

FIREMAN JOHN HARRISON

The Glasgow Herald, Monday 8 December, 1856

Fireman John Harrison died on Friday 5th December, 1856 when the floor above fell on him at a fire in Buchanan Street.

Harrison, the deceased Fireman – Elsewhere we have given details of the calamitous fire which took place on Friday morning, in the neighbourhood of the Exchange, and which was rendered still more disastrous by the melancholy end of Harrison, the poor fireman who lost his life in the discharge of his duty, and whose fate has excited very general sympathy in the city.

It is to be hoped in this verbal expression of sympathy, that it will not be forgotten that the poor man has left a widow and two children, who are rendered destitute by the death of the breadwinner. It might be expected that the Police Committee would sufficiently succour the widow and fatherless in a case like this; but it has been their wont, possibly from lack of power, to extended much liberality to fireman hurt on duty.

In the case of a man injured about nine weeks since at the fire in Govan Street, and who is not yet able to resume work, all the help he has received is 25s from the Police Committee, and 20s from an Insurance Company. We recommend the public, therefore, to look to the case of Harrison's widow for themselves; and we have satisfaction in stating that Mr. Readman, of the Clydesdale Bank, will be happy to receive and take care of any sums which may be entrusted to his keeping.

We have also pleasure in stating Mr. David Bell requests his name to be put down for £5, 5s., and Messrs William Wardlaw & Co. for £2, 2s., in aid of the desolate widow and children. Mr. Bell also offers an additional sum of £5, 5s. towards a permanent fund in aid of firemen who may be hurt on duty.

Harrison the Fireman – In addition to the subscriptions noticed in our last in behalf of the widow of Harrison and her children, who lost his life in the fire in Buchanan Street, on Friday morning, the members of the Police Committee, headed by the Lord Provost, contributed at the meeting of the Police Board on Monday, the sum of £30 8s. These are subscriptions from the gentlemen as individuals, and not in their official capacity. We have to repeat that Mr. Readman, of the Clydesdale Bank, will be glad to receive subscriptions on behalf of the bereaved widow and her children.

Funeral of the Fireman Harrison – Yesterday afternoon the remains of John Harrison, who lost his life at the fire in Buchanan Street on Friday morning, were interred with what are termed firemen's honours. At one o'clock a fire engine, drawn by four horses, with outriders, left the Central Station, and proceeded to Shuttle Street, where the body was lifted. The coffin was placed on the top of the engine, covered with a pall and surmounted with deceased's helmet, reversed, and his belt and keys. The engine was then drawn to College Street, where it remained till the company, who were assembled within the firemen's hall, were formed into procession.

The funeral procession consisted of 50 members of the fire brigade, in full uniform, (headed by the Superintendent, Mr. Bryson,) upwards of one hundred gentlemen, including the relatives and friends of deceased, as well as many of the merchants and tradesmen in the city. The Rev. Dr. Graham of Barrack Street Church though suffering from severe indisposition, which prevented him from accompanying the funeral, conducted the services in the hall.

Thereafter the firemen took up their positions, three deep, in front of the engine, which was flanked right and left by the West of England Brigade, the friends and relatives following in the rear. Captains Smart and Mackay were amongst the mourners, and a strong detachment of police kept admirable order, though the crowd was very dense, and escorted the procession to the cemetery at Sighthill.

Up till Saturday evening it was intended that the funeral should be private and considering this, the arrangements were such as reflect great credit on Mr. George Smith, Nelson Street, who, till recently, was one of the branchmen in the Central Brigade.

DESTRUCTIVE CONFLAGRATION - A FIREMAN KILLED

As briefly noticed in a part of our last impression, a fire – the most serious that has occurred in the city for a lengthened period – broke out between two and three o'clock on Friday morning, in the extensive square block of building situated between Queen and Buchanan Streets, to the south of the Exchange, and occupied by Messrs. James Black & Co., manufacturer and calico printers; Mr James Paul, manufacturer; Mr. Murry Cowburgh, silk handkerchief and sewed muslin manufacturer; and Messrs Stevenson, Ross & Co., cotton yard merchants. ►



THE
FIREFIGHTERS'
HERITAGE
TRAIL

ROYAL EXCHANGE SQUARE FRIDAY 5TH DECEMBER 1856

The West of England Brigade were the first on the scene with their engine, information of the disaster having been conveyed to the station by a young man who accidentally observed the burning while passing along Buchanan Street. The engine was drawn into the court entering from said street, and at this time – a quarter before three o'clock – the building from top to bottom was in a blaze, and the flames issuing with intense fury from the windows at the west side. The police then seem to have been made aware of the fact that a fire was actually in Buchanan Street, as a messenger was sent to the Central station at three o'clock and gave the alarm.

The brigade, with characteristic rapidity, were speedily on the spot with three engines; but Mr Bryson seeing that all efforts to save the building must prove ineffectual – the roof by this time, about twelve minutes past three, having fallen in – and that the adjoining tenements were in imminent danger, despatched messengers for the Southern, Western and Northern engines, which were speedily in attendance. At this time the appearance of the burning building was truly terrific. The flames ascended to a considerable height, illuminating the city for miles around, and throwing showers of sparks into the air.

About a quarter past three o'clock, Thomas Main, Allan Todd, and John Harrison, firemen in the Central Brigade, forced the door on the first floor, leading to Messrs Black & Co.'s packing room, and were in the act of breaking open an inner door, when the floor suddenly gave way a little, throwing the poor men on their backs; and before they could recover themselves, the flooring of the flat above came down with a tremendous crash. Main and Todd were almost immediately extricated; but we regret to say that poor Harrison, being in advance of his comrades, could not be reached, notwithstanding that every effort which it was possible to think of was made. His body was recovered about eight o'clock, when it was discovered that he must have met with a speedy death, his back having been fractured by a joist which had fallen from the upper floor.

Deceased, who bore an excellent character, was a slater to trade, and one of the best firemen in the brigade. If property was to be saved, and that within the bounds of human power, Harrison, fearless of danger, was a man to make the attempt. At a recent fire in Roslin Terrace, he got his foot burned, but stuck to his post, and required to cut his boot off when he went home. When asked by his superintendent why he did not go home at once, he replied "Oh, no, you would have thought me too thin skinned." He was 27 years of age, and has left a widow and two children.

The other two men were conveyed to the Infirmary, where they are progressing favourably, indeed Todd, though severely bruised, was intent on remaining at his work. The fire during this period was raging in every corner; and at four o'clock the east wall gave way throwing a portion of the south gable through the roof, and into the show room of Messrs Higginbotham, Prince's Court. And here we have to record a most miraculous escape.

Opposite to the east gable, five firemen were stationed upon a wall, separating by a narrow lane the property to the east of the burning building. Mr Bryson, apprehensive of danger at this point, had withdrawn his men only a few minutes before the ponderous mass tumbled down, bringing a portion of the wall on which the firemen had been standing along with it. The internal partitions gave way at the same time, and smashed in the iron doors in the adjacent sunk flat of Messrs Stevenson's premises, filled with cotton copes, which speedily ignited. By strenuous exertions the firemen succeeded in keeping the flames under, and thereby saved this tenement.

About half past five o'clock the flames had expended their fury, leaving the building a complete ruin, with nothing left standing but the front wall, and various portions of the internal fittings, which continued to smoulder and require the attendance of the hose till yesterday.

The Messrs Black had a large portion of their stock packed and ready for shipment to New York, per screw steamer Edinburgh, which had been prevented coming up to the harbour in consequence of the fog. An incident illustrative of the exemplary and spirited conduct of the officers of the 1st Royals is worthy of mention. After the brigades arrived, a difficulty was experienced in getting men to work the engines; and this fact being observed by a number of the officers, who had been enjoying themselves at the Messrs Thompson's ball in the Corporation halls, they set to – in full dress as they were – and worked diligently at the engines for about an hour, and also pressed all whom they could get into the service.

It is perhaps scarcely necessary to refer to a brigade of men who always do their duty; suffice it that on this occasion nothing was wanting, and, under their judicious and anxious superintendent, they worked manfully. But for their exertions the valuable property facing Buchanan Street, belonging to Mr Bell of Blackhall, and occupied by Messrs. Henry Field & Son, Messrs Allan & Ferguson and others, would more than probably have been totally destroyed, the two buildings being only separated by a court about twenty feet in width. ►



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The total loss will amount to upwards of £50,000; but we are happy to say that it is fully covered by insurance. Messrs J. Black & Co. are insured for £18,000, in the following offices, viz.: - Pheonix, £4,000; Imperial, 4,000; Alliance £2,000; North British, £2,000; Scottish Union, £2,000; West of England, 2,000; and Unity, £2,000. Messrs Stevenson, Ross & Co. are also insured for £18,000, as follows:- In the County, £5,000; Royal Exchange £3,000; Alliance, £2,000; Guardian, £2,000; Northern, £2,000; Caledonian, £2,000; and Monarch, £2,000. Mr Paul is insured for £4,000 in the Imperial and National offices. The building, which belongs to Mr Scott, of Kelly is insured in the Pheonix for £4,500, and the rents for £500.

The origin of this very serious fire is, of course, unknown – no one having observed it until the whole fabric was in a blaze. This is the more mysterious when we learn that the tenement was on the beat of two policemen, and actually guarded by a private watchman. That this fire progressed to such an extent through the carelessness of these men there can be little doubt, and we have good authority for stating that, even taking into consideration the inflammable character of the contents of the building, fire or smoke must have shown, at the very least, an hour before the alarm was given.

Of course an investigation will doubtless be instituted, a case, perhaps, against one or more of the constables, a dismissal follow, and the affair ends. But the safety of the city demands more than this, and when we consider how many fires have been only discovered when too late, we are led to suspect a cause. The superior officers, whose duty it is to see that the constables attend to their respective beats, and not to slumber on stairs or in closes, have too many duties to perform; and, in a word, we would say that if publicans must be hunted down and shebeen houses routed out, let it be done by a special body of men, and not by the night inspectors or serjeants, whose time is thus occupied so largely.

We do not advance this as the cause of non discovery in the present case, but we think that constables, instead of being spies against publicans, should devote their entire attention to the peace and safety of the city. If officers are necessary to implement Forbes Mackenzie's Act, let them be set apart for this work alone. As it is, we have reason to believe that the police force has not improved, since it's members were called on to perform the duties of hunting down publicans and illicit whisky sellers.

One Saturday afternoon, the portions of the walls which were in an unsafe condition were pulled down by workmen under Mr York, builder, Mr Morrison, slater, and Mr Donald, wright. The operations were under the superintendence of Mr Carrick, and were accomplished without any accident or injury to adjoining property.



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