

He thought the tea-rooms were about a quarter full. After being in the lounge for only a few minutes, four or five men, whom he took to be assistants from the men's tailoring, came running through the art display space with handkerchiefs to their faces. They were followed by a cloud of smoke. Almost immediately there was an explosion, and everything in that part of the shop burst into flames. The flames appeared to be coming through the arches from the furniture showroom, the arch outside the cash-desk, or the ladies' rest-rooms, and through the arch from the art display.

As he made his way down the stairs there appeared to be burning materials falling from above. His evidence was that, when he went downstairs, he saw no one directing evacuation, and there was no one at the door in Cashel Street by which he left the building.

75. Another witness, Mrs. Elsie Smith, spoke of arriving at the western entrance to Ballantynes in Cashel Street at not earlier than 3.52 and noticing confusion about the corner of Colombo and Cashel Streets. She entered the building and, on her way to the shoe department, noticed a customer being served. On arrival at the shoe department she says the smoke or vapour was terribly bad, and the lights were out. An assistant said there was nothing to worry about; Mrs. Smith collected a parcel she had gone in for, and then hurriedly left the premises. Mrs. Smith thought she was in the building for approximately four minutes, and during that time saw no evacuation measures being taken, and there was no person manning the exit.

76. Then we have the evidence of a Mr. Troup and his son who entered the mercery department shortly after 3.35 p.m., and left the premises just prior to flames breaking out in the building. While in the shop Mr. Troup heard a fire-engine arriving outside, and an assistant remarked, "That will be the fire-engine to our place; there's been a fire going on in our cellar for some time."

During the whole of the time he was in the premises no orders were given regarding evacuation, and the staff appeared to be carrying on their work as usual. Mr. Troup left the premises after his son had viewed the premises from the street, and returned to say the smoke was very bad outside.

77. We also have the evidence of a Mrs. Mangin who was in the vicinity of the basement stairs when the smoke issuing from the basement was first noticed. This customer spoke of the covering of stock and an assistant locking the entrance-doors on to Colombo Street, and then unlocking them to allow her to enter Colombo Street.

78. Ballantynes seemed to have thought fire-risk was negligible; the staff was not instructed where to go, or what to do in event of fire; no preventive measures were taken, and the executive officers who could have been expected to take control had to improvise necessary control.

The Good Housekeeping Scheme, highly regarded by authorities as one of the most effective measures of fire-prevention, involved to those who praised it much more than Ballantynes practised. Properly understood, it is not confined solely to collecting paper, cleaning floors, and emptying rubbish-bins. It involves keeping technical devices in order, and was not carried out when the automatic warning-device was neglected, and on that account was taken out by the firm who installed it. No substitute was installed to take the place of the automatic warning, and even the Klaxon horns, which could have been used for warning and were put in during the E.P.S. period, were taken out. Nor was good housekeeping carried out in allowing flexes and other electric equipment to become worn or frayed.

As a whole the steps taken, after allowing for the difficult situation caused by lack of antecedent prevention measures, cannot on the evidence of the executive officers be regarded as satisfactory. Urgent personal action to see to the evacuation of the staff on the upper floors was required, and, in our opinion, was lacking.