

A GLASGOW FIRE TRAGEDY

The Glasgow Herald, Tuesday 27 December, 1927

Four firemen lost their lives while fighting this warehouse in Graham Square, in the East End of Glasgow. The building was completely destroyed.

FOUR FIREMEN PERISH

Christmas Eve Tragedy in Glasgow

EAST END WAREHOUSES GUTTED
ESTIMATED LOSS, £50,000

Four members of Glasgow Fire Brigade lost their lives while on duty at a fire in the East end of the city on Saturday night.

The men, who were all attached to the Central Division, were:—

James Conn (49) David Jeffrey (24) Harry W. M'Kellar (31) Morrison Dunbar (23)

The scene of the fire was a six storey warehouse in Graham Square, and owing to the threatening circumstances many tenants of adjoining dwellings were warned out. Some of the tenants were absent at the time of the outbreak, and on return – carrying with them, in numerous instances, their parcels got in the course of Christmas shopping – were surprised and alarmed when informed that it was unsafe to enter their houses.

A touching feature of the fire tragedy is that the men of the Eastern Division were enjoying Christmas festivities with their families in the Fire Station when the call which was to mean death to some of their colleagues in the Central.

FROM JOY TO SORROW

In the long history of the Fire Brigade of Glasgow many deeds of heroism stand to the credit of the men. In the great majority of cases their bravery has gone unnoticed or been known to a limited few – the instances of calm courage and of grave risks taken to save property and frequently life have come in the ordinary course of duty when no eye was there to see or pen to chronicle. It is only when such a tragedy as that of Christmas Eve shocks the community that full light is thrown on the dangerous nature of the fireman's calling and recognition is paid to the magnificent manner in which he carries out his trying and difficult work.

While the Fire Brigade in Glasgow has enjoyed a remarkable immunity from loss of life when a period of, say, half a century is scanned, nevertheless death with unwelcome frequency has exacted a grim toll.

Surely never was the toll made under more distressing circumstances than on Saturday evening. The Eastern Division men, with their children and friends, were in the midst of Christmas rejoicings when the call came. The men are used to such breaks in the social round, and cheerfully they responded to the summons to duty, which is taken as a matter of course.

With the celerity characteristic of the Brigade, the men from this and other Divisions with their equipment quickly set out for the scene of the fire, and the civilians remained behind to continue the happy entertainment, not dreaming of the dreadful fate that was soon to overtake four members of the Brigade, who, in the face of obvious danger, carried on till death overtook them.

The missing firemen are:—

James Conn (49), married, and with three of a family, who had 23 years' service with the brigade.

H. W. M'Kellar (31), married.

David Jeffery (24), single.

Morrison Dunbar (23), single.

SCENE OF THE FIRE

The fire was located in Graham Square, a cul-de-sac on the north side of Gallowgate, which leads to an entrance to the Corporation Cattle Market. The east side of the square consists, starting from the Gallowgate end, of a modern tenement and of a brick building of six storeys with a frontage of 135ft, and a depth of 30ft. This building, which was totally destroyed, along with corrugated iron sheds, and a warehouse at the rear, contained business premises, workshops, and an hotel.

The tenants of these premises are Messrs P. and R. Fleming, engineers 8-16 Graham Square; David Arthur, auctioneer, 12 Graham Square; Alexander Jack and Son (Limited), implement makers 20 Graham Square; Wilson, Ronald and Co. (Limited), wholesale grocers, 26-30 Graham Square; A. M'Vean and Co., manufacturers, 30 Graham Square; Thomas Dunlop, implement maker, 38 Graham Square; Pringle, Logan and Gallocher, seed merchants, 38 Graham Square; and James Houston, cabinetmaker, 12 Graham Square. ➤



THE
FIREFIGHTERS'
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GRAHAM SQUARE SATURDAY 24TH DECEMBER 1927

THE ALARM

About 8pm two constables on duty in Graham Square observed that fire had broken out in the premises occupied by James Houston. Further examination revealed that the outbreak had originated in a hoist at 34 Graham Square, which was used by several of the firms in the block. The constables smashed the fire alarm and turned out several detachments of the Fire Brigade.

By this time the fire was extending to other parts of the building. On the arrival of the first two detachments of the Fire Brigade from the Central Station great volumes of smoke pouring from the building indicated that the flames had taken a firm hold, and further reinforcements were summoned, along with four pumps and the fire escape, Firemaster Waddell took charge of the operations.

FIREMEN WITHDRAWN

Immediately, the fire was attacked both from the interior of the building and from the street. The intense heat, the density of the smoke, and the general threat to the structure, made it obvious at an early stage of the operations that it was highly perilous for the firemen to remain for long periods inside the building.

Therefore, adopting what methods they could, the firemen continued the main attack from the roadway in Graham Square, from the roofs of buildings to the east and south of the endangered premises, and even from the top of the fire escape. It soon became apparent that the entire structure was doomed and that any measures adopted by the Fire Brigade would be futile except to restrict the area of devastation.

TRAM SERVICE STOPPED

The flames were being strongly fanned by a north easterly breeze, and showers of sparks and poisonous clouds of smoke were causing much alarm in Gallowgate towards which they were drifting, and in which large crowds of spectators had gathered. The pungent smoke hung in dense clouds over the streets and sparks floated thickly down.

The tramcar service, interrupted owing to the lines of hose across the street, was diverted for a period, and then was ultimately resumed over rail bridges. The tenants of houses, who had been Christmas shopping when the fire occurred, mingled with the crowd, their arms full of parcels. Some of them were unable to reach their homes, and experienced grave anxiety as the flames darted ominously higher and seemed to endanger the tenement.

TENANTS WARNED OUT

This tenement building, which adjoins the ruined warehouses was considered at this time to be within the danger zone, and the tenants were advised to consult with their own ultimate safety and desert their homes. There are nine families in the tenement, and the alarm was raised when most of the children had hung up their stockings and retired early to bed in eager expectation of Christmas morning. Some of the tenants elected to leave, and these assembled in the street to watch the battle with the flames, but others stayed in their homes during the entire course of the fire.

COLLAPSE OF WALLS AND ROOF

A thrill ran through the watching crowd when the roof of the burning building collapsed amid an awesome pyrotechnic display of flame and sparks, to be followed a few minutes later by the thunderous crash of large portions of the walls into the interior of the structure. Dust and smoke arose in suffocating clouds. With this fresh development the career of the fire was checked, however, and half an hour later – that is, two hours after the raising of the first alarm – the outbreak was under control, and the occupiers of the tenement were informed that they might return to their homes. Lines of hose were in use all through the night, however, as a precaution against further outbreak.

FATE OF THE FIREMEN

About ten o'clock the fire was so far extinguished that several detachments of the Fire Brigade were ordered to prepare to return to their stations. The discovery was then made as the motors were about to depart that four firemen from the Central Division were missing.

An exhaustive inquiry was at once begun, but it was early feared that the men had been trapped in the building when the walls and flooring had collapsed. So far as can be ascertained the four missing men, along with others, were on the third floor at the south end of the building when the flames were first attacked. At that time the fire was confined largely to the northern end of the building, and it is assumed that with great fortitude the men had pressed some distance through the building towards the seat of the fire so as to be of greater service. ➤



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INSTANTANEOUS DEATH

Suddenly, it appears, there was a loud crash and the north end of the structure, towards which the men had gone, tumbled inwards, carrying several floors in a downward rush of destruction. Several of the firemen who were inside managed to get clear, and at that time it was thought that all of the firemen had emerged safely. When the first collapse occurred one of the officers at once dashed into the building and up the stairways right to the top flat to warn out the men. He met one fireman who was under the impression that he was the last to leave.

Jeffrey was last observed when he called for more hose, and it is one theory that, furnished with the extra length of hose, he and his colleagues had courageously penetrated towards the seat of the fire unknown to their comrades – numbering 60, and widely dispersed – who were all actively at work. There seems no doubt, at all events, that they were caught in the devastating fall of beams and brickwork and hurled down to be buried in the immense heap of debris. It is certain, whether due to injuries or fire, that their death must have been practically instantaneous.

THE SEARCH BEGINS

As portions of the remaining walls were in an extremely dangerous condition, it was recognised, reluctantly, that it would be unwise to risk the lives of other firemen in an immediate endeavour to extricate the missing men from among the still smoking wreckage during the darkness of the night. Several firemen were posted on duty, and immediately daylight broke on Christmas morning a well equipped rescue party of firemen were dispatched to take up the tragic task of attempting to recover the bodies of their unfortunate comrades.

A preliminary search was conducted with the assistance of a ladder and the fire escape, but it was found impossible to interfere to any great extent with the debris until the dangerous tottering and smoke blackened walls which marked the site of the destroyed building had been taken down. Accordingly another unavoidable hitch occurred in the work of retrieving the bodies while a gang of workmen, under the supervision of Mr Thomas Somers, Master of Works, demolished the dangerous walls.

THE DAMAGE

The loss caused by the fire is provisionally estimated at between £40,000 and £50,000.

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS CANCELLED

All of the social functions which usually take place at this time of year at the various fire stations in the city have been cancelled owing to the tragedy at Graham Square.

SEARCHING FOR THE MISSING MEN

Throughout the day on Sunday gangs of firemen, working in relays, continued their tragic task of endeavouring to locate the bodies of their unfortunate comrades. They dug amongst the broken masonry with picks and shovels until darkness descended, but no trace of the bodies could then be found. Flare lamps were obtained in order that the work of the rescue might not be interrupted.

OXY-ACETYLENE BURNERS

Portions of shafting and heavy machinery had become so intertwined when the floors collapsed that it was extremely difficult to separate and remove the twisted metal from the debris. A number of skilled operators armed with oxy-acetylene burners were obtained from the Corporation Tramway Department. Many pieces of metal were cut through, and the task of removal was thus made less difficult. As the broken masonry, charred timber, and twisted machinery were taken from the building these were removed to the street by a large number of workmen. All night long the firemen laboured heroically, but their efforts to reach the entombed men were unsuccessful when daylight broke yesterday.

FRESH RELAYS OF WORKERS

Another batch of firemen took up the search, and were engaged all day in removing the tons of debris which separated them from their unfortunate comrades. By the afternoon they had succeeded in penetrating to a considerable depth in the centre of the ruined building, and they were hopeful of being able to reach the flooring at that point before darkness came on. The search is being continued. ➤



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The Glasgow Herald, Wednesday 28 December, 1927

GLASGOW FIRE TRAGEDY - BODIES OF FIREMEN RECOVERED

FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS

After a search lasting since early on Sunday morning, the bodies of the four firemen who lost their lives in the disastrous fire which occurred in Graham Square, Gallowgate, Glasgow, on Christmas Eve, were found yesterday.

Three of the bodies were found in the forenoon, close to each other, in what had been the north east corner of the building; and the fourth, discovered some hours later, was not far from them.

The heroic firemen, who belonged to the Central Fire Station, were: –

James Conn (49), a married man with three children; H. W. M'Kellar (31), married; David Jeffery (24), single; Morrison Dunbar (23), single.

A LONG SEARCH

The bodies, which were badly mutilated, were identified last night, principally by means of their clothing and various articles found in the pockets. They were removed to the mortuary at the Royal Infirmary.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES RECALLED

The men, it will be recalled, had along with others been on the third floor of the building at the south end when the fire was first attacked. Evidently they had pluckily pushed their way through the interior of the building towards the heat of the fire in order to be of greater service in quelling the outbreak. Their bravery, unhappily, cost them their lives.

Some time after the outbreak the north end of the building buckled inwards, and with a crash the walls and flooring hurled to the ground. A number of firemen who were in the building at the time succeeded in reaching the open in safety, and it was thought that all the men had made their escape. It was not until about ten o'clock when the fire was so far extinguished that several detachments of the Fire Brigade were ordered to prepare to return to their stations, that the discovery was made that the four men from the Central Division were missing.

An exhaustive inquiry was made, but no trace of them could be found, and although there was no lack of volunteers it was considered unwise to endanger the lives of other firemen by making an immediate search of the now ruined warehouse.

Early on Christmas morning the search for the bodies of the men, buried under the huge pile of wreckage, was commenced, oxy-acetylene burners being employed to break through the heavy barriers of steel shafts to where it was believed that the unfortunate men lay. Feverishly the rescue party worked all through Sunday night, Monday and Monday night in an endeavour to locate the bodies. Progress was difficult under the circumstances and all too slowly the debris was cleared away. By the time the first body was discovered the workers were carrying on their operations behind a huge pile of wreckage, and could not be seen from the street. It is understood that the workers yesterday numbered between 60 and 70, a score of whom were firemen.

For two and a half days the search was carried on without success until yesterday forenoon, when three of the bodies were discovered in the north east corner of the ruins, thus confirming the belief that they had penetrated through the interior to that part of the building. Later in the day the body of the fourth man was recovered.

FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS

The funeral of three of the men takes place at noon on Friday from St David's (Ramshorn) Parish Church, Ingram Street to the Necropolis. The members of the Fire Brigade will attend to do honour to the memory of their late comrades, and the funeral will also be attended by ministers from the churches at which each of the men worshipped. It is understood that the relatives of the fourth man are desirous of other arrangements being made for his burial. ➤



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The Glasgow Herald, Friday 30 December, 1927

GLASGOW FIRE VICTIMS - ARRANGEMENTS FOR TODAY'S FUNERAL

Arrangements were completed yesterday at a special meeting of the Glasgow Corporation Watching and Lighting Committee, held in the City Chambers, for the funeral today of the four members of the Glasgow Fire Brigade who lost their lives at the fire which occurred in Graham Square, on Gallowgate, on Saturday night.

A public service will be held in St David's (Ramshorn) Parish Church, Ingram Street, at 12 noon, at which the Corporation will be represented by the Lord Provost (Mr David Mason), the Magistrates, and Town Councillors. Members of other local bodies will attend, and in addition there will be present representatives of Fire Brigades throughout Scotland, and the Firemaster of Manchester.

Prior to the funeral service the caskets containing the bodies will be conveyed to Ramshorn Church from the mortuary at the Royal Infirmary. The service will be conducted by the Rev. John A. Swan, minister of St David's and the very Rev. Dr John White, of the Barony Parish Church. After the service the cortege will proceed to the place of interment in the Glasgow Necropolis. The route will be by way of Ingram Street, High Street, and Cathedral Street.

SYMPATHETIC MESSAGE FROM BELFAST CORPORATION

At a meeting of the Police Committee of Belfast Corporation yesterday reference was made to the melancholy event in connection with the fire in Glasgow on Christmas Eve, in the course of which four firemen lost their lives in the discharge of their duties. It was unanimously resolved to direct that a resolution of deep sympathy be forwarded to the Firemaster of the Glasgow Brigade for conveyance to the relatives of the four deceased men, and also an expression of sympathy with the members of the brigade in the loss they had sustained by the deaths of their brave colleagues.

The Glasgow Herald, Saturday 31 December, 1927

FIRE HEROES - PUBLIC FUNERAL OF GLASGOW MEN

DRAMATIC EPISODE

By a dramatic coincidence the Glasgow Central Fire Brigade were summoned to attend a fire yesterday at the very moment that the funeral cortege of their comrades, the four victims of the Christmas Eve disaster, was passing the Fire Station.

Several members of the guard which was drawn up in front of the station to salute the cortege had to man immediately a fire engine, which was driven out while the procession was still in progress.

The funeral was very impressive in its solemn ceremonial, with which representatives of all the civic services were associated, and in the display of public interest and sympathy which it evoked.

THE CONSTANT VIGIL

After a service had been held in St David's (Ramshorn) Church, the funeral procession passed along Ingram Street to proceed to the Necropolis by way of High Street and Cathedral Square. The coffins were mounted on four fire engines, and just as the first of these hearses was moving slowly past the Fire Station, in front of which a guard of uniformed firemen was posted, the fire alarm sounded in the building.

The ringing of the signal was heard by the large crowd of spectators who were grouped on both sides of the street. Many took it to be a prearranged part of the programme – something of a Fire Brigade equivalent for the sounding of the Last Post. The guard of firemen waited until the fourth of the coffin bearing carriages had passed them, but, with that concession to the proprieties of the occasion, they instantly rushed inside the building to man a couple of engines.

The sliding doors of the station were pushed open, and the two motors, fully manned, emerged at a brisk speed. With whistles sounding in warning the engines were driven through the thronged street, travelling in an opposite direction to that taken by the funeral procession. A considerable length of the extensive concourse had still to pass when the engines were driven out, and the carriages had to draw aside slightly to allow the waggons to pass. ➤



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The public quickly realised that the ringing of the fire bell was a genuine alarm – not a concerted tribute to the four heroes – and there was general expression of regret at the inopportuneness of the call which encroached to some extent on the participation of some of the men in the tribute to their comrades. A number of the firemen who went with the procession to the cemetery had to hurry away before the graveside obsequies were concluded in order to take up duty in consequence of the call

GREAT PUBLIC INTEREST

The funeral was a very imposing demonstration, bringing out strongly that the public imagination has been deeply stirred by the tragic fate of the four firemen who lost their lives in their loyalty to duty at the fire in Graham Square on Christmas Eve. The men were James Conn and H. W. MacKellar, married and David Jeffrey and Morrison Dunbar, single.

There was a very large attendance of mourners, while dense crowds of spectators gathered at all points along the route of the cortege. The fore part of the procession was composed of companies of the several civic departments of Glasgow, there being present, in addition to firemen, contingents of the city police, of the tramwaymen, and of employees of the Lighting Department, and representatives of the St Andrew Ambulance, and Order of the Eastern Star, and of the Commissionaires Corps.

The Lord Provost (Mr David Mason) and many members of the Corporation were in the procession, and accompanying one of the Socialist Councillors was Mr Campbell Stephen, M.P. Over 120 Glasgow firemen were in the parade, and 95 officers and men represented the fire brigades of other cities, including Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Dundee. The Firemaster of Manchester was among the visitors. Fire brigades in all parts of the country sent floral tributes, the wreaths including one from the London Brigade, one from Liverpool, and another from Manchester.

The relatives of the men followed the engines which carried the oak coffins, each of which bore the emblem of the men's vocation in a fireman's helmet and belt. Behind the principal mourners there was along line of carriages several of which were laden with flowers.

THE CITY'S SYMPATHY

The religious service in Ramshorn Church was attended by a congregation which so thronged the building that men had to stand in the aisles. The service was solemnly impressive and at points poignantly touching in its evidence of the grief of the relatives, who were accommodated in a reserved space in front of the chancel.

The Rev. John A. Swan, minister of the church, officiated, and was assisted by the Very Rev. Dr John White, of the Barony, who paid a tribute to the deceased firemen. The heart of the whole community, said Dr White, had been deeply stirred by this sad happening, and sympathy with the mourners in the four sorely stricken homes was that day very abundant and very sincere. The presence of the Lord Provost and Magistrates and representatives of other public bodies was a just tribute to the memory of the four men who died in the discharge of their duty.

These representatives stood for the city in its sympathy and in its respect for the dead. How much our safety and comfort depended on the fidelity and endurance and discipline in the public service was too seldom thought of by us. These four men in giving their lives in the performance of their task reminded us that heroism was still with us; it walked so quietly at our side that we scarcely noticed it until, as in this great battle with fire on Christmas Eve, we were brought face to face with it.

At the close of the church service the four coffins were carried from the chancel by men from the Central Fire Station, comrades of the deceased, and placed on the fire engines, on which they were transported to the Necropolis, where the four caskets were consigned to one grave.



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