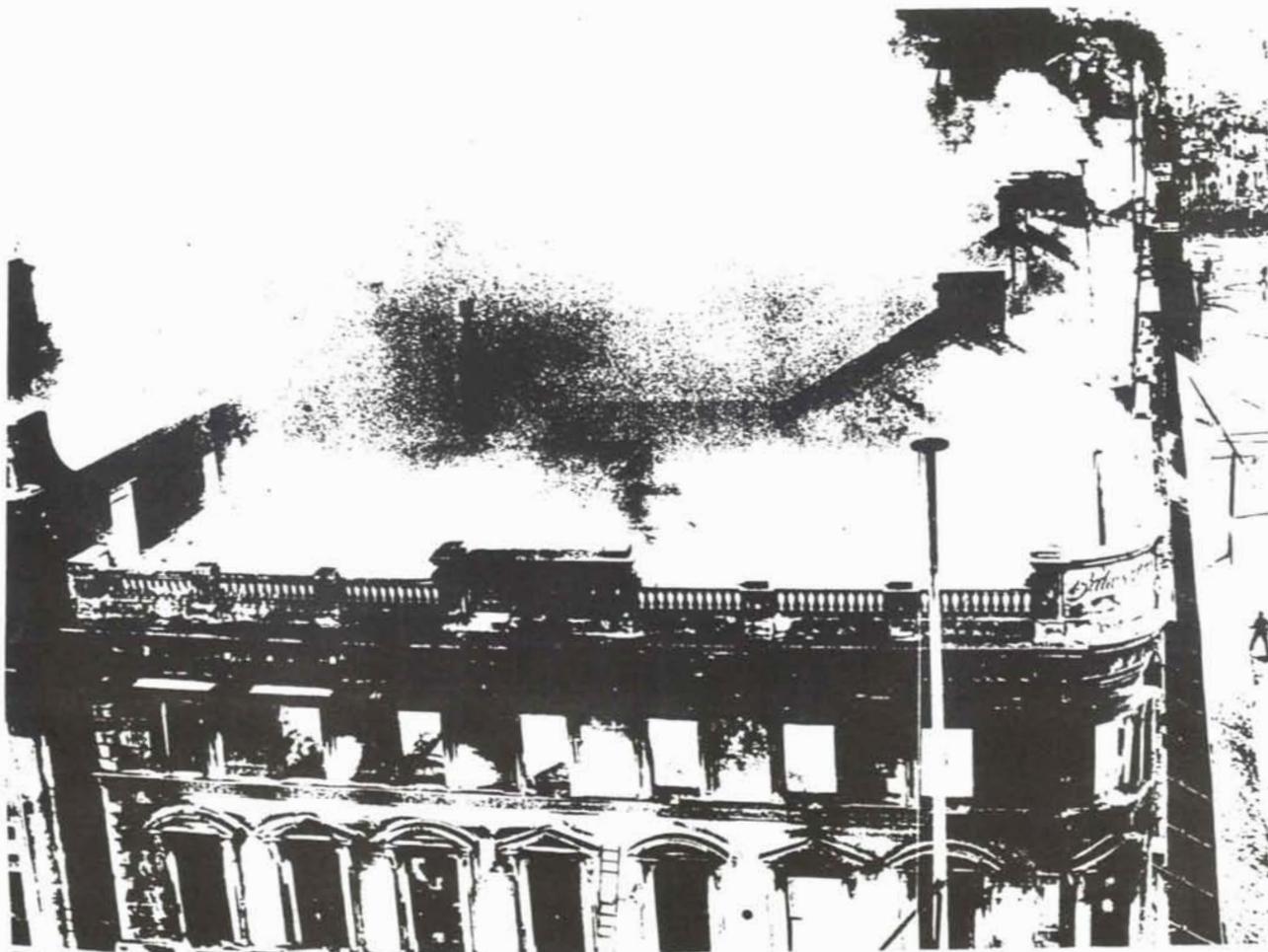
7. We recommend the instruction of staffs in the principles of fire-prevention, evacuation drill, and elementary principles of fire-fighting. We advocate that all floors above ground floor be immediately evacuated on alarm of fire being given.

8. We find that, after arrival at the fire, there was failure on the part of the brigade officers to appreciate the potential danger and take adequate steps to meet that contingency.

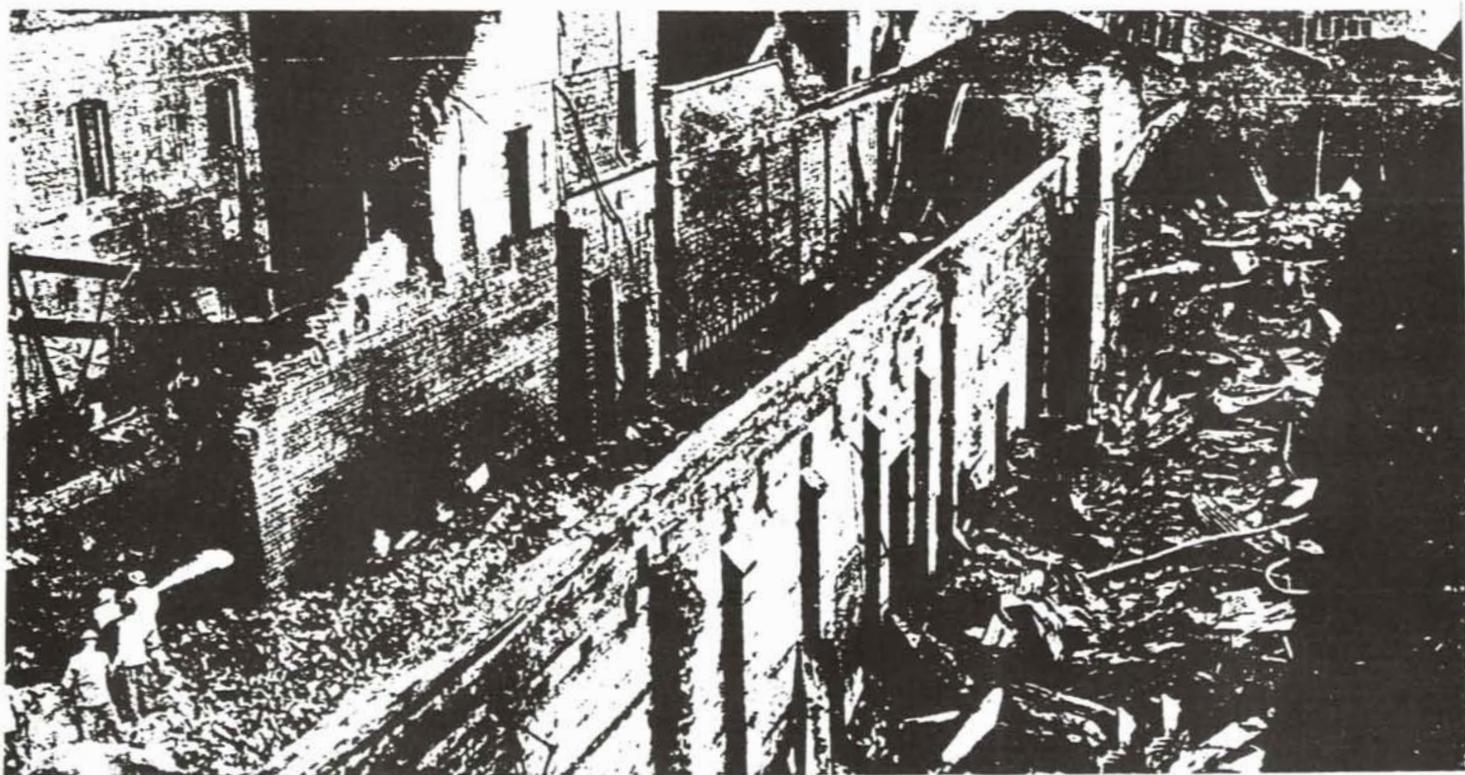
We find the attempt made to rescue those trapped suffered from lack of competent leadership.

We find the equipment employed by the brigade to combat the fire was, in general, sufficient save that the Tilling-Stevens electric ladder was obsolete.

20. Ballantynes fire.



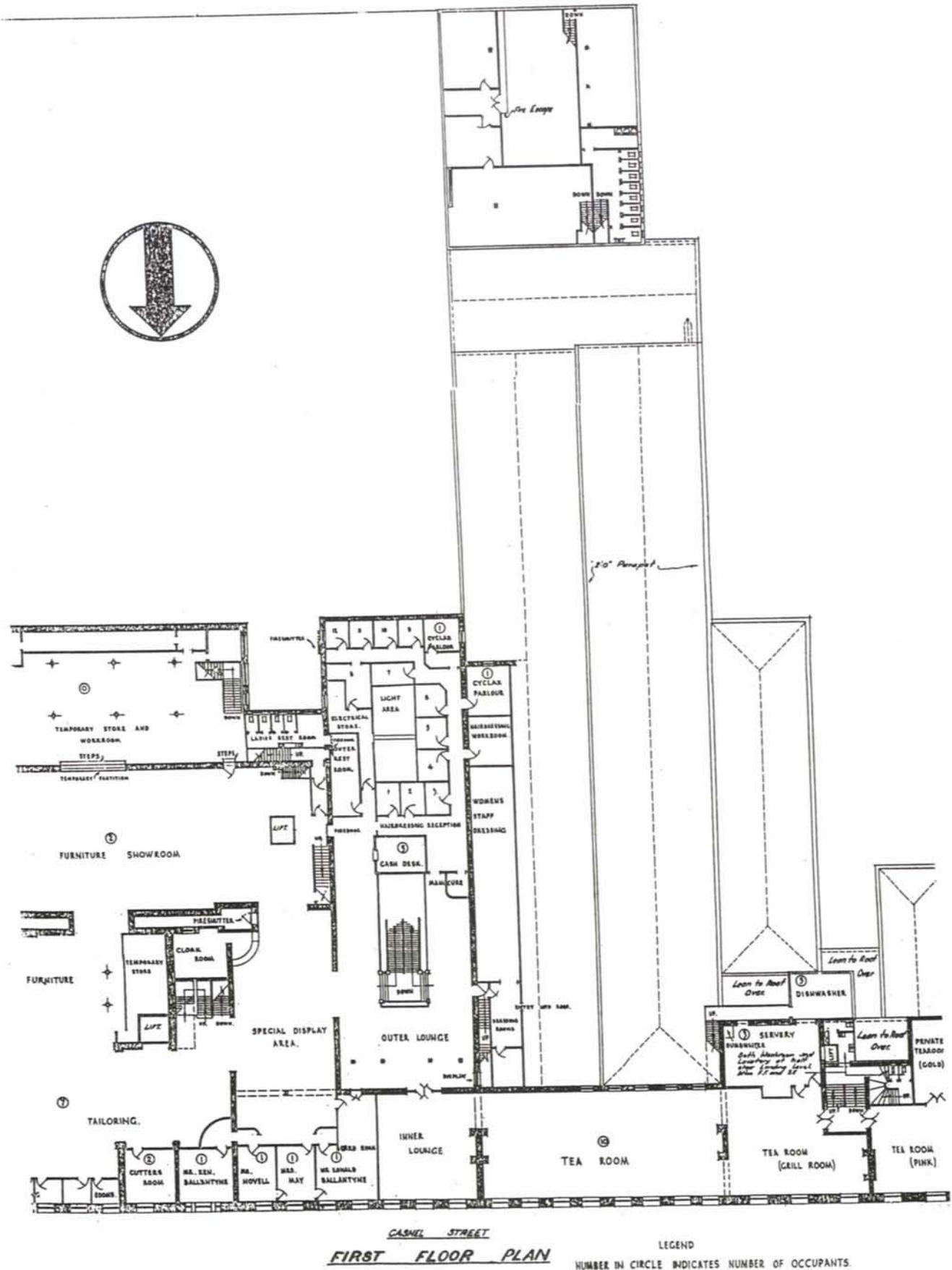
The outer walls appear to be the only part of the building left standing in this view looking along Cashel street. *Photo; S Moore.*



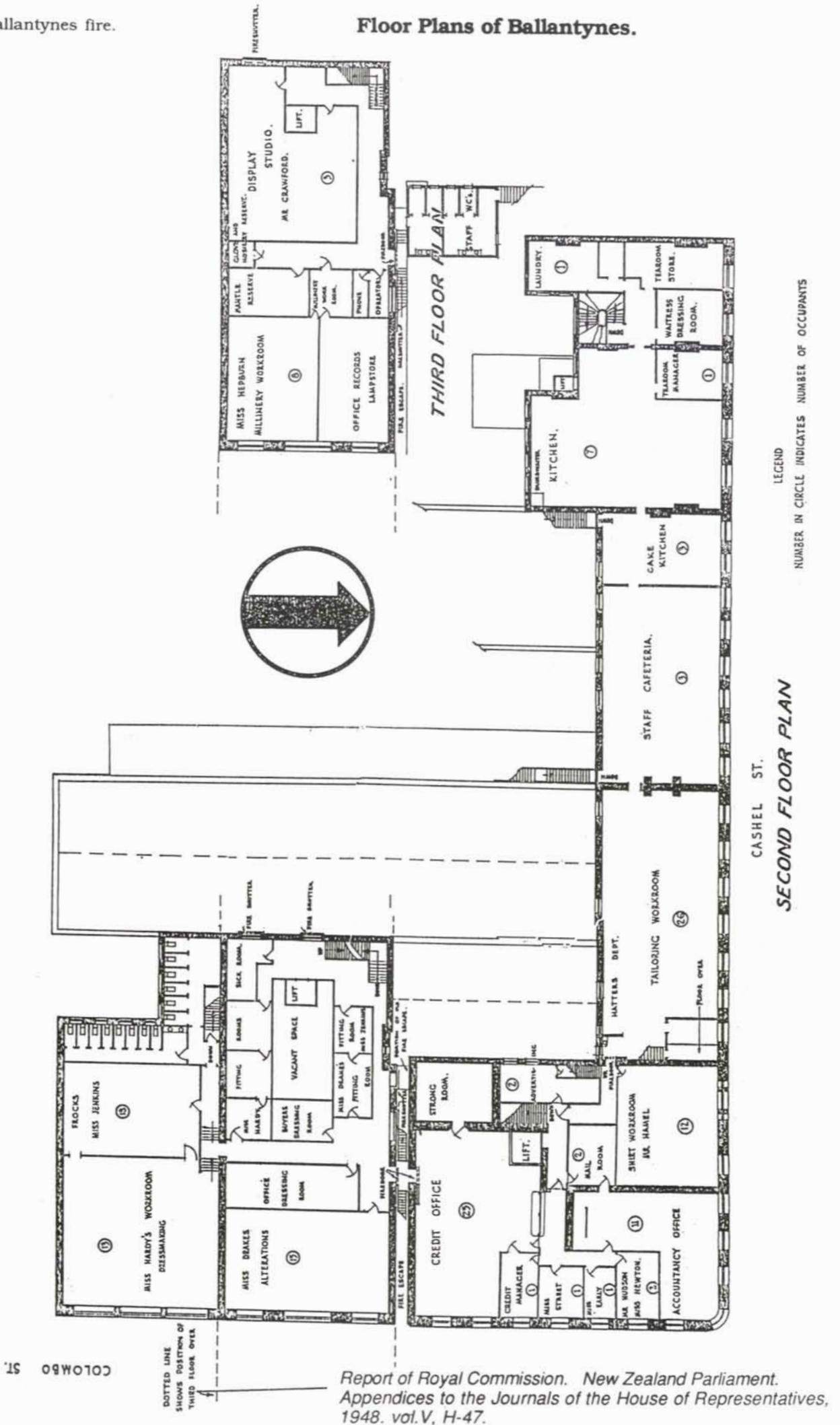
A view of the central area of the building. Little remains except for the brick dividing walls and twisted iron from the roof. *N.Z. Weekly News, Nov 26, 1947.*







Floor Plans of Ballantynes.



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