

SOUTHEND STANDARD

January 10th 1895

“EMPIRE” BURNT OUT

Entirely Guttred from End to End
Full and Descriptive Accounts

AN ALARMING FIRE

Early on Sunday morning this place of entertainment was discovered to be on fire, and in spite of the most determined efforts by the Southend Fire Brigade, Police, and Helpers, the conflagration was not extinguished until the morning was well advanced, and then all that was left was a roofless ruin, resembling - to utilise the remark of an inspecting urchin, “One of those old abbey ruins, you know.”

As all our readers are doubtless aware, the theatre stood on the north side of Alexandra Street, at about the centre of the thoroughfare. Its existence had been of a chequered kind. It was nearly the first public building erected in Southend, and owed its origin to that spirit of enterprise for which the late Alderman Hemmann was so well and favourably known. Its building was a sort of sign that a town was hers. Its erection and management were entrusted to a public company; which, sorry to say, rarely flourished. Possibly successive caterers also experienced a like unfortunate financial result; for after many ups and downs the building was put up to auction, failed of a purchaser, and was afterwards privately sold to Mr Marlow, an East London entrepreneur; who erected a gallery, re-sited and re-fitted the place; altogether spending a large sum of money. He also changed its name from “Alexandra” to “Empire,” and the place is variously described by those names and also by its original style, “The Public Hall.” Mr Marlow had gained a large measure of public support since he opened.

On Boxing Day Mr W Marlow, the proprietor, placed on the stage a combination of artistes who nightly have since, up to Saturday evening last, been rendering excellent accounts of themselves in their combined impersonation of the pantomime “Aladdin and the wonderful Lamp”. Public appreciation has not been wanting, and crowded houses have been the rule on each of the 14 occasions on which the piece was performed. On Saturday afternoon, at the invitation of Mr Marlow, about 250 of the old people who attended the Foresters’ dinner at the Alexandra Coffee Palace last week were visitors, and at night the ordinary performance was again well attended. Everything passed off satisfactorily. At about 11 p.m. the lights were all turned off, and an inspection of the premises - for the very purpose of detecting any likelihood of an outbreak of fire - was concluded satisfactorily. All was quiet whence until 2.10 am on Sunday morning. At that time P.S Fenner and P.C’s Alexander and Drury were on duty in the street, and a smell of smoke was detected. Locating it at the Theatre, the officers summoned Superintendent Hawtree and their comrades and by means of fire bells alarmed the Fire Brigade. In eight minutes the firemen were on the scene with appliances. But meantime flames began to appear through the roof at the Alexandra Street end, probably in the vicinity of the spot where the outbreak originated. Shortly, flavoured by the wind, the flames shot up at an immense height and ran along to the other end of the building, the covering quickly becoming an immense mass of flames. Heat grew intense; the lead flashing and guttering on the roof melted and ran down the side walls to the ground at the side of the building. It can be easily imagined that with a conflagration of this dimension raging the adjoining establishments on either side -

Messrs Powell's and Smethurst's - were in extreme danger, and the police, in the few minutes of waiting for the Fire Brigade, aroused William Hoffer, who as caretaker, was sleeping in a room on the ground floor of the theatre, conducting him in his nightshirt across the road to the police station opposite, where he dressed. The occupants of Mr Smethurst's shop, consisting of that gentleman and Mrs Smethurst, the mother of the latter, and the rest of the family of young children were next made aware of their risk, and were taken across - all scantily attired - to Supt. Hawtree's quarters, where Mrs Hawtree and her servant attended to their requirements. Mrs Powell, who with her husband was sleeping in the house on the east side of the Theatre, was also assisted out of danger to the same quarters, and made comfortable, the young children being put to bed. The mother of Mrs Smethurst was accommodated by Mrs Fenner. Other residents of Alexandra Street were next awakened by the rattle of the Brigade as with both engines and the fire escape they dashed up Alexandra Street, and

A SCENE OF EXCITEMENT FOLLOWED
Inhabitants of both sides of the doomed "Empire" began to remove their belongings into the street. Fortunately the operations of the Brigade were not impeded by any crowd. Captain H Garon was in command and was supported by Lieut J Berry, and Chief Engineer Shrimplin, Engineer Willingate, Secretary W Steward, and Firemen J Wood, R Gooch, H Hoad, W Judd and Smith. The flames raged to such a height that the glare could be seen for many a mile round. The Brigade got quietly but effectively and smartly to work, but it was at once seen the effect must be towards preventing any spread to the adjoining property. Hydrants were utilised

outside Caunter's confectionery shop, Hunsdon's baker's shop at the corner of Clarence road, and with the view of getting the full force, another was fixed in Clarence road to play at the rear of the building. The new steamer was stationed at the corner of Alexandra Street and supplied from two hydrants from the High Street mains, lines of hose being run to firemen on Smethurst's and Powell's roofs, whence play was directed with their intention of saving these properties. As the direction of the wind changed somewhat, it was feared that the gable end of the theatre would fall across the way, and perhaps strike Supt Hawtree's house. Accordingly, it was thought better to remove the children who had been put to bed in Mrs Hawtree's rooms, to a safer place in the court at the back; this place having been well warmed by the hot air pipes and gas, and there they stayed until about seven o'clock. For an hour and three-quarters a volume of water was poured on to the burning mass without intermission. At about 3.30 am the roof of the hall fell in with a great crash. The theatre with its contents was, of course, completely destroyed, and as the roof fell in the only remaining portion of the building were the four walls and main ground floor, entrance alone not greatly defaced. The total amount of damage has been estimated at £6,100; the insurance policy in the London and Lancashire Fire Office being for an amount of £4,000 - £3,000 for the building and £1,000 for scenery, furniture and effects. There was about £100 worth of uninsured property, consisting of performer's dresses etc. The Brigade were kept on duty until the fire was considered to be practically extinguished, and then they and others were provided with coffee and eatables by Mrs Hawtree and other residents nearby. Great assistance was rendered by the following police officers,

those from the outlying districts, having seen the glare of the fire while on duty, and run to give assistance: Police Superintendent Hawtree, Police Inspector Chase (Rochford), Ps Fenner, Mardern and Smith (Shoeburyness), Pc's Drury, Alexander, Hoy, Lambert, Bretton, Knights, Webster, Potter, Prime, Reynolds (Barling), Hart (Shoeburyness), Clift (Great Wakering), Davidson and Reeve (Leigh).

The actual cause of the fire has not transpired so far, but it seems probable that it originated from a chimney in a room over the entrance, which was connected with a wooden beam, and set fire to this; it being pointed out that the entrance underneath has escaped with only little injury, and that it was near this chimney that the roof first caught fire.

As the morning sped the crowd in the street grew, and amongst the earliest persons on the scene was Mr W Marlow, the proprietor, Mr Charles H Bowmaker, the manager, and members of the pantomime company. The emotion some of them displayed as they realised their misfortune was most touching, actors and actresses shedding tears as they looked on. Mr Marlow and his manager were also greatly upset.

Throughout most of Sunday, Alexandra Street had a lining of people curious to see what was left of the Theatre. During the morning it was found necessary to erect a slight barricade to keep off the people.

CAPTAIN GARON'S IMPRESSIONS

In an interview by our representative with Captain Garon, that gentleman expressed himself as satisfied with the efficiency and smartness of his men. He expressed his acknowledgement to several persons, not firemen, for the ready assistance they gave and their obedience to orders; while speaking in terms of the warmest thanks to Supt. Hawtree

for his assistance and kindness.

"The fire was most rapid in its effect" he went on to say, "and we could see there was no hope at all events for the theatre, as soon as we arrived, which was between seven and eight minutes from the call."

"What power of water had you at your command?"

"Well", said the Captain, "The steamer was throwing about 240 gallons per minute, and from each of the three mains we were getting 80 to 100 gallons, so the total would be over 500 gallons per minute. You see by fixing the hydrants as we did we ran the least chance of weakening the force of the supply. The water we did get was in grand force, and I should like it mentioned that Mr Billham, the superintendent of the Waterworks Company, was present at the fire all night, and lent us all the aid possible. He sent for a stand pipe from his place for us, and it came in very useful indeed, just what we were wanting. Mr Gorge Warren and Mr Lovell Warren also, besides Supt Hawtree, by the bye, got up and made tea and coffee and brought it out to the firemen, and indeed everybody treated us kindly."

"As the crowd was not large," continued Capt Garon, "we were not hampered, and our fellows worked grandly: while two or three other men gave us great assistance. You can tell what was the force and heat when you know that bits of charred wood and the like from the fire were found as far off as the Esplanade and the beach this morning. If all the engines in London had been down here they could not have saved the theatre."

Here the Captain turned to a solid nugget of lead which had dropped on to the ground in a melting state from the roof, and was probably of about a quarter of a cwt in weight. This he explained the Fire Brigade were desirous of preserving, labelled "Empire Theatre, January

1895," as a relic of the fire, in their museum at the fire station.

MR MARLOW'S STATEMENT

Our man next interviewed Mr Marlow, who was much upset. In answer to a question he said: "The building and nearly all in it were mine. Very nearly all the costumes were mine, and the scenery was new as well, a good deal of which I had bought. The pantomime was to have been here for six weeks, and I had just concluded arrangements with several managers to go on tour afterwards. We had been making arrangements for its production since September, and it was, of course, an expensive engagement. There were 40 performers altogether, and the thing was a great success"

Here Mr Marlow stated the amount he had received, which perhaps it would be improper for us to divulge. At any rate, the pantomime would, at that rate, have been profitable. "It is certainly very sad," volunteered our representative. "Yes." replied Mr Marlow, "it is indeed, for I was just congratulating myself that I had won my way to the hearts of the Southend people, and only on Saturday night, a couple or three hours before the fire, I had arranged with the Mayor to give at his expense a performance next Saturday to all the school children of Southend."

Questioned as to his estimate of the loss sustained, he could give no near figure off-hand, but pointed out that of the £4,000 insurance he would probably not receive the whole, as is usual in cases of fire.

A TRADESMAN'S ACCOUNT

Mr J Hundson said the first he saw of the fire was the reflection into his bedroom window. Hastily dressing and looking from a side window, he witnessed the Hall in flames. That

was a half past two, but the firemen were already at work; having attached their hose to a stand-pipe near to his house. The engine was placed at the High street end. The spectators then numbered hardly more than two score. Fire was bursting in great flames out of the front windows; an immense tongue of fire shot through the roof, and the burning could be seen all along the edges of the roof, the fire having got hold of the timbers near their seating on the side walls. Firemen were chopping away at the roof by Mr Powell's, and all along the wall to the shed in the Corporation's yard. The wind was from the north, but there was not much of it. The night was clear and bright. The fire grew ever fiercer, the heat became intense; and the crowd of spectators gathered somewhat there was a growing excitement because of the noise from falling slates and timbers. Piece after piece of the roof fell through, but when the last had dropped the fire deadened somewhat. Meanwhile the firemen poured great volumes of water on the houses on either side. There was not much alarm felt in respect to a spread of the fire because the firemen got the outbreak well in hand within less than half-an-hour of their arrival. Mr Powell, said Mr Hundson, informed him that, sleeping in the room next the Hall, he smelt fire then opened the window and loudly shouted "Fire;" his alarm being laconically answered by Sergeant Fenner from the street, "We know it". Mr Hundson's opinion was that the fire broke out in the middle of the Hall, because the volume of smoke was first noticed coming out from about the middle of the building. He puts down the probable place of origin as about the centre of the gallery. He also adds that great praise is due to the Fire Brigade for their handling of the whole business; they saved the adjoining property - the Hall itself being

doomed before they arrived. It was a fine sight to see a fireman, notwithstanding the intense heat and falling slates, standing upon a shed in the Corporation's yard and pouring water through a window on to the stage. This fire was distinguished from other local fires not only because it was greater in itself but also from this fact that at its earliest stage there was great risk of loss of life. Attracted by the fire, policemen from all over the Hundred had reached Southend by five o'clock in the morning.

LIEUT BERRY'S STATEMENT

Lieutenant James Berry was also seen afterwards by our representative, and the first few words he spoke seemed most sensible of the services rendered by the new steamer. "It was undoubtedly owing to the large delivery of water we were able to obtain with her, and the forces at which she fed the pipes that no further damage was done..." He casually mentioned that she was working continuously for nearly two hours during the whole of which time she was throwing 260 to 280 gallons of water per minute. He proceeded to give a graphic account of the progress of the fire, of which we think is well worth reproducing. "I was called" he said "and rushed out of the house half dressed, and completing my dressing as I ran. The whole of the town was lighted up and there was one gigantic mass of flames, which, at first, I thought must be the Coffee Palace ablaze.

But as I turned the corner by Counc Darke's I saw where the fire was. Few people were then in the street, and as I neared to the spot the flames were roaring forth from the doors and windows, the ventilators and the roof, and the scene was altogether a striking one. Of course, I did not want to waste the time running down to the Fire Station and so ran to the closest hydrants, and had not finished

opening them when Fireman Judd and J Wood ran the fire escape round the corner. And Captain Garon with the hose cart. There was no disorder. All was perfect discipline, and I believe it was impossible to do it better, for we were playing upon the flames in something less than ten minutes after the call was received and this was owing to the immense advantage of the electric communication over the old method of being called by the police. Of course" he continued "the place was like a furnace, and as soon as we started we saw the theatre must go. It was comical to see old Mr Hoffer when he was awakened up when I hustled him up in his bed, he started up and rubbing his eyes muttered 'Fire, what fire?" but as he heard the flames cracking on the floor above he decided not to 'roll over' but rush out and across the road, carrying with him what clothes he could clutch in his fright. Across the road he ran and into the police station where he was assisted trembling into his trousers. We had a hard job to arouse the inhabitants of the two adjoining houses, but we did it at last, and while Mr Powell was most excited, Mr Smethurst, after his people were all out safely, acted most coolly, and went in again and sat at his side window upstairs looking out at the fire smoking a cigar. He seemed almost to be enjoying the matter, so cool was he, and he invited me to have one, as I stood meantime playing on the flames. I did not feel in a particularly proper condition on the roof and in the chimney gutter to need one, and so I declined with thanks. So strong was the delivery from the steamer that as I stood on the roof near the gable end of the theatre I could play on to the stage and behind it at the other end. I did not know this until I heard Judd and another fireman who were playing upon the fire, from Clarence Street yell out 'Hold on there, Jim, you are drowning

us,' and I could then just see that the water from my feed was going over them. My hose was a good one, for from where I could prevent the spread both to Smethurst's and Powell's, and now and again I could let fall on to the burning building. It was a grand sight to see the flames dancing along the beams and running hither and thither like water," said Lieut Berry, "and when the roof fell in with a crash the flames flew up to a tremendous height." With a strong praise of the conduct of his comrades, he continued to play until ten o'clock, and it was considered safe to leave at 11 o'clock."

AID FOR THE DISTRESSED

A meeting was held at the Alexandra Hotel on Monday night, with a view to considering what were the best means of affording assistance to the actors and actresses who have lost their means of livelihood by the fire. There was a good attendance and the meeting was most sympathetic. Coun Bowmaker offered the use of Victoria hall for a benefit entertainment to be given on Saturday, and tradespeople volunteered assistance with the result that a miscellaneous performance has been arranged, of which particulars will appear later.

RECOGNITION

Mr Powell on Monday subscribed a sum of £2 2s to the funds of the Fire Brigade as recognition of services rendered at the fire.