

Although, therefore, it was decided on irrefragable grounds not to embark in a general policy of insurance, the wisdom of increasing the efficiency of existing preventions, and of establishing systems in places more or less neglected, was clearly recognised. In most of the large public buildings and institutions where water-pressure was available, more or less successful attempts have been made to enable it to be properly utilised in case of fire; and in Dunedin and Wellington an elaborate system of electric police and fire-brigade alarms has been established, with the aid of the Telegraph Department, and is about to be applied also in Christchurch and Auckland. The possibility of any outbreak of fire obtaining serious mastery is thus reduced to a satisfactorily low mark. These general precautions have been supplemented by many others, such as internal rising mains, fire-hoses, axes, crowbars, fire-buckets, shut-offs to passages and roof divisions, fire-proof paints, escape-ladders, hand-pumps, grenades, sprinklers, and other approved appliances, all of which, as well as all other details of the whole system, are, where possible, arranged in consultation with the captains of fire-brigades, and designed as regards all fittings and connections in keeping with those of the brigades, so as to enable these, when coming upon the scene of a fire, to utilise them freely and readily along with their own. In addition, night-watchmen, with specified patrol duties, the faithful performance of which is checked by electrical or mechanical tell-tale clocks, are attached to many of the more important public offices and institutions.

From this it will be evident that a good deal has already been done; and in all important new buildings undertaken last year due provision has been made of appliances. Nevertheless, there is both room and urgent necessity for immensely wider development. It is only the larger and more important offices and institutions that are thus more or less safeguarded, and a moment's reflection will serve to show how vitally important it is that every possible effort should be made to bring the systems of prevention to the highest and most perfect development. Taking only some of the wooden buildings in Wellington as an example—there are the Parliamentary Buildings, almost entirely of wood, with innumerable valuable State papers and documents, and a splendid library; the departmental offices, with the whole of the archives, records, accounts, and rolls of the colony, and other books and papers absolutely irreplaceable if destroyed; Government House, with Imperial documents and records; and the Museum, with its valuable collections. Not to mention in connection with these the destruction of the buildings themselves by fire, the collateral losses would represent hundreds of thousands of pounds, would absolutely wipe out many pages of the colony's history, and would be national. At Mount View, with its hundreds of patients, a lamentable loss of life, such as too frequently accompanies fires in asylums, might be the penalty.

These illustrations could be abundantly repeated from other large towns in the colony; while, if country places are considered where fire-prevention appliances are the exception rather than the rule, and nearly every public building is constructed of wood, and often necessarily left quite unguarded after night-work, when fires and lights have been burning, the call upon a Government, which on more than justifiable general grounds does not find in its accounts any expenditure for insurance, to at least provide a liberal annual vote for prevention appliances is distinct and undeniable.

These views were represented last year, but the stringencies of economy witnessed the disappearance of the suggested vote from the estimates. It is difficult to see how even the most persistent advocacy of retrenchment can deny the situation; and the appearance on the estimates this year of the reasonable sum which you have sanctioned should, it is strongly urged, be accepted as an annual recurrent item, of the absolute necessity of which there can be no rational question. A department charged with the administration of the large numbers of public buildings and institutions which cover the face of the colony from the North Cape to Stewart Island would omit an essential demand of duty if it failed, in season and out of season, to urge by every means at its command this most important question of fire-prevention. In the future, this urgency can be somewhat discounted by a closer adherence to the policy of building in brick or stone wherever possible, which is desirable not only on account of lesser risk of fire, but also on the grounds of durability.

It is in asylums, perhaps, that the necessity for a complete system of fire-prevention is most essential, and greater facilities for escape in the way of flying staircases or ladders, or other of the many patent appliances for the purpose, are much wanted. The Commissioners of Lunacy in England are tirelessly persistent in demanding that all the institutions under their inspection should perfect their fire-appliances; and the same policy should be pursued in regard to our asylums.

FURNITURE AND FITTINGS AND OTHER MISCELLANIES.

Of the multitudinous requisitions, large, medium, and small, for supply of an infinite and bewildering variety of furniture, fittings, and miscellaneous requirements for public offices, which in the course of a year come to, are dealt with, and passed through by the department, imagination better than description must be relied on to form an idea; but, although small matters in themselves, their supply involves an amount of estimating, specifying, valuing, checking, registering, and account-keeping which makes serious inroads on the time and more important duties of the staff of the head office. A due regard is paid to economy in these items, and in aiming at the provision of plain but neat and serviceable furniture and fittings for the public offices, without any of those elaborate designs and enrichments which frequently characterize the interior of private institutions and offices.

CARETAKING AND MISCELLANEOUS SERVICES.

Where special circumstances require it with larger public buildings caretakers are employed, who have to supplement their general duties in that capacity before the opening and after the closing of the offices by service as messengers, or the performance of other specified duties.

Arrangements have to be made for the large towns, generally by contract, for many miscellaneous