

171. There was considerable evidence that smoke was seen to be increasing on the first floor of Congreves, but no brigade officer inspected this floor. Had Officer Burrows instructed one of his officers to investigate this floor he would have discovered the potential danger that existed, and would have realized the whole building was in jeopardy.

We have the evidence of Officer Burrows that he intended to carry out these inspections after returning from the right-of-way for the second time, but was prevented from doing so by the break-through of flames. This was after a lapse of ten minutes from his arrival at the fire, and, while conceding the fact that the brigade was acting under a severe handicap through a very late call, we believe the failure to take effective action to cover and surround the fire was an important omission which contributed largely to the ultimate disaster.

172. We have been asked not to judge by after events. It is true it is easy to be wise after the event, but the evidence of the Superintendent of the Christchurch Fire Brigade, who was naturally anxious to protect his officers and men, is in itself some justification for, at any rate, conclusions adverse to the brigade. We set out some questions put to him in cross examination, and his answers :

Q. Knowing, as they must have known, that there was a great volume of smoke building up on the first floor of Congreve's building—that being plainly visible to everybody—are you satisfied with no officer at any stage investigating the position on the first floor of Congreve's building ?

A. No.

Q. Somebody should have, should they not ?

A. Yes, that is so.

Q. Are you satisfied that no officer entered the ground floor of Goodman's building to investigate the possibility of attacking the fire from that approach ?

A. I am not satisfied.

Q. Had the investigation of the first floor that I referred to been carried out, the dangerous condition up there would have been discovered, would it not ?

A. I was not there, but from the evidence I think that that was a reasonable way of finding out the position

Q. I will come back to the ground floor now. You agree that some one should have gone in through the doorway of Goodman's building and investigated the position on the ground floor ?

A. Yes, and there was a reason why that was not done. (The reason being that Burrows was led on by Roger Ballantyne.)

Q. Has that been done by some officer, they must have discovered the entrance to Congreve's cellar through the archway ?

A. Yes

Q. That is to say, if any officer had gone in that way and got into Goodman's ground floor or Congreve's ground floor, the chances are he would have hacked a hole in the floor and attacked the fire through that hole ?

The Chairman : I may be wrong, but I think the evidence is that some of the staff were in there. Is that not so ?

Mr. Watson : I was reserving that for comment at a later stage.

Q. At any rate, you will say that, had an officer gone in there and got on to the ground floor, the probability is that he would have hacked a hole in the floor and attacked the fire through that hole ?

A. Yes, that probably would have been done.

Q. And that probably would have saved the calamity of Ballantyne's fire ?

A. No, I don't think so.

Q. That is what you would have done if you had been there yourself ?

A. I certainly would have gone in through Goodman's building.

Q. And if you could not have gone down into the cellar, you would have hacked a hole in the floor ?

A. Certainly.

Q. That is what you would have done yourself ?

A. Yes.

Q. And that is the ordinary practice for attacking such a cellar fire ?

A. That is so.

Q. Coming back to the point that the Chairman mentioned, and which I was reserving for comment later, I put it to you this way : If the evidence shows that laymen without respirators were present on that ground floor at the very time I am suggesting you could have got down the stairway into either cellar—Goodman's or Congreve's—you will agree that officers and men of the fire brigade could and should have gone down those stairways ?