

QUEENS COURT SATURDAY 14TH JANUARY 1832

MOST DESTRUCTIVE FIRE AND LOSS OF LIFE

The Glasgow Herald, Monday 16 January, 1832

On Saturday morning, one of the most destructive fires took place in Queen's Court, Queen Street, that has occurred in Glasgow for a very long period of time; in fact, we believe nothing equal to it for loss of property can be brought forward in the annuals of the city.

Amidst the confusion of the occasion, and where so many individuals have suffered we have found it extremely difficult to pick up a sufficiency of authentic particulars of this calamity but we think our readers may rely on the following statements:-

At about a quarter past one o'clock, Francis Porter, the watchman on the station, along with another individual who chanced to be passing at the time, thought they felt the smell of burning in the vicinity of Queen's Court but as they had no key to the iron gate which led into the court, they proceeded round to Miller Street, where they saw that a warehouse looking into the Court was on fire. They then instantly gave the alarm, and the watchman made the best of his way round to Queen Street, by which time the flames were observable in front, in the windows, we believe, of Paterson and Bisset, manufacturers.

By the attention of this watchman, as many of the owners of the property as he could get advised of the casualty by message were summoned, and a great deal of goods was consequently saved by their exertions, assisted by people who were attracted to the spot; but so extremely rapid was the progress of the fire, that few of the sufferers were able to remove their books or papers, which must be, in most cases, an irreparable loss.

In little more than ten minutes after the first alarm had been given, Mr. Davidson, with the fire engines, was on the spot, by which time two floors were burning in the Court, with fire visible in the third, and the flames had also extended to the front of the building. Notwithstanding every endeavour, and the display of many instances of personal daring, in order to arrest its progress, the fire made the most dreadful ravages amongst the warehouses, filled with combustible materials of every description; and Mr. Davidson, as well as the bystanders, soon saw that all their endeavours would be in vain. The exertions were continued, however, in the most unremitting manner to the last, and the adjoining property was saved.

When the roofs of the different departments of the building began to fall in, the spectacle would have been grand in the extreme, could the onlookers have divested themselves of the feeling of regret that the sight was purchased at such immense cost; and when the whole extent of building, about fifty yards in front, with the two back jombs, was on flames at once, and when now and then an explosion like that of the springing of a mine took place with the fire glaring from a hundred windows, its appearance was awfully striking and sublime.

We are sorry to state, that early in the morning a fine young man, Mr. D. N. Penman, stationer, aged 22, was buried in the ruins. It appears that he, along with two or three other individuals had gone into his own shop to endeavour to save some of the most valuable articles, when the roof fell in unexpectedly, sweeping everything before it in one mass of wreck, and caught him before escape was possible. The others, we believe, were rescued with great difficulty, one gentleman, Mr. Allan, being got out by the window dreadfully scorched and bruised, the shutters and frame of which had first to be smashed in for that purpose, as the door had been shut and jammed with the falling materials.

It is suspected another gentleman of the party, who has not been seen since, also perished on this occasion. About five o'clock that part of the wall on the south side of Queen's Court fell in, and afterwards the north part, exposing to view the whole of the interior of the building in a state of the most picturesque ruin.

This was a circumstance which the spectators were prepared for, as they saw at once the slender stone butts in front could never bear up a four storey wall of such great extent, although it was of no great thickness; and the sequel proved that their suspicions were well founded, for about five in the morning that pillars snapped in pieces, and their load crumbled to the ground.

It is impossible to speak with any degree of certainty of the quantities of goods preserved by the exertions of the different proprietors and their friends, and meritorious individuals who happened to be on the spot, but we have heard that Messrs. Wingate, Son & Co., saved a great deal of their very valuable stock in this way, as well as their books, as did the Messrs. Black and Falconer, G. Johnston & Co., Laing and Buchanan, &c. &c.; but when all is taken into account, we have heard it alleged that the total damage cannot be far short of one hundred and thirty thousand pounds, while others have estimated it at a much larger sum. ►



THE
FIREFIGHTERS'
HERITAGE
TRAIL

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We have since learned that Messrs. Laing and Buchanan saved their books, memorandums, and papers of all descriptions, along with a good deal of property, at very considerable hazard to those engaged. The loss of this company, we are glad to hear, is fully covered.

Amongst the Insurance Offices that will suffer most severely, we have heard the Scottish Union, the West of Scotland, the Sun, the Atlas, and the Caledonian, generally mentioned.

The following is a list of the individuals and companies whose premises have been burned, being everyone that the buildings contained:

In Queen Street

D. N. Penman & Co., stationers.
William Slaughter, millinery shop.
John Marks, hat manufacturer.
Thomas & John Muir, clothiers.
John Hutton, confectioner.
G. Johnston, & Co., perfumers.
William Watson, cloth merchant.
James Carswell & Son, joiners, cabinet makers, and upholsters.

In Queen's Court

Jamieson & Thomson, pullicate and gingham manufacturers.
Wingate, Son & Co., silk and shawl warehouse.
John Robertson, sewed muslin manufacturer.
James M'Dougall & Co., calico printers.
Cochran & Brown, manufacturers.
Paterson & Bisset, do.
Black & Falconer, do.
John Murdoch & Co., do.
Henry Know, jun., do.
Ellis, McCall & Co., do.
Dykes M'Allister & Co., do
Gowdies, Wilkinson & Bull, silk gauze manufacturers.
Laurence M'Kenzie & Co., manufacturers.
Laing & Buchanan, drysalters
Francis Blaikie & Sons, merchants.
Andrew M'Nair, commission agent.

We are also sorry to say that about nine o'clock in the morning, one of the firemen, James Bruce, who was a very active hand, fell from a considerable height off a ladder, and shocking to relate, alighted on the spikes of the iron railing below, which entered his lungs about three inches.

It is needless to observe that this poor man died soon after. He has left a wife and seven children to lament his fate; but we hope, even amidst so much loss, the silent claims of the widow and the orphans of this poor man, who did his duty so well, will not be forgotten.

It is impossible to enumerate all the individuals who were active on this occasion in their endeavours to preserve life and property; we had many of them in our eye, but we are sure they would not desire to be put prominently forward, even in such good work.

On Saturday, some reports prejudicial to the character of the fire department, and reflecting on Mr. Davidson's conduct, were industriously circulated by some individuals, who, it was alleged, had not been present during the night. From anything we saw the charges are vexatious and groundless, there is little doubt however the whole matter will be fully investigated. We heard it noticed as a particular fault, that the engines were removed from the front of the building in Queen Street for nearly two hours, when they might have been of service in stopping the progress of the fire there; while on the other hand it was alleged, most strenuously, that they could have done no good whatever in that quarter, and were most judiciously employed in saving the adjoining properties of Bailie M'Lennan, Messrs. Stirling, Gordon & Co., &c. &c.

In the early part of the morning an immense pile of goods which had been thrown from the windows all around into the court unfortunately caught fire, and were also reduced to a heap of ashes, and created much alarm to those engaged in the Buildings, as it was only through the Court they could make their escape.

During the progress of the fire, and when raging and cracking with furious grandeur along the whole line of building, many peculiarly striking occurrences took place. When some of the upper flats sunk down on the shops below, a black cloud, mixed with fire, would be thrown out across the whole of the street in front as if impelled from the mouth of a cannon, to the great astonishment and confusion of the bystanders

As we have said before, it is believed no casualty of equal magnitude has taken place in the history of this city, but we must confine this remark to the present and last century, as in the years 1652 and 1677 there were dreadful conflagrations, as fully narrated in Dr. Cleland's Annals. ➤



THE
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The Lord Provost, Bailie Smith, and the Commissioners of Police, along with the officers, were active in preserving order, and protecting property. It has been remarked as a strange coincidence that although this was as large and alarming fire as had ever been seen in Glasgow, comparatively few spectators were present during the night and many of the sufferers by the calamity never heard of it till next morning when they saw the place in ruins. Large sums of money and bills were lost in some of the safes which were built in the wall, the contents of which were seen blazing in all directions when their iron doors became red hot; and yesterday considerable sums were offered to the firemen to endeavour to save money and papers in particular safes which were then standing in the walls, and supposed to be uninjured.

One of the firemen who had received a guinea for picking up some valuables amongst the rubbish generously gave it to the widow and family of poor Bruce, who was killed the day before. From all we heard and saw on this occasion we imagine it to be a bad plan to build these safes in walls. They are much more likely to be preserved by falling amongst the rubbish than by being stuck up in the wall, exposed to all the heat that may be going.

About four o'clock on Saturday morning a large piece of the north wall fell in, which knocked down part of the wall and roof of Baillie M'Lellan's work, while that gentleman, Mr. Davidson and others were at work; but they escaped unhurt, almost by miracle with the exception of William M'Vey, one of the firemen, who was so severely injured that there is little hope of his recovery.

About two o'clock yesterday (Sunday) morning the north gable of the building fell down with a great crash, but no person was hurt and labourers were afterwards engaged during the day in having the dangerous ruins levelled to the ground. The falling of the south wall in the forenoon was an appalling but grand spectacle; it came slowly over into the ruins, as if it had been one solid piece of stone, to the great terror of the bystanders, although far out of its reach.

Amidst the many instances of generous conduct displayed during the morning, we cannot omit to mention the conduct of Convener M'Lennan, in one instance at least. When that gentleman got the first alarm of the fire about one o'clock, he instantly recollected the danger the valuable warehouse of the Messrs. Wingate was in; and having got some of his workmen, with the coachwork ladder, and their sledge hammers, he entered their premises by window, and proceeded to the counting house, where they broke open the safe door and got out

the books and papers, which the Convener lodged safely in the hands of a trusty person near the spot.

He then established a regular train of conveyance for the fine goods, which would have been easily damaged by want of care. As we have already noticed, a great part of them was in consequence saved. – Mr. Thos. Aitkinson, bookseller, was also extremely active.

FURTHER PARTICULARS

The premises in which the fire took place consisted of one range of buildings, about 140 feet long by 40 feet wide, fronting Queen Street, from which proceeded backwards two extensive wings, of perhaps 80 feet in length each by 40 or 50 in width. The staircases to the whole buildings were two in number, and situated at the point of junction between these back wings and the front building facing Queen Street. It was apparently in the warehouses on the third story from the ground entering from the south-most of these staircases, that the fire originated, and to this point the energy of the fire establishment was collectively applied.

The pipes from three engines were led up this southern staircase, and plied for two hours and a half, but without effect, in subduing the progress of the flames. The southern division of the property, to the two upper flats of which the fire had hitherto been confined was now, in defiance of the quantity of water poured into it from the top of the staircase, irrecoverably in possession of the flames; and the mass of burning material descending through the floors, speedily enveloped that division of the building in ruin.

This being the situation of the southern compartment, Mr. Davidson's attention was next directed to the opposite staircase which gave access to the northern part of the tenement; but so awfully rapid was the progress of the fire, from the immense quantity of timber used in the construction of the building, and there being only one central gable in the whole length, perforated with various doors, which acted as flues, that, by the time the pipes had been removed from the southern division to the northern staircase, the fire had passed over and through the doors of the central gable, and had, beyond the possibility of human exertion, seized upon the northern compartment. Every effort was then made to extinguish the hold that had been got by the flames on this part of the building, but so numerous were the inlets to communicate the fire, that every effort to subdue it was speedily baffled. ►



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So tenacious were the firemen here to do their duty, that it was with the greatest difficulty they could be persuaded to leave this staircase, even when the greater part of the front buildings, from the base to the attics, was one mass of flame; and shortly after they were compelled to do so the whole range of the front wall fell down. The two staircases which have already been noticed in a great measure isolated the back wings from the front buildings, and so the preservation of these extensive ranges the efforts of the firemen were now directed. The conterminous steadings on the south were those of Mr. Downie, where two heavy gables protected it from the burning property. The boundary upon the north consisted of a range of buildings of various heights, the property of Convener M'Lellan, and part of his coach works; the northern wing of the burning tenement approached to within fifteen feet of these buildings, in which there were many openings, and therefore peculiarly liable to be set on fire.

The engines at this period were withdrawn from the front buildings in Queen Street, and were applied, one on the southern boundary of Mr. Downie's property; two were conducted into Convener M'Lellan's property on the north; and, from the high windows of that gentleman's building, the pipes were most efficiently directed to subdue the flames in the front building in Queen Street. No position could have been better chosen by Mr. Davidson for preventing the fire from proceeding to this extensive range of back buildings than the window in which the firemen were placed, in the high tenement from which the steam engine stalk of the coach work rises. But even here the fire baffled all endeavours.

As the flames travelled to the east, one of these engine pipes was removed into another part of the same line of coachwork buildings, consisting of only two stories, where Convener M'Lellan, with Mr. Davidson, and about six men in each flat, were still busily engaged in throwing water on the burning buildings, At this period the whole of the north wall fell on the premises they occupied, knocking in the roof and the front wall. It was here poor M'Vey was so severely wounded, the others making a more miraculous escape. When the ruins were approachable, this party proceeded to play on the coachwork buildings, which were now in imminent danger, but which had been protected before by Convener M'Lellan's workmen continually pouring buckets of water on them.

The greatest energy and good conduct were displayed by Mr. Davidson throughout, and the behaviour of his men was distinguished by fearless and intrepid daring. An officer's guard of the 90th regiment attended, and were of great service in keeping the ground clear after the distressing casualty.

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EDITORIAL

A most destructive fire, attended with the loss of life took place here in the night betwixt Friday and Saturday. The particulars will be found in the following columns. We never interfere with our reporter's statement in cases of this kind, but we must say that there is a very general opinion in this city that we cannot too soon get out of the slim unsubstantial style of building, however handsome it may look, which has for some time prevailed here.

Every schoolboy knows that iron pillars will expand with heat, and as they cannot raise the great weight that is above them, they must necessarily bend. When the prop thus gives way, the whole mass comes down bodily, there being no solid stone partitions to act as ribs to the building. The iron cylinders, too, upon water being thrown on them when thoroughly heated, are liable to split or crack.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Note - The Mr. Davidson referred to throughout is James Davidson, Glasgow Firemaster 1824-33.



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