

On the day of the fire the officer assigned to take charge of the electric-ladder—namely, Senior Station Officer Shield—was temporarily absent on duty when the call came. He returned to the station at 3.57 p.m. and then immediately left for the fire with the electric ladder. As the electric ladder left for the fire before the brigade call was received at 4 p.m., some weight might be attached to the suggestion that, in the first turnout, the electric ladder was held at the station because of the absence of the officer assigned to that appliance.

137. When the first call came through there were available at the Central Station, in addition to the Duty Officer and watchroom-duty fireman, four officers and seventeen firemen, of whom three officers and eleven firemen with Nos. 1 and 11 appliances and the salvage van left at once for the call. On the return of Senior Station Officer Shield at 3.57 p.m. he and a driver left with the Tilling-Stevens electric ladder.

138. When the brigade call was received at 4 p.m. an officer and five firemen left with the No. 9 appliance, leaving No. 6 appliance and a combination hose-laying van unmanned by duty men. As leave personnel became available the combination unit left for the fire at 4.18 p.m. with two officers and one fireman, and this was followed at 4.39 p.m. by the No. 6 appliance carrying three firemen.

As a consequence of the brigade call the duty officer, in addition to turning out the No. 6 appliance from central station, gave orders for the turnout of the brigades at Sydenham, St. Albans, Sumner, New Brighton, Islington, Belfast, and Woolston—the latter brigade reporting at the central station at 4.5 p.m., where it was retained in the event of an emergency call from another area. Assistance was later received from the Air Force Station at Wigram and the Army at Burnham. A large number of ex-E.F.S. personnel and a number of men of the Navy and Army, as well as members of the general public, rendered assistance to the brigade.

139. The first appliance to arrive at the fire was No. 11 engine with Senior Station Officer Stevenson in charge of a crew of one driver and four firemen. It stopped close to the right-of-way to the south of Congreves.

The second appliance to arrive was No. 1 engine with Third Officer Burrows and a junior officer in charge of a crew consisting of a driver and four firemen. It stopped on the east side of Colombo Street, north of the right-of-way. The salvage van had a driver only, and it pulled up behind No. 1.

Neither of the officers in charge of No. 11 and No. 1 appliances was aware that the electric ladder was not accompanying them.

140. On the way to the fire Officer Burrows, knowing that he was proceeding to a cellar fire, gave orders to a fireman to prepare to don a breathing-apparatus. No such order was given by Officer Stevenson, who arrived first and pulled up at the entrance to the right-of-way.

141. Although much of the evidence was unsatisfactory, and to a great measure contradictory, we think there was a considerable volume of smoke issuing from the right-of-way to the street when the brigade arrived. Nevertheless, while breathing-apparatus was essential to enable the firemen to reach the basement, we believe, considering the whole of the evidence, it was possible for a person to penetrate to the double doors in the right-of-way, a distance of 39 ft. from the street frontage, without the use of such apparatus.

142. On arrival the brigade was met by Mr. Roger Ballantyne and an employee (Mr. Falkingham) and, although brigade officer Stevenson apparently asked no questions, he was told that the fire was in the basement, access to which could be gained from a door on the right-hand side of the right-of-way, this basement entrance being some 25 ft. beyond the double doors. Mr. Falkingham, who went with Mr. Roger Ballantyne to meet the brigade, said he actually led the way to the double doors, being followed by a fireman, whom we think must have been Officer Stevenson.