

INTRODUCTION

11. Messrs. J. Ballantyne and Co., Ltd., have for many years carried on a large general drapery, clothing, and furnishing business in premises with frontages to Colombo and Cashel Streets in the heart of the City of Christchurch. The extent of the business is indicated by the number of employees, which is given as 458.

12. Of the 41 persons who lost their lives in the fire, 38 were employees of Ballantyne and Co., one was an independent representative of the College of Retailing Representatives, and two were auditors engaged on the premises at the time of the fire on examination of the firm's books and records for purposes of audit. No customer or member of the public on the premises at the time of the fire lost his or her life.

13. The number of customers that would normally be on the premises in mid-afternoon, the time the fire started, was given as approximately 250 to 300, and at peak periods 1,500. On special occasions—for instance, at the time of Christmas buying or special sales—the number of customers on the premises, it is estimated, might reach approximately 2,000 or more.

Most of the public would always be on the ground floor, or main selling and display area, the area of that floor being approximately 39,000 square feet.

14. The first floor was, in the main, given over to furniture, tailoring, hairdressing, special display, and tea-rooms for members of the public. Customers would not be there in such numbers as on the ground floor, although at certain times 250 people might be seated in the tea-room. At the time of the fire it seems it was only about one-quarter full.

15. The staff cafeteria was on the second floor, directly over the public tea-room. Customers had access to the second-floor fitting-rooms in Goodman's and would be limited in number.

The second floor of Congreve's, the third floor of Goodman's, and the second floor of Pratt's were devoted principally to the staff.

16. The premises occupied by Ballantyne and Co., consisted of some eight buildings acquired at different times. We are most concerned with Congreve's building fronting Colombo Street; Goodman's building fronting Colombo Street; and Pratt's building fronting Colombo Street and Cashel Street, as in Congreve's building the fire started, and the lives were lost in Goodman's and Pratt's buildings.

17. The premises can be described as a group of buildings, each erected many years ago, converted by openings in one-time party walls into one large establishment. In such cases it is questionable, since weaknesses in an old building from the fire-prevention point of view can become weaknesses of added gravity to the whole of the new layout, whether the whole should not be treated as a new building.

The group had a frontage of 265 ft. to Cashel Street, and 165 ft. to Colombo Street. The Colombo Street depth was 133 ft., and the Cashel Street buildings ran back from Cashel Street to Lichfield Street where the frontage was 69 ft.

Photographs of the model showing the Colombo Street and Cashel Street frontages follow. On them we have marked—

“A” A right-of-way at the south of Congreve's building:

“B” The alleyway between Goodman's and Pratt's buildings:

“C” The windows of the millinery workroom in Goodman's building, where seven girls lost their lives:

“D” The window in Pratt's, where two girls jumped to the veranda:

“E” The window from which Mr. Kenneth Ballantyne was rescued.