

Later on, to the question :—

Q. Well, wouldn't it have been very much better if you had spent a few seconds just obtaining the information that would have helped you, which you say the man didn't volunteer ?

He answered—

A. Yes, sir. At the time I didn't anticipate any difficulty, but I do agree with that now.

Commenting on these questions, Mr. Hutchison said :—

Stevenson was the officer in charge of the first motor, and it was his job to find the fire as quickly as possible. We can now see, as Stevenson says, that if he had had more information it might have enabled him to have found the cellar-entrance. This is a case where one can be wise after the event, but to the officer in charge of the first motor, arriving at this alleyway (right-of-way) and receiving this information, it was, I submit, quite reasonable that he should go in expecting that he would find the cellar-entrance.

It is suggested that, when he was at the entrance to the door into Congreves, he might in some way have directed the use of the lead that the branchman had. There was no fire visible ; there was considerable heat and considerable smoke ; and the whole place appeared to be filled with this heat and this smoke, with no apparent place from which it was coming. There was no fire on which water could be directed. It was suggested to him that he might have used it to cool down the first floor, but that was not Stevenson's function. His function was to locate the fire, and after he located the fire to direct his hose on it.

In our opinion it is amazing that, if more information was wanted from Mr. Roger Ballantyne or Mr. Falkingham, it was not asked for. Officer Burrows was there as well as Officer Stevenson and Branchman Thompson. He knew the importance of getting water to the cellar as quickly as possible. Mr. Roger Ballantyne and Mr. Falkingham were there to give the brigade information, and no one has suggested they were not ready to answer any questions that might be put to them.

Officer Burrows, who was in charge of the operations, on his own account said hardly a word to Mr. Ballantyne. He made no inquiries as to whether the building had been evacuated and, after rejecting the entrance from the goods-lift as a possible means of reaching the cellar, sought no information at all as to other means of reaching the cellar. He did not even notice the alleyway between Pratts and Goodmans down which the fire-escape ran, which his own Superintendent said he should have done.

In our opinion, if it was, as Officer Stevenson admits, lack of information about the whereabouts of the door in the right-of-way and the staircase leading from the door to the cellar, and the seat of the fire, that delayed or even prevented the success of the attempt to reach the cellar from the door in the right-of-way, the blame must fall on the fire brigade.

150. In our opinion, the loss of the ten minutes spent in that right-or-way, and Officer Burrows' absence unaccompanied by a fireman to whom he could have given orders, led to almost total inactivity on the part of the whole brigade till flame burst out at approximately 3.58. The loss of ten or eleven minutes in the attempt to use the entrance through the right-of-way rendered such steps as could have been taken to confine the fire to the cellar impossible.

151. On returning from the right-of-way, where he had been for approximately two minutes, Officer Burrows inquired from Mr. Roger Ballantyne if there was an alternative entrance to the basement. Mr. Roger Ballantyne then took him to the goods-lift well, from where there was an entrance to Goodman's cellar.

According to Mr. Roger Ballantyne, he intended taking him into Goodmans through the Colombo Street entrance, which, of course, was the most sensible route. When opposite this entrance he veered towards the doorway, but, coming up against a number of people in the entrance, and noticing through the display window that the building was filled with smoke, he decided to proceed to the corner of Colombo and Cashel Street, enter that way, and then proceed to the goods-lift to the south of the shoe department and a short distance from the western end of the right-of-way, from where the smoke was issuing and Officer Stevenson and a fireman were endeavouring to locate the fire.