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GREAT SUNSHINE FIRE

Flour Mill Destroyed

Building to be Re-built

Sunshine put up its most spectacular sensation to date, in the fire that raged at the Albion flour mills on Wednesday night. Usually a fire in the metropolis is a matter of minutes. This fire burned fiercely for at least four hours, and briskly for most of the night. The chief factors that made for this record blaze, were the nature of the building as a fire proposition (a flour mill is usually regarded as very inflammable, owing to the atmosphere being impregnated with fine dust and much of the mechanism being gauze-like), a hot summer evening with a strong north-east wind, a water supply that may be written down as a minus quantity. It may be stated as a fact that there has never been a bigger blaze in Australia. The building was of immense proportions, even for a flour mill, being regarded as the most extensive and up-to-date mill in the Commonwealth. Its activities were carried out principally on four floors, and a fifth attic floor was also utilised.

The mill is, or was, situated on a triangular block of land, the base facing the Albion railway station—indeed the flour mill was not divided from the railway property and the railway lines connected with the mill siding. It was a solid structure of brick, with specially heavy main walls and abutments. A grain or flour shed adjacent built of galvanised iron.

adjacent built of galvanised iron. The building escaped, except that portion of the roof was broken in by the north mill wall of brick falling upon it.

It is necessary to convey to the reader, who did not witness the scene, some pictures of the spectacular nature of the blaze. Imagine a red-hot brazier fifty feet high, and a hundred feet square, all ablaze—not a dull, heavily-smoking fire, but a robb, red flame, licking the sky at times, with great tongues of gorgeous illumination. Multiply this great square of flame into about three blocks, and you will have some conception of the size of the blaze. As ventilators for this beautiful, gigantic brazier, the structure had no fewer than 120 windows, which in the past had given the mill a picturesque appearance when lit up with electricity at night-time, when in full work.

The progress of the fire was not as rapid as might be expected. There appeared to be plenty of fuel to keep it at full glow for a full hour before the back and more extensive portion of the building became ablaze. It was not until about eight o'clock that the fire extended to this portion of the building, which was separated from the front portion of fire-proof doors on every floor. Unfortunately these doors could be seen to be open, otherwise the fire might not have extended to the rear of the building.

Occasionally the crowd assembled were thrilled with a falling wall or roof or gable end. These portions of the building came down with a dull thud and flattened out anything in the way. The manner in which the roof of the iron store shed was thus annihilated was an eye-

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was thus annihilated was an eye-opener.

Concerning the crowd that gathered, it was quite on a par with the gigantic nature of the conflagration.

Sunshine added its full quota of sightseers, who came per car, cycle, and boot; a large Footscray contingent came via Ballarat and Sunbury roads, and about nine o'clock, all the motor cars, apparently, that were available, were requisitioned and were to be seen in a serried rank a mile deep on the Ballarat Road. It would be a conservative estimate to say that 10,000 people visited the holocaust.

The most outstanding feature was the shortage of water. Had the Metropolitan ten-inch main reached mill along the Ballarat Road, the insurance Companies would have saved nearly £100,000.

The mill and its equipment cost £200,000, and the estimated loss is £300,000. Heavy insurances are on the building, the policy being distributed by the Colonial Mutual Fire Insurance

Coy. About seventy regular hands have lost their occupation.

The first alarm of fire was given by a topman named John Bell, who, with a mate, James Temple, was working on the top floor of the mill, flour packing. Bell was relieving the regular packer, James Sheil, who had knocked off at 6.45 for crib.

Telling the story of the alarm, Bell said that about ten minutes after he relieved Shiel he smelt smoke. He said to his mate: "By G——, Jim, the mill's afire." He opened the fire-proof door, and a gust of smoke shot up from the wheat-cleaning plant on the floor below.

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up from the wheat-cleaning plant on the floor below, technically known as "the smuts." The flames spread with amazing rapidity, and Bell and Temple realised that to waste time making for the central staircase would probably cost their lives. Fortunately for them, a spiral chute led from the top floor to the railway siding alongside the mill, and down it the bags of flour were shot to the trucks below. It was not a time for niceties of comfort. Both men jumped into the chute, and in a couple of seconds landed breathless, but safe, on the platform. Bell at once gave the alarm, and rushed to the office to call the local fire brigade. Precious moments were lost raising the Exchange; Bell says he had to ring three times, and by the time the Sunshine fire station, 300 yards away, had been notified, the whole building was well alight.

A contingent of seven men, and two hand reels, dashed down Talmidge Street to the mill, but the only water available was from a 4-in. main, which ran to a dead end twenty yards from the blaze. It was tapped, but only a thin trickle of water resulted. The first pump to arrive was from Footscray, and the reservoir at H. V. McKay's harvester works was tapped. This is a sheet of water over half an acre in extent, and 10 feet deep. Two powerful electric pumps kept a supply of water from the reservoir into McKay's service main, and, within twenty minutes, a good pressure was obtained. This water had to be pumped a quarter of a mile, the hoses going under four sets of railway lines. By that time the task of saving the mill was hopeless, and the brigade concentrated on preventing the spreading of the flames.

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ing the spreading of the flames. Twenty minutes later a roof collapsed, and a mighty sheet of flame shot upward. From that time interest centred in the saving of the wheat stacks and fencing and adjoining residences. Mr. Lee had four pumps working on Mr. H. V. McKay's reservoir, and another from the water main. When a lane had been cut through the big wheat stack, danger of a spread in that direction was averted. A smaller stack, containing about 20,000 bags, situated between the larger stack and the railway station, suffered considerably from water, but did not ignite.

After the fire had been burning for nearly one hour and a half, a sound was heard as if bricks were being dislodged. Suddenly, with a terrific roar, portion of the roof collapsed. Showers of sparks were sent high into the sky, increasing the glare and causing intense heat. With the additional draught caused by the absence of the roof, the fire seemed to gain a fresh hold, and the roar of the flames made conversation difficult at a distance of 25 yards from the building. Apparently the weight of the collapsed roof caused an additional strain upon the wall on the north-eastern side, and shortly after the collapse of the roof the wall was seen to bulge. Orders were shouted to the sightseers, who had gathered in the vicinity of the station, to "stand clear," and, with clouds of dust and sparks, the upper part of the wall near that part of the building in which the fire had originated, collapsed. While hot bricks and sheets of corrugated iron were flung on to the ground, and also immediately another portion of the wall collapsed. When the inner portion of the building was revealed, it was seen

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the building was revealed, it was seen that the floors had collapsed in the earlier part of the fire. Tangled masses of the expensive machinery could be seen hanging to the blazing rafters, and, at intervals, parts of the machines dropped to the ground floor, where there was a tremendous accumulation of burning debris.

A wall on the south-western face of the building bulged dangerously, and, at the top, was more than 15 inches out of perpendicular. It was recognised that, if the wall collapsed,

the bricks and masonry would fall on to the wheatstacks, which, in parts, had then become ignited, but if covered with the fallen bricks there would be no possibility of saving them. With that in view, Mr. Harrie B. Lee, with the co-operation of the mill manager (Mr. G. H. Davey) organised a gang of volunteers to remove sufficient bags of wheat from the larger of the two stacks, where 53,000 bags were stored, to form a "fire break." It was feared that the logs on which the bags were placed, when the stacks were built, had become ignited—the large wheatstack is only separated from the blazing mill by a narrow pathway—and that the fire was creeping along under the stacks. Firemen were directing streams of water on to the stack, it being recognised that any attempt to save the mill was futile.

Eager to assist, young men, many of whom were employed at the mill on various shifts, hurried forward when the request was made for volunteers. Quickly the bags were removed, and an efficient "break" was created. The danger of many thousands of pounds worth of wheat being destroyed was averted. Although the fire reached portion of the stacks.

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fire reached portion of the stacks, and the contents of many bags will be ruined by water, the loss will be only comparatively small.

During the early stages of the fire Mr Gibson, station master, of Sunshine, was at work with several others, principally Darling's men, in extricating the loaded and empty trucks which were on the line at the mill platform, some being unloaded of wheat, and some loading flour for the s.s. *Ascannus*, Port Melbourne to London. There were eleven of the ordinary trucks, which had to be taken in lots of three over the sets of points before they could be hand-shunted to another track temporarily out of danger, whence they were specially removed by special engine. At first the fireman carried the hose across the line, which would have dislocated the train service. A way out of this difficulty was secured by the repairers picking a hole under between the sleepers, to let the hose through beneath the rails. The trains were not delayed, and fully 500 passengers came by train to view the spectacle. The railway arrangements fully met the situation. The destruction of the mill means a revenue loss of £1000 a month to Sunshine station.

The mill is to be rebuilt immediately and work will be found for the men.