

Five men perished as massive store erupted in flames

The upholsterer Harry Clegg stood on top of a blazing furniture store in Sydney's Haymarket on the morning of Wednesday, July 10, 1901.

With exits blocked by flames he had run to the roof and had been trapped. In desperation he climbed up on a brick parapet far above Gipps Street but there was no escape.

The thousands watching in horror from the street knew the man was doomed. Flames were leaping at him from the roof and licking upward from windows below.

As Clegg dropped to his knees and raised his hands in prayer, women fainted and men cried openly or cursed at their inability to help the forlorn figure.

He rose and seemed to lift his hand in salute to the onlookers. His coat was blazing and tearing it off he dropped it into the flames.

Then Harry Clegg threw his cap into the air. He shouted: "Goodbye everyone," and to hysterical shrieks jumped feet first from the wall.

He did not have a chance and plummeted 35m to his death. Police lifted the broken body and in dead silence carried it away.

Harry Clegg was one of five men to die that morning in one of Sydney's most spectacular and tragic fires.

The five were employees of Anthony Hordern's department store which consisted of a complex of five adjoining buildings in the Haymarket. Those buildings, every single one of them, were reduced to debris on that terrible morning.

When the fire broke out at 8.20am Anthony Hordern's and Sons was a huge retail business employing 1200, serving 30,000 customers daily and making sales of \$3 million annually.

SECTIONS

The five Hordern buildings were so huge that they covered every centimetre of an area bounded by George, Gipps and Pitt streets.

The complex was in three sections as the block was divided by Parker Lane and Parker Street. However the main frontage was along the whole length of Gipps Street, now known as Barlow Street.

When the fire was sparked only staff members and a few early shoppers were in the store. Had it been later it would have been thronged with customers.

The blaze was touched off when an electric wire fused in the basement toy department of the Palace building. It faced Gipps Street and was roughly the centre of the whole complex.

A spark ignited celluloid toys and the fire spread rapidly to other flammable goods. Employees threw buckets of water on the blaze but even then they were wasting their time.

Tongues of flame were leaping in all directions and in moments the fire had climbed from the basement into the haberdashery de-

HISTORICAL FEATURE

partment on the ground floor.

Staff and customers raced for the exits as flammable stock quickly turned the whole floor into a roaring furnace.

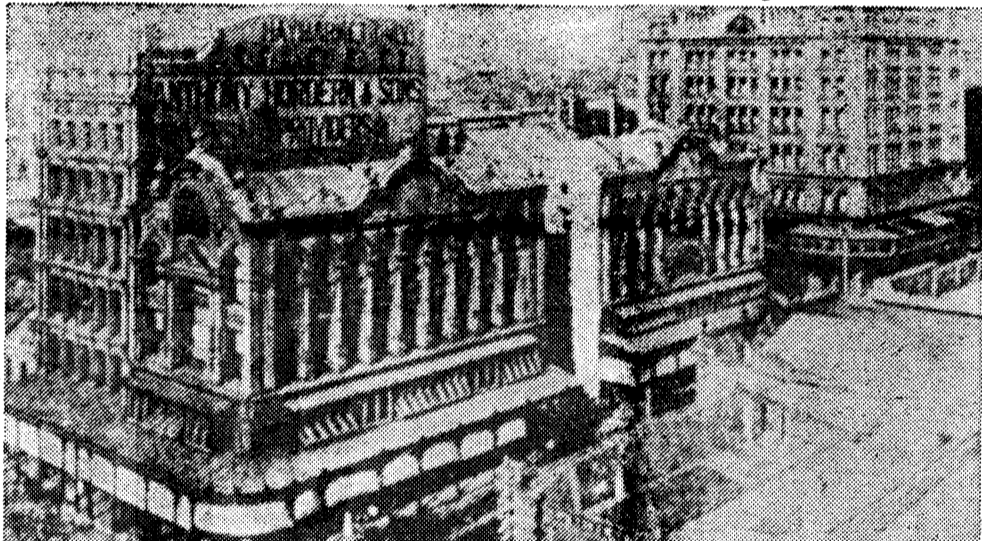
A few employees thought of their fellows on the three upper floors and began racing through the building shouting for everyone to get out.

Meanwhile an unknown caller had telephoned the

But only three men had stayed in the building to operate the hoses. They were furniture storemen John Nicholl, Rober Malcolm and George Mills.

As the pump lifted water to them they pushed a hose through a window on the fifth floor and directed a stream across Parker Street into the flaming Palace building.

It was a futile and dangerous exercise but down in the



The old Anthony Hordern's complex before the 1901 fire. The five buildings were reduced to piles of rubble.

fire brigade and in just four minutes the first horse-drawn steam fire engine came galloping to the scene with bells clanging.

As that engine — aboard was Superintendent Webb from fire brigade headquarters — hurtled round the corner into Gipps Street the crew saw the Palace building for the first time. It was an inferno of flames.

There was no chance of saving it and Webb and the firemen concentrated on preventing the blaze spreading to the other Hordern buildings.

The trouble was the westerly wind was strong and although 10 fire engines were soon at the scene they couldn't stop the flames leaping across the narrow thoroughfares which separated the buildings.

From the Palace building tongues of flame soon were reaching across Parker Street towards the eight-storey furniture department which ran through to Pitt Street.

Inside that building a handful of employees had initiated their own fire-fighting operation.

Down in the basement the store's engineer William Dashwood and his assistant Walter Brett started a pumping engine to get water to hoses on the upper floors.

As it turned out the men were so busy directing their hoses on the building opposite that they did not see flames leap across the street and take a firm hold on lower floors of the furniture store.

Although three floors burst into flames within minutes, the four men with the hoses on the fifth floor were oblivious of their danger.

But firemen appreciated their plight and knew someone would have to warn them. Shouting that he would go, the furniture storeman William Farrell ran into the main entrance in Gipps Street before anyone could stop him.

Realising the man should not be alone Deputy Fire Superintendent Sparkes followed Farrell and together they fought their way through billowing smoke to the fifth floor.

There they gasped out a warning to the four men at

street another employee, 22-year-old Henry Clegg, did not realise that.

Late for work that morning, he had arrived to find the Palace building well alight. Standing in Gipps Street he saw his workmates with their hose at the furniture store window.

The head of the upholstery department where Clegg worked was standing nearby and Clegg called to him: "I'll

the window. They had to get out, Sparkes yelled. All six then set out for the stairs surrounded by flames that now were bursting up through the floor.

Sparkes and one of the storemen, George Mills, actually ran through the flames. They reached the stairway and although severely burned stumbled down to the ground floor and out into the street.

The Anthony Hordern's horror

get up there and help them with that hose."

His boss nodded but another man standing near them shouted a warning: "Don't go in there, lad, you'll be killed."

DESERTED

Harry Clegg shrugged his shoulders and headed across the street to the building. The real danger was not apparent as the furniture store was not yet burning and was separated from the flames by the width of Parker Street.

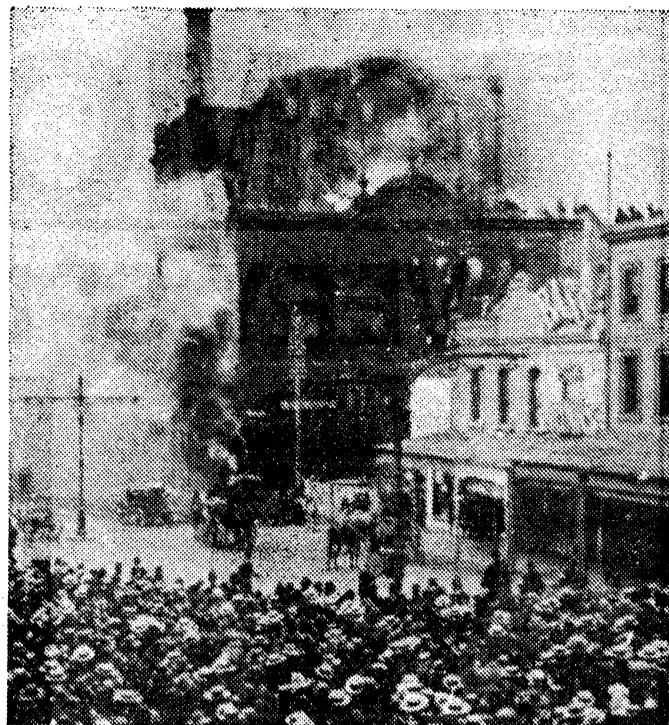
Entering the deserted building Clegg raced up the stairs to the fifth floor where he helped the others get a second hose working.

As for William Farrell who had braved the flames to warn the others, he was halted by a wall of fire as he ran for the stairs.

He shouted to another storeman, John Nicholl, who was right behind him to head instead for the goods lift.

Both men slid down the steel cable to the roof of the lift which stood at the fourth floor. Farrell wriggled through the trapdoor and drove the lift down through flames to the ground floor.

Staggering out of the lift William Farrell headed for an open door calling to Nicholl to follow him. He collapsed when he reached the street but recovered in a few moments.



Anthony Hordern's in the course of destruction. Many of the thousands packed in the streets saw a store employee jump to his death.

His first thought was for Nicholl. When he asked another Hordern employee what had happened to him he was told not to worry for the man had made it to safety. In fact Nicholl had been burned to death on the roof of the lift.

Standing in the street Farrell suddenly remembered the two men, William Dashwood and Walter Brett, who had gone to the basement of the furniture building to pump water for the storemen's hoses.

He dashed to a rear entrance intending to warn the pair to get out. But the doorway was a mass of flames and he was driven back.

By that time Dashwood and Brett had been incinerated.

Realising they were cut off by the fire they had headed for a window but had been enveloped by flames as they tried to remove steel bars covering it.

That brought the death toll of the fire to three and two more were yet to die in the building. They were Harry Clegg and Robert Malcolm, also trapped on the fifth floor by roaring flames.

Instead of using either the stairway or the lift to get out as the others had, they panicked and ran upstairs away from the fires that were blossoming everywhere.

They got to the roof without trouble but it was not long before it too was enveloped. The only place left now was up on the brick parapet overlooking the street.

Clegg climbed up and steadied himself by hanging on to a plaster ornament. Malcolm tried to follow but missed his footing. Next instant he crashed back into a heaving ocean of fire.

the gas company building just along Pitt Street from Hordern's was one that melted. It also burst into flames.

At that instant a roar went up from the crowd: "The gas tanks!"

In their hundreds terrified onlookers fled, fearing the two large gasometers at the rear of the gas company building would explode.

Actually there was no danger as Fire Superintendent Webb already had ordered the company to pump the gas in the containers back to its Mortlake works.

For some hours firemen fought grimly to save the gas company's premises and eventually got it under control after it had burnt out the roof and part of the interior.

IN RUINS

By early afternoon the fire had been extinguished in all the affected buildings. But the once bustling department store was in ruins and it seemed that as retailers Anthony Hordern's was finished.

But it wasn't. Live-wire Samuel Hordern, son of the store's founder, still had \$1 million worth of stock stored in warehouses.

Within 24 hours of the fire he had leased the huge Exhibition Building in Prince Alfred Park as temporary premises and 48 hours after that Hordern's was again open for business.

The Hordern fire resulted in stricter safety measures in city buildings and strengthening of the then inadequate Metropolitan Fire Brigade.

Superintendent Webb however told a coroner's inquiry into the fire that even with 50 fire engines, instead of the 10 at his disposal, nothing could have saved the Hordern store.

Soon after the fire Samuel Hordern — he left the then huge fortune of \$6 million when he died in 1909 — bought a 2.5ha site up George Street on Brickfield Hill.

There was erected another store that for years was the retail wonder of Sydney.

The business closed in the 1960s and the building itself is now due for demolition to make way for a \$500 million development.