

120. Fire is best fought by preventing fire. Half-measures are not sufficient, and in the wider case—that is, the case of fire in one building spreading to other buildings—it will be found that the enormous loss cannot be borne by the owner, who from lack of preventive measures has really caused the fire. Prevention is the only remedy, not damages after the event.

In our opinion, if the Code is made compulsory to all buildings, including existing buildings, subject to the qualification that the engineer can qualify strict compliance with the requirements of the Code, owners will be alive to their responsibilities and more readily approach the engineer and ask him to inspect their premises if he has not already done so, than under the present system under which experience shows no active steps at all have been taken.

ORDER OF REFERENCE (7)

The desirability of occupiers of business premises instructing their staffs in the principles of fire-prevention, evacuation drill, and the elementary principles of fire fighting.

121. During the war period thirty men and twenty-four women on the staff of Ballantynes were members of the E.P.S., and as such received instruction in fire-prevention. Of this number but seven men and three women remained on the staff of Ballantynes at the time of the fire.

122. In England, we believe, all E.P.S. men and women were trained in the elementary principles of fire-prevention, including, amongst other matters, the way to pass through smoke, that is to say, keeping close to the ground and walls when moving through it, so as to get clearer atmosphere and avoid the weakest part of a floor in case of fire, that is, the centre where supporting members are most likely to snap.

It is usually safe to travel by both passageways and fire-escapes or other stairways so long as the smoke is not too hot to breathe. It may be unpleasant and frightening to the uninitiated, but it is better to put up with discomfort than to stay trapped.

123. Mr. Blundell, who appeared for the fire underwriters, said that, in their opinion, without presuming to be dogmatic, evacuation drill in any of our big stores would not be effective, and to the extent that it was defective it might create a false sense of security, because members of a staff might move, in case of emergency, to exits they were accustomed to go in their drill, and if those exits were blocked, material for a panic would arise. He said that he thought it preferable that there be an obligation to ensure that every member of the staff knew every exit and means of getting to that exit in the particular building.

We think, in answer to that, that evacuation drill would ensure that members of the staff knew all exits and the means of getting to those exits.

124. In our opinion, despite all preventive measures, including, for example, the sprinkler system, intelligent evacuation practice should be compulsory in all cases where workers are employed. In Ballantynes we were told that the whole building could, with proper organization, be evacuated in three and a half to four minutes.

Mechanical means of warning and mechanical devices such as fire-sprinklers may and do from unpredictable causes—such, for instance, as a break in supply of water or electric power—prove ineffective. So far no absolutely fireproof building has been designed. Disastrous fires have occurred in modern buildings which have been advertised as fireproof.

In our opinion, all members of the staff should be instructed how they should move in the event of fire and, in a large organization, there should be detailed men or women who could take positions and have authority to direct members of the staff to the positions they should take up on warning of fire, and move those who attempted to pass down one exit to another exit in the event of the first exit becoming impassable.