

PREFACE

The report of the Commission which we present is the report of all your Commissioners.

1. The general scope and purpose of the inquiry is set out in the preamble to the particular matters to be inquired into, which preamble is as follows :—

Whereas on the 18th day of November, one thousand nine hundred and forty-seven, a disastrous fire occurred at the premises of Messrs. J. Ballantyne and Company, Limited, situated in Colombo and Cashel Streets, in the City of Christchurch :

And whereas a number of persons lost their lives and extensive damage to property occurred by reason of the said fire :

And whereas it is expedient that a full inquiry be made into all the circumstances concerning the fire and the resultant loss of life and damage to property :

And whereas it is desirable that inquiry should be made into such other matters arising from the said fire as may be necessary to enable consideration to be given to the adoption in the future of such measures as may be deemed advisable in the public interest.

2. As it appeared imperative that the Commission should take the earliest opportunity of viewing the ruins of the Ballantyne premises, we proceeded to Christchurch in December, 1947, and a thorough inspection was made of what remained of the buildings. At this stage much debris had been removed, but little demolition had taken place, so that we gained first-hand evidence on the structural elements of the building ; alterations made from time to time, such as lateral and vertical openings ; dividing walls from basement to first-floor level ; and general comprehension of the original layout of the main portions of the premises.

3. A preliminary sitting was held in the Provincial Council Chambers at Christchurch on 17th December, 1947, when counsel representing the Crown and various other interests met the Commission, and arrangements were made to commence public sittings in Christchurch on 27th January, 1948. Since opening, we have held the following public sittings, the dates mentioned in each case being inclusive, and all sittings being in Christchurch :—

27th January to 6th February.

17th February to 27th February.

11th March to 19th March.

6th April to 23rd April.

25th May to 1st July.

In all, we sat for 65 days ; heard 186 witnesses, whose evidence occupies 3,527 pages ; and in addition heard addresses by counsel which added another 900 pages to the notes. Of the witnesses, 67 were either present or past employees, or principals of the firm of Messrs. J. Ballantyne and Co., Ltd. In addition, exhibits numbering 144 were admitted, and many of these consist of lengthy technical reports. A list of the witnesses called on behalf of the Crown and other parties is attached as Appendix A.

4. In view of the scope and purpose of the inquiry and the recommendations called for with a view to preventing, as far as possible, a recurrence of a disaster causing loss of life and destruction of property such as occurred in this fire, we deemed it in the public interest to ensure that all evidence available should be placed before us. All counsel engaged have co-operated in this matter, and have called all witnesses they considered could give evidence relative to the inquiry and, in addition, have called certain further witnesses we desired to hear.

5. The police interviewed every employee of Ballantynes who was in the buildings affected by the fire, and took statements from upwards of three hundred and fifty people in one way or another connected with the fire—some as employees of Ballantynes, and others as customers on the premises during the early stages of the fire, or as witnesses