

seemed adequate. Mr. Hudson, we know, went to the credit office on the second floor of Pratt's. Mr. Novell apparently confined his attention to the ground floor and the customers there.

When the fire broke through he entered the building and found some twelve to twenty employees on the ground floor. They were still there when he came back after visiting the first floor. When he finally left the building he spoke to Mr. Novell, who told him the last of the employees had left. It was not till some considerable time later that he learned that some of his employees had been trapped on the upper floors.

72. Finally, we take the evidence of Mr. Novell, who was general manager of the company.

When he first heard of the fire, the evidence suggests somewhere between 3.40 and 3.45 p.m., he said he went to the unoccupied portion of the first floor in Congreve's, and then to the ground floor, where he met Mr. Roger Ballantyne. As the fire appeared to be confined to the basement, and he was told the brigade had been called, he did not consider there was any immediate danger or necessity to evacuate the staff.

In evidence he stated that his first reaction was to go to the ground floor to take charge, but, apparently, on finding Messrs. Roger and Kenneth Ballantyne there, he considered there was no necessity for him to do anything. When told of the arrival of the fire brigade he went to the Colombo Street frontage to see what was taking place and for the purpose of giving the fire brigade any information they might require. From that time until flames appeared was apparently a period of inactivity on his part.

Once flames appeared he said he returned to the building and closed the fire-doors in the furnishing department and cleared that department of staff. On returning to Colombo Street he was amazed at the spread of flame, and then realized that a major catastrophe was taking place.

His plan was then to re-enter the building and take control of complete evacuation. On re-entering the building and finding on the ground floor employees from the upper floors, he assumed all those on the upper floors had been warned in some manner, and therefore did not contemplate any necessity to have staff evacuated from the upper portion of the building.

On moving to the centre of the shop to control evacuation he came in contact with Mr. Ronald Ballantyne, whom he thought had attended to what was necessary in the centre of the shop, so he left to view the fire from the street. A further visit to the shop was made, and, after satisfying himself that the ground floor was cleared, he finally left the shop. It was some time later that he first learned that members of the staff had been trapped on the upper floors.

73. The evidence of members of the public who were on the premises was that they heard neither warning nor orders to evacuate, and noticed no sign of organized evacuation.

Although there appear to have been isolated efforts to prevent people from entering the building, nevertheless right up to the time of the break-through, and indeed after the first appearance of flame, there was no real obstacle to prevent customers from entering the shop, at least from the Cashel Street entrances. It was estimated that at the time of the fire there may have been 250 customers on the premises.

74. One witness, a Mr. G. B. McDonald, spoke of entering the premises at the corner of Colombo and Cashel Streets at not earlier than 3.56 p.m., at a time when the lights were off and the fire-doors to the soft furnishing department were closed. He noticed assistants behind the counter and other people in the shop. At the bottom of the main stairs he saw Mr. Novell and Mr. Roger Ballantyne, but he was not prevented from going up the main stairs to the cash-desk and lounge. In the lounge he found other people.