

# ABERYSTWYTH HOTEL FIRE.

100 GUESTS IN DANGER.

BIG BUILDING COMPLETELY GUTTED.

THRILLING STORIES OF RESCUE.

The biggest fire known in Aberystwyth since the College fire in 1885 occurred in the early hours of Tuesday when in a few short hours the block of buildings facing the sea and extending along Terrace-road to Bath-street, known as the Waterloo Hydro, were gutted from end to end, leaving the walls alone

promptitude and skill in their efforts to prevent the fire spreading and in confining it to the one site. There was a plentiful supply of water from stand-pipes in Terrace-road and on the Promenade. There was anxiety for a long time that the fire would extend to the adjoining house, No. 30, Marine-terrace,

standing. The fire was first discovered in the basement on the Promenade side where the members of the hotel staff took their meals. By two o'clock the flames were issuing from the upper portion of the front of the building and by five o'clock the fire had obtained complete mastery. When the fire broke out the wind was blowing from the south and against the Terrace-road side of the hotel. As the fire progressed the wind veered into the south-west with the result that when the front doors and windows fell in the flames were fanned by a strong wind and driven backward throughout the block facing Bath-street. The Fire Brigade attacked the fire from the back in the hope of cutting off the fire from the rear; but it was soon evident that nothing could be saved. In quick succession room after room at the front became illuminated and then burst in a flame. Then the dormer windows and roof on the western end where the fire originated fell in with a crash. The front rooms on the ground floor, as well as the upper rooms to the fourth storey, were blazing cauldrons fed continuously by the falling

a double-fronted house in which Mr. and Mrs. John Gibson and family reside, who were removed and similar precautions were taken in the next adjoining houses, including the "Deva." Several visitors cleared out of adjoining houses on the Terrace and with their children camped on the Promenade until the danger of the fire spreading was over. As the result of an incessant flow of water and the thickness of the partition wall the fire did not penetrate further eastward.

A representative of the "Cambrian News" interviewed a number of the staff and visitors on Tuesday morning. M. Jean Pasche, chef, who was sleeping in the top part of the Hotel, said that on hearing a disturbance he immediately rushed downstairs. He wore his working trousers and vest only and lost everything else including his savings in Treasury notes. Smoke was then coming from the basement kitchen underneath the office, situated near the front entrance hall. For half an hour he continued his efforts to extinguish the fire by throwing bucketfuls of water on to the burning woodwork; but the increasing flames forced him to yield.

Queen's-road, performed a gallant and risky deed which won the admiration of the crowd of onlookers. He climbed up the second ladder, but found that Mr. Bennett was able to descend without assistance. The bedroom and the room underneath were then ablaze. Mr. Thomas also suc-

ceeded in unfastening the second ladder before returning. Unfortunately, he hurt his heel by having to kick his foot through the window in order to obtain an opening to fasten the ladder to the frame of the window and the injury prevented him returning to duty on Tuesday.

Mr. A. Bennett, boot manufacturer, Mardol, Shrewsbury (who lost his leg when a child in an accident on a farm) went to the Hydro on Saturday and was given a bedroom on the top landing. He went to bed about twelve o'clock and slept until about two in the morning when he was awakened by hearing excited voices in the street below. He went to the window in the dormer of the roof to see what was wrong and saw that the further end of the hotel was on fire. He immediately got into his clothes, pushed a few things into his bag, and tried to get down the stairs, but was unable to proceed because of smoke. Realising that his only way of escape was through the window he shouted for help and shortly afterward realised that an attempt was being made to rescue him. A ladder had been reared against the building, but did not reach higher than the fourth storey. A very gallant attempt was



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## THE HOTEL ON THE MORNING AFTER THE FIRE. PORTIONS OF THE FRONT FELL IN SHORTLY AFTER THE PICTURE WAS TAKEN.

floors of timber. The flames crept along from room to room to the eastern end of the hotel, including the billiard room, until the entire frontage was a mass of fire. Before the furthest rooms were reached, however, human interest was excited by a statement that a visitor was sleeping in the further attic. A ladder was procured, but it would reach no further than the window of the room immediately below and the excitement grew intense as the roof was sending off columns of smoke and the flames were rapidly approaching the attic. Another ladder was hoisted up and attached to the top of the first ladder in order to reach the imprisoned visitor. One of the firemen and a young townsman were seen to climb up and get into the attic and eventually, amid the cheers of the crowd, descended into safety. Shortly after the attic was in a blaze. A hose was affixed to a hydrant on the Promenade and efforts were successfully made to cut off the fire from the adjoining Terrace house, between which and the hotel there fortunately existed a four-foot wall.

In the meantime the fire was steadily pursuing its course down Terrace-road to the Bath-street end of the hotel block. One window after another became illuminated, then broke into a blaze, and the upper windows belched forth volumes of flame extending to nearly half across the street. The back premises seen from Queen's-road and Bath-street were one mass of flame. The fire crept downward from top to bottom storey and shop after shop on the ground floor took fire. The firemen endeavoured to save the shop at the corner of Bath-street and Terrace-road; but it is doubtful whether any Brigade could have saved it and it became evident to all that nothing would stop the fire until it had burnt itself out. The Hydro baths on the Bath-street side and the upper rooms and roofs blazed furiously

Herbert Wilson, boots at the Hydro, retired to bed about eleven o'clock; but did not sleep until near twelve. About 1-30 o'clock he was awakened by the slamming of a door and a scream and found that his room was full of smoke. He got his clothes, went down to the basement where the members of the staff took their meals. He obtained water from the taps for the French Chef to throw on to the fire and it was through the coolness and bravery of the Chef that the fire was somewhat checked at the start or probably there would have been loss of life before the visitors could have escaped. The pipes got damaged by the fire and the water supply gave out and the gas pipes melted, followed by the lighted gas as the pipes gave out. Shortly afterward flames were seen coming through the flooring of the hall and the police directed that the hotel should be cleared. Some of the inmates got down the stairs while others got on to the balcony and were caught in blankets as they jumped on to the Promenade. There were 150 in the Hydro at the time, including the staff. They were hospitably sheltered by the Belle Vue Hotel and Mr. Teviotdale.

James Good, assistant boots, was sleeping in the attic when he was awakened by the smell of smoke and by crackling noises. After reaching the ground floor, he found Mrs. Richards, the manageress, in distress, and after helping her he gave a hand to the Chef in throwing water and to the police in awakening the visitors.

Miss Norah Harries, daughter of Dr. Harries, Grosvenor House, was one of the first to give the alarm of fire. She was disturbed by seeing light which seemed to blaze all at once and she had never seen anything equal to the sight. The visitors on escaping from the Hotel thronged into the house in an excited and frightened state. Mr. Lionel Harries, son

nevertheless made by Mr. James Jackson, Hyde Grove, Charlton-on-Medlock, who mounted to the top of the ladder and attempted to throw a rope to Mr. Bennett, which unfortunately failed. A second ladder was then attached to the top of the first, but there was still an intervening space of some six feet of roof between the ladder's top and the dormer. That being so, Mr. Jack Thomas did a brave piece of work. He assisted Mr. Bennett, who by this time was in a pretty bad condition, on to the ladder and both descended safely to the Promenade. He was then kindly taken in by the Rev. Mawddwy Jones and hospitably treated. Mr. Bennett lost his watch, mackintosh, and several things which had to be left behind in the room.

### HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE WATERLOO.

The Waterloo Hydro Hotel formed a triangular block of buildings, well-equipped, richly furnished, and occupying a commanding position in the centre of the Marine Parade, and extending along Terrace-road and Bath-street, the site being considered one of the most valuable in West Wales. There were originally nine houses which were incorporated into one building held on a lease from the Corporation for a term of seventy-five years from 1908, at an annual rental of £60. The Hotel had accommodation for 200 visitors in 107 bedrooms. The large dining room could seat 250 and the smaller dining room 65. The public rooms, all of which were handsomely furnished, included a ballroom, lounge, smoking room, coffee room, drawing room, and billiard room. Along the front were two extensive balconies, to which there was access from the principal rooms. Over £3,000 was expended on the installation of electrical and medicinal baths of modern construction in



until approaching daybreak and then little was left of the Hydro but its blackened walls and chimneys. It was feared that the walls would fall into Terrace-road which was therefore kept clear of spectators, but they remained standing until the end.

### HOW IT HAPPENED.

#### NARRATIVES OF VICTIMS AND EYE-WITNESSES.

Among the onlookers, who assembled in large numbers on the Promenade, in Terrace-road, Bath-street, and Corporation-street, the foremost question was whether any lives were in danger and as the assurance was passed along that, as far as could be ascertained, all had been saved, the excitement was calmed. There was anxiety, however, with the wind blowing strongly and fanning the flames that the fire would extend to the adjoining house and endanger the whole of the middle part of the Marine-parade, as well as the houses in Bath-street. The wind blew for a time toward the sea, but changed to the south-west which was the means of saving Bath-street from the conflagration.

According to all accounts the fire was discovered at 1.30 a.m. and efforts were made to extinguish it before the alarm was given. Shortly after midnight there was a heavy downfall of rain, but the rain had ceased before the fire was discovered. Telephone messages were sent to the Police Station, and P.C. Arthur Jones, who was informed when on duty in North-parade, immediately gave the alarm and the Fire Brigade was summoned. P.S. Thomas Davies and P.C. Jones, on arriving at the scene, entered by the side-door in Terrace-road and proceeded to the basement where they found a beam on fire. M. Jean Pasche, chef; Herbert Wilson, boots; and James Good, assistant boots had

of Dr. Harries, also gave assistance in endeavouring to extinguish the fire at the outset and in helping visitors to clear from the premises. When the Terrace-road side of the Hotel was in full blaze Grosvenor House and the locked-up shops, Messrs. Jones Bros. office, the two restaurants on the opposite side of the road were threatened by the blazing heat which cracked the glass in the windows and scorched the walls.

"Three of us were sleeping on the third landing," said Mrs. Edge and her daughter, of Edgbaston, "when we heard people running downstairs and shouting. We did not have time to collect our belongings, but we went out with coats over our night attire and in the darkness we had difficulty in finding the way to go." They, however, heard a voice saying "This way down, please," and hurried as fast as they could outside.

Madame Laura Evans-Williams, the famous Welsh soprano of the Queen's Hall and leading London concerts, was staying at the Hotel with her concert party, in the course of their Welsh tour. They were naturally distracted, having lost their clothing, jewellery, music, and other valuable belongings. Mr. Purcell Jones, who delighted the large audience at the Coliseum on Sunday night, lost his cello valued at £130. "It was one of the most awful experiences I have ever had," said Madame Laura Evans-Williams. "We were told at first that there was no need for alarm as it was only a cigarette that had set fire to some paper, but it turned out to be more serious and we had to clear out almost in rags. We failed to return for our bags, but we wrapped ourselves with towels. We are now in borrowed plumes. We have been very kindly treated this morning and we are as happy as possible." Mrs. Ankers, Gorseland, North-road, saw the party at St. Michael's Hall and took them to her house where she

1912. There were also hot and cold, sea and fresh water baths.

For thirty years the business was conducted by Mrs. A. Griffith and Miss A. E. Morris, the proprietors. Owing to the extension of business, the premises were twice enlarged and modernised. In 1908 the business was converted into a company under the title of Morris and Griffith, Limited. The property was under a mortgage to Mr. T. Lewis, Cardiff.

An interesting history is attached to the Waterloo for it stood on one of the ancient landmarks of the town. The name was derived from the Waterloo House, owned by Dr. James, who was a notable inhabitant. The house was built in the Waterloo year, 1815, and was purchased by the Morris family in 1835 from Dr. James whose surgery adjoined in Terrace-road and was occupied after him by Messrs. Murphy and Rowley, dentists. The surgery was also bought by the new owners, as well as No. 27, Marine-parade which were added to the Hotel. In 1887 a splendid staircase was constructed of mahogany and pitch-pine, and made an attractive feature of the premises. An adjoining cottage in Terrace-road, owned and occupied by the father of Mrs. E. H. James, was also purchased with the shop of Miss Urania Davies and the well known lapidary shop known as Egyptian House at the corner of Bath-street. The late Mr. Peake's premises on the Bath-street side were also purchased, as well as No. 28, Marine-terrace, belonging to Mrs. Rowland Morgan, and No. 29, belonging to Mr. John Evans who was managing clerk to M. H. Davis and Sons. On those three sites the Hydro and ballroom were erected at a cost of £10,000. Above and around the original Waterloo additions had been made which resulted in a commodious hotel for seaside visitors.

Shops and a vacant restaurant occupied the lower part of the Terrace-road side and all were destroyed by the fire the contents of



boots; and James Good, assistant boots had been endeavouring to extinguish the fire by throwing water; but owing to the smoke and flames they had to retire. It is presumed that by then one of the gas pipes had burst. Realising the gravity of the situation, the police at once gave the alarm in the upper rooms and roused the visitors. As far as could possibly be known at the time everybody was roused and warned to clear off the premises.

Mr. Rhys Ellis, chemist, rang up Mr. P. B. Loveday in Chalybeate-street and brought ladders which were of the greatest use in rescuing the occupants of the upper rooms. There were, of course, thrilling episodes. Most of the visitors, after having been warned, were able to go downstairs and thus escape in time. There were pitiful cries for "help" and the screaming and shouting could be heard from a distance. Some managed to bring their clothes and baggage with them; but many came in their night attire only and were greatly agitated. They were sheltered in the Belle Vue Hotel, Grosvenor House, and several houses on the Terrace. All the accommodation available was used. The Bandstand was also filled and a few remained in the open-air shivering and wondering what to do. St. Michael's Hall was then opened and afforded refuge for those in distress until eight o'clock when breakfast was provided for all the victims at Teviotdale's, North-parade. Subsequently, many of the visitors were able to return to their own homes by the ten o'clock and mid-day trains. The names and addresses of all the visitors who were removed from the Hotel were recorded by the police and numbered 100.

By half-past two o'clock the fire had got hold of the Hotel from one end to the other and before five o'clock the building was completely gutted. Seven members of the Fire Brigade were on duty, under the command of

Brigade were on duty, under the command of Captain James Evans and the Deputy Captain (David Edwards). The police acted under the direction of Supt. Phillips, assisted by Inspector Edwards. They worked hard until half-past six. It is to the credit of the Fire Brigade that they displayed commendable

entertained them and others.

Two members of the concert party, Mr. Manuel Jones, tenor, and Mr. Michael Mullinar, accompanist, had an exciting experience. The latter being of a nervous temperament was quickly overcome. Mr. Manuel Jones carried him on his back while sliding down the water pipe from their bedroom on the Bath-street side. Madame Laura Evans-Williams and party were able to proceed to Towyn on Tuesday to continue their tour.

A visitor from Yorkshire, who did not wish his name to be published, was one of a party of seven, including his mother over seventy years of age, staying at the Hotel. He gave expression to the general feeling of gratitude for the kindness shown by the townspeople. Awakened at 1.45 a.m. by some one crying "Help," he turned up the light and on looking out through his bedroom door on to the third floor landing was met by a huge volume of black smoke. They were naturally frightened, but managed to escape uninjured. "We have been very kindly treated," he added, "and I appreciate the kindness because we have lost all we had."

From a bedroom facing the sea, two young women managed to escape by tying blankets to the frame of the verandah and descending on to the Promenade.

#### A PLUCKY RESCUE.

The most thrilling incident was the rescue of Mr. A. Bennett, bootmaker, Mardol, Shrewsbury, who has one leg crippled. He and another man were seen in a dormer window at the top of the eastern corner of the Hotel. One of Mr. Loveday's ladders was erected in front of the verandah and was held by Mr. Loveday and Mr. Jenkin Humphreys. It was found that the ladder, which reached three storeys was not long enough to reach the top room where Mr. Bennett was seen. The second

room where Mr. Bennett was seen. The second ladder was then fixed to the window by Mr. Loveday and Mr. Jenkin Humphreys, who is a sergeant in the Brigade. Both of them rendered meritorious service, and a junior officer of the merchant service, John Thomas, son of Mrs. Thomas, Edleston House,

were destroyed by the fire, the contents of which, it is understood, have not been insured. On the site of the old Egyptian House a fancy emporium was kept by Mr. Frank Phillips. The two other shops were kept by Sergt Neal as a tobacconist, and by Mrs. Longley for confectionery.

The Hotel and its contents were valued at £34,665. It is estimated that the furniture alone at pre war prices was worth over £5,000 and none of it has been saved. Though the proprietors did not live on the premises they had valuable personal possessions there. Among them was the unique collection of horns adorning the ballroom. They were horns of animals killed by the late Mr. William Griffith during his expeditions in Central Africa with Mr. Selous, the famous hunter.

Numerous political, municipal, and social functions have been held at the Hydro. Mr. Lloyd George, on one of his visits, spoke from the balcony. Mrs. Lloyd George has also been entertained, and among other eminent guests were Lady Henry Somerset, Mr. Runciman, Mr. McKenna, Lord Rendel, Sir John Williams, Major David Davies.

The total damage caused is estimated at £50,000. It is understood that the property was insured.

M. Maurice Zola arrived on Monday from the Park Hotel, Cardiff, to manage the business in succession to Mrs. Richards, the manageress, who has not been in good health.

#### COMMENTS.

Having regard to the size of the building and its collapse it was remarkably fortunate that no untoward accidents happened during the hours that the large crowds witnessed the fire. It was also a satisfactory feature that, in spite of the rush and excitement which naturally prevailed, all the visitors were able to escape uninjured. Their exit was facilitated by the accessibility of the corridors. The visitors were loud in their expressions of gratitude for the help and kindness they received.

It was believed that the fire could have been moderated at the outset, but the staff being strangers did not know where the meter



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was to cut off the gas, and the fire extinguishers, which the proprietors state had been provided, were also not found.

As has already been stated, the firemen and police worked strenuously and their services were favourably commented on. The magnitude of the fire, however, emphasised the handicaps caused by the inadequacy of the appliances, a matter which requires attention by the Town Council. There is need for additional nozzles in order to ensure the use of a greater quantity of water than was possible on Tuesday morning. That will necessitate more hose, reels, and hydrants. Another necessity which was pointed out was a fire escape capable of always being kept upright in a convenient place. The equipment of the Fire Brigade requires to be modernised.

Throughout Tuesday the remains of the fire continued to smoulder and occasional flames appeared amid the ruins. The firemen remained on duty all the time. It was feared that the walls, chimneys, and ornamental copings would fall, especially as the wind rose at night and blew hard. Traffic through Terrace-road to Bath-street and the Promenade had to be diverted.

The ruins should be demolished as early as possible for the protection of public safety. The fire kindled on Wednesday night, but was soon extinguished.

Owing to the diversion of the traffic in Terrace-road, the steps from Crynfryn-buildings to the Promenade and the new passage connecting Queen's-road and the front proved of great convenience to pedestrians. Motors and other vehicles were obliged to go a long way round.

The two sisters, Miss Ada Morris and Mrs. Annie Griffiths, the proprietors, provided accommodation for most of the staff at No. 46, Marine-terrace.