

FIRE AT THE PERTH BARRACK

Article from 'The Inquirer & Commercial News'
(Perth, WA: Wednesday 7 December 1887,
page 2 - transcribed)

Close upon half-past ten o'clock on Saturday morning a little boy was seen to be running along St. George's Terrace, in the direction of the Town Hall, crying violently and pursued by an excited looking female who vainly called upon the lad to wait for her. Upon being asked what was the matter with him, the boy sobbed out words which sounded like - "Our bags' a fire," and pursued his course at his utmost speed. In a few moments the rapid tolling of the Town Hall bell announced to the citizens the news that a fire had broken out, while the smoke seen hanging over Mount Eliza at the West end of St. George's Terrace made it clear to all observers that the conflagration had occurred at the Barracks. The members of The Perth Fire Brigade quickly responded to the summons of the fire bell, and within the course of a few minutes the fire-engine was paraded in front of the Central Police Station, attached to a waggonette and taken with all speed to the scene of the fire. It appears that as soon as the alarm was raised at the Barracks, the old Pensioners and policemen there at the time, at once got out the Barracks' engine and tried to stop the spread of the flames; but owing to the machine being so leaky as to be unworkable, nothing effectual could be done. Upon inquiry we learn that the fire originated in the roof of the North wing, close to the entrance gates; and, it is believed, was caused by some sparks from a chimney falling on the dry shingles, which at once ignited. The heat of the weather, combined with the effect of the northerly wind blowing at the time, carried the flames over the entrance tower to the South wing, the roof of which was soon burning furiously. Upon the arrival of the Perth Fire Brigade active exertions were at once made, under the directions of Superintendent Victor, to arrest the progress of the conflagration. The hose was lowered down the well which is in the backyard, the engine-pumps were manned by a number of willing volunteers and in a few minutes a stream of water was directed on the burning roof of the South wing. Another body of men was told off and set to work to cut through the roof in the middle of the wing, with a view to saving that portion of the building; and the task was quickly executed. Before this had been done the attention of a well known old Pensioner, named Brown, was directed to the fact that the little belfry was in flames, thus threatening the destruction of the flagstaff.

Brown at once declared that the flag should not fall, and forthwith clambered on to the burning roof and hauled down the flag. The flagstaff fell burnt through at the butt, a few minutes after. Naturally enough a large crowd assembled both in front and at the rear of the building, but admirable order was maintained by Inspector Lodge, Sub-Inspector Lawrence and Sergt. Claffey. By their direction a double line was formed from the well to the rear of the building and buckets of water passed from hand to hand were hoisted by ropes to the balcony, when they were utilised by a number of men who worked hard at the desperate work of endeavouring to extinguish the flames. Desperate work it was indeed; for what with the heat of the sun, the reflections from the sand hills at the back and the intense heat of the flames. The atmosphere was almost unbearable. But while all possible efforts were being made to extinguish the fire in the South wing, the flames spread with alarming rapidity in the North wing. Soon dense volumes of smoke poured forth from the roof, which were quickly broken by sheets of flame breaking out. Meanwhile the scene in the back yard was one of Wild Confusion.

Numbers of persons were busily engaged in removing furniture from the building. Chairs were thrown to the ground from the balcony, while bedsteads, tables and other bulky articles were lowered with ropes to the ground. Women were to be seen running about weeping and wringing their hands, while small boys and girls sat on the ground crying aloud for their parents; but above all the co-mingled sounds of woe that struck upon the ear, the sullen and monotonous clank-clank of the pumps were distinctly audible. At this point Sergt. Claffey suggested to Sub-Inspector Lawrence the advisability of telephoning for the Fremantle Fire Brigade, and was at once instructed to ride to the railway station to do so. However in this the police had been anticipated by the Traffic Manager (Mr Roberts), who had telephoned for the Port Brigade. The Fremantle men assembled in uniform with admirable promptitude, and the 11 a.m. train was delayed a quarter of an hour for them. By that time they had their engine and hose on board the train, which conveyed them to the North Perth Station in eighteen minutes, the quickest time the journey has ever yet been performed in. Upon the Arrival of Fremantle Brigade the men-under the orders of Captain Newbold -at once directed their attention to the North wing of the building, which by this time was a mass of flame. The hose was carried up into the balcony, the engine-manned by a body of energetic volunteers-and soon a stream of

water was poured upon the fire to the tune of an inspiring sailors chant raised by the men working at the pumps. A body of prisoners from the Perth gaol arrived in charge of a warder, and they did good work by taking spells at the pumps, as well assisting in carrying buckets of water from the well. Some water-carts were brought to the spot but proved of little if any assistance. Among the most active of the volunteers was Mr. Steve Chipper, who we are sorry to say suffered somewhat severely through his exertions, for he was so overcome by the intense heat that the blood gushed from his nostrils in a stream. He was led into the engine-shed; and after his head and the back of his neck had been copiously sluiced with plenty of cold water the bleeding at last ceased, leaving Mr. Chipper in a very weak state. While the two brigades were battling with the fire, a rumour spread that there was a large quantity of powder in the magazine, and an alarm was raised that the fire might reach it. The magazine stands at the rear of the building, just near the end of the South wing; but all fear was soon removed by Lieut. Campbell assuring the people that the building was protected from danger by a fire-proof roof under the exterior shingle covering. Still it was thought advisable to Remove the Ammunition, and accordingly a large number of cartridges and percussion caps were placed in safety, but the gunpowder-of which there were some tons in the magazine-was left undisturbed. By noon the fire in the south wing had been got under control, and its further spread was effectually stopped by the removal of a large portion of the roof; and although the roof of the North wing was evidently doomed, yet the Fremantle Brigade had so far succeeded in getting the upper hand of the fire as to ensure the safety of the rest of the premises. The utmost credit is due to the members of the Perth and Fremantle Brigades for the praiseworthy promptitude with which they answered the summons to assemble at their stations, as well as for the extremely laudable manner in which they worked at extinguishing the conflagration. We must not forget to chronicle an act of considerable kindness on the part of Messrs Harwood & Smith, of the Lion Brewery, who very kindly sent up some casks of beer for the refreshment of the firemen and volunteers. Nor should it remain unknown that Mr. D. Gray, as soon as he heard of the outbreak of the fire, at once sent off all his workmen-to the number of thirty-eight-to assist in extinguishing the conflagration. It is with regret that, in connection with this affair, we have to record that the City Supervisor met with A Severe Accident.

It appears that Mr. T. Halliday was at the North Perth railway station, awaiting the arrival of the Fremantle Brigade; and when hurrying to the scene of the fire either ran against or was knocked down by one of the Swan Brewery Co.'s carts. At any rate the result was that Mr. Halliday sustained the fracture of a small bone in one of his legs, and had to be removed to his residence, where he now lies attended by Dr. Jameson. We have already explained that the alleged Cause Of The Fire was the shingles being ignited by some sparks from one of the chimneys; but against that theory Inspector Lodge states that he had all the chimneys in the buildings swept only a short time ago, in fact the bill for the work was paid only last week. Under the provision of the Act lately passed by the Legislature an inquest on the fire will no doubt be held, but until that inquiry takes place the real cause of the conflagration will not in all probability be discovered. While these lines are being written the fire at the Barracks is still smouldering, but all danger of the building being destroyed is over.

The Prison Reel Sent For. At two o'clock the fire had not been extinguished and the Fremantle prison reel, with all the hose obtainable was sent for. A special train was at once provided and the reel and hose were despatched to Perth,

The Railway Department deserve the greatest praise for the manner in which they performed their part of the work. Fully 20 minutes before the police arrived at the Perth station with a request that the Fremantle engine might be sent for, Mr. Roberts had on his own responsibility, telephoned for it and had given orders to delay the 11 tram until it arrived. At 5 minutes to 11 the Fremantle fire bell rang and the news soon spread that the Perth Barracks were on fire. At exactly 15 minutes past 11 the Fremantle brigade had their engine and 2 reels on board the train and were leaving Fremantle station, the railway department having had the trucks ready to receive the equipment on arrival. The journey to North Perth occupied 18 minutes, the train having travelled at over 35 miles an hour. Passengers were left behind at Bullen's and Claremont, no doubt to their dismay, but private individuals must always give way for the general good. As the train passed Claremont an attempt was made to change staffs, but the Fremantle — Claremont one was dropped, and falling on the line was knocked off by the wheel of the carriage. On arriving at North Perth, Mr. Roberts had had a panel of the fence taken out to allow the engine to pass through. The engine and reels took 4 minutes to get off the tracks, and

another 5 minutes to run to the Barracks, so that in 46 minutes from the time the fire bell rang at Fremantle, the Port corps was on the scene of the fire at Perth ready to start work. At about 7 o'clock the fire was completely extinguished, the whole of the north wing, the offices and clock room over the portico, and nearly half of the south wing of the building being completely gutted. The loss is estimated at between £2000 and £3000. The building belongs to the Colonial Government and was occupied partly as a Police Barracks.

Pensioners and Perth Barracks

*Article from the Western Mail (Perth, WA):
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transcript)*

Most of the pensioners sent to Western Australia came in convict ships. They kept guard over the prisoners until they arrived at Fremantle, when many of the military guard went into the Fremantle barracks. These pensioners were scattered about-many at Freshwater Bay, others at Butler's Swamp, Claremont, and several at Perth.

When the Perth Barracks, were completed, numbers of these men and their families moved there. Before the erection of the Barracks, the pensioners had a guard room at the back of the old Treasury, near the Government Gardens. They mounted guard night and day at Government House, the Treasury, the Prison and the Magazine. The Magazine was close to Perth Causeway, on the south side-about 200 yards before you reached the bridge.

Colonel Bruce was in charge of the Military Department at that time; and I shall never forget seeing these splendid men waiting outside Colonel Bruce's quarters for many hours, each month, in summer and winter, to receive the paltry pension of 1/- and in many cases 8d. per day. I knew a great many of these Crimean and Indian Mutiny heroes. They were splendid men, many being six feet in height. I should just like to mention the following; - Sergeant Minorgan, Sergeant Finnigan, Private O'Dea, Private Darley, and also Naylor, V.C., one of the noble 600 in the Charge at Balaclava.

The pensioners had a splendid canteen at the Barracks, where they were given the room on the left hand side of the entrance through the

archway. No spirits were supplied, unless for medical purposes, but there was always a good stock of English ale and stout in casks. The pensioners were allowed to invite a friend in for a drink; but of course the visitor paid. The writer has been invited in and has sampled the splendid Burton-on-Trent English ale provided.

There was also a first-class surgery, in charge of a pensioner chemist, Mr. Scanlon, a very competent and kind man. I am sure I am within the mark when I say that hundreds of outside citizens were often glad to go to him for advice, and he never sent them away without prescribing for them. At this time there were only three doctors in Perth. Dr. Lapsley was the military doctor.

Over 30 years ago there was a fire in the eastern wing of the Barracks, which destroyed a portion of the building. Several years later the Public Works Department Government took over the building and the pensioners' families had to vacate it. I believe the Government of the day assisted and paid rent for most of those who were compelled to go.

Every year, on the Queen's birthday (May 24), there was a grand field day. All military pensioners and officers came to Perth, and a review and sham fight was held on the old recreation ground, East Perth. The residents of Perth and Fremantle of 60 years ago used to put in an appearance on that day.

- John Watson,
- Thomson-rd., Claremont.



Photo by Betty Pratt, taken from the National Australia Bank Calendar series during the 1960's. Betty's family had this picture framed with the write up of a Captain Cary who owned the painting. The editor has been unable to find the article to date.