

## 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.*