

The following table shows for purposes of comparison the fire losses in Great Britain, Canada, and the United States of America.

	New Zealand Fire Loss.	Fire Loss per Head.							
		New Zealand.	*	Great Britain.	*	Canada.	*	U.S.A.	*
	£	s. d.		s. d.		s. d.		s. d.	
Average (1927-31)	1,332,032	18 1	..	5 0	..	17 5	..	16 0	..
1932	867,714	11 5	36.9	3 9	25.0	16 8	4.3	13 2	17.7
1933	644,781	8 4	53.9	4 7	8.3	12 11	25.8	8 10	44.8

* Percentage drop on five-year average.

It will be noted that the fire-loss returns for the United States of America show a reduction as compared with the five-year period 1927-31 approaching that experienced in New Zealand, but that the larger proportion of this reduction occurred in 1933. The reduction in the American fire losses for 1932 was generally held by the authorities to be mainly due to the drop in property-values, but it is significant that the very considerable reduction in 1933 occurred during a period of extreme financial disturbance. The financial conditions existing in Great Britain and in Canada were by comparison normal, and the slight increase in loss in Great Britain during 1933 is attributed to the effects of the very dry summer experienced and to the shortage of water for fire-fighting in some districts. Commenting on the 1933 returns for the United States of America, the *Quarterly*, the official organ of the National Fire Protection Association, says editorially:—

“Various authorities attribute this material reduction in the national fire losses to different causes. It is noteworthy, however, that the initial drop was coincident with the declaration of the bank moratorium and the adoption of the sixty-day rule by the insurance companies. The effect of the bank moratorium was to create scepticism as to the solvency of all financial institutions, insurance companies as well as banks, and made it temporarily impossible for the companies to pay losses. The decision to withhold payment of losses for sixty days discouraged incendiarism and made honest property-owners unusually careful to avoid having fires. . . . Just what percentage of the fire loss of the country is due to arson is a matter of conjecture, but the experience of the past year seems to substantiate the opinion that incendiarism, deliberate or unconscious, is responsible for a very substantial part of the total fire loss.”

Experience over many years and in different countries has shown that the great bulk of the loss by fire is due to carelessness. While it is not possible to prove conclusively the causes of the reduced losses either in the United States of America or in New Zealand, it is a reasonable assumption from the facts that the reduction is mainly due to a greater measure of care with respect to fire by the public generally, and that this greater care has been induced by the knowledge that under the existing financial conditions insurance is not an effective safeguard against personal loss in the event of fire. In New Zealand the public realization of this fact is due partly to the fire-prevention publicity campaigns undertaken in recent years, and partly to the action taken fairly generally by the insurance companies in the reduction of the insurance “cover” allowed, and by a tightening-up of the system of inspection of their risks.

It would appear that the maintenance of the present more satisfactory position with respect to the national fire wastage is to a great extent in the hands of the insurance companies themselves. Inquiries made into fires of a suspicious nature almost invariably show that “over-insurance” has taken place and the property is insured for more than it is worth. In such cases the insurer is likely to assume that he will gain by a fire. Conversely, if the public generally can be made to realize—as it has by the existing conditions—that insurance will only cover part of the fire loss, the greater care and lesser tendency to deliberate fires evidenced by the 1933 figures will have a permanent effect on the national fire loss.

FIRE LOSS IN FIRE DISTRICTS.

It will be seen from Tables I and III attached that the fire loss in fire districts during the year ending the 31st March last was £245,195, and in areas protected by Fire Boards £39,158, or a total loss of £284,353, as compared with £201,736 for the previous year. This increase was due in some degree to the inclusion of additional fire districts (City of Nelson and several areas included in the Auckland Metropolitan District), but mainly to the fact that although the number of fires was slightly lower than during the previous year (732 as compared with 737), the number involving a loss of £5,000 or more increased from four to twelve. Of these fires, four occurred in Auckland (£50,353), one in Wellington (£5,100), five in Christchurch (£66,174), and two in Dunedin (£14,922), the loss in the twelve fires being £136,549, or practically half the total loss for the year. Although the loss per head (6s. 6d.) in fire districts is higher than for the previous year, it is still considerably lower than the national loss for the calendar year 1933 (8s. 4d.) referred to above.

CAUSES OF FIRE.

The year's records show that there has been no great variation in the causes from which fires arise. Pride of place as the principal fire hazard is still held by the unguarded domestic fireplace, while fires from electrical equipment tend to increase, mainly owing to electric irons and radiators being left on after use. Next in order come fires from smokers' carelessness with matches, pipes, and cigarettes, this hazard being a prolific cause of fire in business premises. Fires from naked lights (candles, lamps, &c.) are decreasing in number with the greater use of electricity, but those from the domestic use of petrol inside buildings (home dry-cleaning) appear to be increasing and are the most prolific source of personal injury. The indications from the returns are that every year approximately the same number of people leave matches—and particularly wax matches—about for children to play with, light rubbish fires near buildings, use petrol or kerosene for lighting fires, place hot ashes in wooden containers, air clothes before open fires, look for gas-leaks with a lighted match, or contribute to the national fire waste in the other ways detailed in these reports from year to year.