

FIRE LOSS IN FIRE DISTRICTS.

It will be seen from tables II and IV attached that the loss in fire districts during the year ending 31st March, 1939, was £441,489 and in areas protected by Fire Boards £9,453, as compared with £170,167 and £24,011 respectively for the previous year. As indicated above, this increase is accounted for by the exceptional number and severity of major fires in the cities. Details of fires in fire districts with loss exceeding £5,000 are as follows :—

Fires with Loss exceeding £5,000, Year ending 31st March, 1939.

Locality.	Day and Date.	Time.	Occupation of Premises in which Fire occurred.	Cause of Fire.	Loss.
					£
Auckland ..	Sunday (15/5/38) ..	10.26 p.m.	Motor-body builders	Unknown ..	30,898
Auckland ..	Friday (8/7/38) ..	8.40 p.m.	Joinery-factory ..	Unknown ..	20,885
Auckland ..	Thursday (2/3/39) ..	1.50 a.m.	Theatre and shops ..	Unknown ..	5,300
Auckland ..	Sunday (5/3/39) ..	7.33 p.m.	Timber-mill ..	Unknown ..	8,929
Dunedin ..	Friday (28/10/38) ..	2.32 a.m.	Confectionery-factory	Unknown ..	12,296
Christchurch ..	Saturday (14/5/38) ..	9.11 p.m.	Shop and factory ..	Unknown ..	14,030
Christchurch ..	Monday (23/5/38) ..	2.47 a.m.	Departmental store ..	Unknown ..	47,283
New Plymouth ..	Thursday (7/7/38) ..	7.10 p.m.	Departmental store ..	Unknown ..	11,304
Wellington ..	Wednesday (22/6/38)	7.20 p.m.	Hosiery-mills ..	Unknown ..	10,600
Wellington ..	Thursday (10/11/38)	12.30 a.m.	Confectionery-factory	Unknown ..	9,192
Wellington ..	Thursday (2/2/39) ..	2.44 a.m.	Government offices (wooden building in course of erection)	Unknown ..	46,468
Wellington ..	Tuesday (28/3/39) ..	6.59 p.m.	General warehouse, offices, &c.	Light thrown into packing-material in lift-well	77,826
Palmerston North* ..	Friday (17/2/39) ..	9.24 p.m.	Aero-club "hangar" and club-rooms	Unknown ..	7,139
					£302,150

* Outside fire district, but within area protected by the Fire Board.

LOSS OF LIFE IN FIRES.

It is to be regretted that during the year under review an unusually large number of fatalities again occurred at or in connection with fires, there being twenty-one deaths, as compared with twenty-two last year. Of these deaths, ten were caused through persons being trapped in burning buildings and five were due to the victims' clothes catching fire. In three of the latter cases the ignition was caused by ordinary electric radiators. Of the remainder, one death was due to the use of petrol for dry-cleaning, one to the explosion of a petrol lamp, one to a child lighting a fire with kerosene, and one to a person being trapped in a scrub fire. Another death was caused by the ignition of clothing impregnated with potassium chlorate; and in one case a fireman was electrocuted while engaged in operations at a fire.

FIRE-BRIGADE ADMINISTRATION.

The proposals for fire-brigade administration set out in my last annual report were adopted by the Government as a basis for discussion with the local authorities and other interests concerned. During the year under review a number of conferences have taken place with representatives of the Fire Underwriters' Association, the Municipal Association, and the United Fire Brigades' Association. As a result of these conferences the general principle involved has been approved, subject to certain modifications which were adopted as a result of representations made by interested parties. It had been intended to prepare legislation for submission to Parliament during the current session, but owing to the existing war emergency this will have to be deferred.

CAUSES OF FIRE.

The causes of fire in fire districts are set out in Table I attached. No unusual information is disclosed by the figures for the current year, and, as in previous years, the great bulk of fire loss is due to fires which are returned as of "unknown" origin. It has been explained in previous reports that this is due to the fact that serious fires in most cases destroy all evidence of the cause of the fire. It will be noted, for instance, that in the table of serious fires given in this report in all but one instance the cause is not known, and even in this case the immediate cause, whether a match or cigarette, was not actually determined, but as persons were in the building at the time of the fire it was quite evident that the fire was due to the ignition of packing-material either by a match or cigarette-butt. There is little reason to doubt that practically all of these serious fires are due to one or other of the causes enumerated in Table I.

INSPECTION.

The inspection work was considerably reduced owing to my prolonged absence due to ill-health. Only about one-third of the brigades were inspected during the year, but close touch was kept with the activities of all districts through newspaper-cuttings, and, where necessary, several visits were made to individual fire districts. The conditions found were in every case satisfactory; and it is pleasing to report that the investigations made showed that in no case were the high-loss fires referred to previously in this report due to any default by the brigade. As a matter of fact, in most instances one could have nothing but the highest praise for the effectiveness of the work carried out under difficult conditions.

A number of reports were made during the year with regard to the fire protection of Government buildings and to the Local Government Loans Board on loan proposals for fire protection, water-supply and water-reticulation services.

Attached are statistical tables covering both the year under review and also averages taken over a period of years.

I have, &c.,

R. GIRLING-BUTCHER,
Inspector of Fire Brigades.