

STORY OF THE GREAT FIRES.

TOLD BY CAPTAIN PURCELL\*, CHIEF OF DUBLIN FIRE BRIGADE.

£2,500,000 is put down as an approximate value of all the buildings and stock destroyed by the fires in Dublin during the rebellion. It is the estimate of Captain Purcell, Chief of The Dublin Fire Brigade. The total number of buildings involved in the fires is over 200. With the assistance of a specially coloured map, Captain Purcell, on Monday, 1st May, described to a representative of the Irish Times the area of the fires as follows:

The total area burnt on the east side of Sackville street district includes—Portion of the block between Cathedral street and Earl street, the whole block (between Earl street and Sackville place, bounded by Nelson lane at the back; portion of the block between Sackville place and Abbey street, the whole block between Abbey street and Eden quay, bounded by Marlborough street on the east. The area of this east side district is 27,000 square yards. Among the principal establishments in the area were the Royal Hibernian Academy, Clery's warehouse, the Imperial Hotel, the D.B.C., the branches of the Hibernian Bank and the Munster and Leinster Bank, Wynn's Hotel, Hoyte's, the druggists; Messrs. Hamilton and Long's, Sir Joseph Downes's new restaurant and bakery, Lawrence's shops and warehouse. Messrs. Hopkins and Hopkins' jewellery establishment, and the four public houses—Messrs. Nagle's and Sheridan's, in North Earl street ; Messrs. Mooney's in Lower Abbey street, and Messrs. Mooney's on Eden quay, etc.

On the west side of Sackville street the area destroyed by fire is as follows :—Portion of the block bounded by Henry street, Henry place, and Moore street; portion of the block fronting Henry street, between Moore street and Cole's lane, running back in part to Samson's lane ; the whole block from the General Post Office back to Arnott's warehouse, fronting to Henry street back to Prince's street; the greater portion of the block from Sackville street fronting to Lower Abbey street back to Prince's street and towards Liffey street, within a short distance of the Independent Printing Office, where the fire was stopped ; portion of the block to the south side of Middle Abbey street, with two houses fronting to Sackville street, up to and including No. 62 Middle Abbey street. This area of the fires on the west side of Sackville street is 34,000 square yards in extent. The principal buildings burnt are the General Post Office, the Hotel Metropole. Messrs. Eason and Son's, Messrs. Manfield's new warehouse, the Freeman's Journal Office, Messrs. Bewley's, Messrs. Alexander Pierie's wholesale paper warehouse, Hampton Leedom's, Messrs Curtis and Son's brass foundry and munition factory, where much work has been going on recently; the Oval Bar, Messrs. Thom's Printing Works, Messrs. Sealy, Bryers, and Walker's, and Messrs. Fitzgerald's, etc.

Outside these principal areas there were fires in two houses in Harcourt Street of £85 valuation, and at Nos. 1, 2, and 3 Usher's quay, and round the corner into Bridge street, including two tenement houses, and Doherty's Hotel, Nos 17 to 21 Bridge street, where the fire was stopped before it reached the Brazen Head Hotel. These places have a total valuation, of £277.

Another area of fire outside the Sackville street districts is that including the ancient Linen Hall Barracks, one of the landmarks in the history of a great national industry, recently the seat of the Civic Exhibition, and latterly the office of the Army Pay Department. Here 32 clerks were employed. They were surrounded and besieged for four days and unable to get food. Twice this place was fired. The staff dealt with it themselves. The Fire Brigade could not approach it. It is stated that on the fourth day the Rebels, by means of the bombs at the rear, ignited the building by setting fire to a wooden structure, erected at the time of the Civic Exhibition. This was a ready prey to flames. This fire involved the portion of the Linen Hall occupied by Messrs. Hugh Moore and Alexanders, Ltd., wholesale druggists and drysalterers. The premises, which covered about two acres, contained huge stores of oils and chemicals.

Some small conception of the work of the Brigade and the danger to the city of utter ruin may be gathered from the story Captain Purcell gave of the fires that occurred and how the Brigade dealt with them, Captain Purcell's story is as follows :—

The first call came at 3.58 p.m. on Monday, 24th April. It was from the Ordnance Department at Island Bridge, stating there was a fire at the Magazine in the Phoenix Park. A detachment was sent with a motor engine from the Thomas street section. They made their way round Steevens' lane and Kingsbridge, and managed to get to the Magazine without opposition. They found one section of the Magazine on fire. This contained large quantities of small arms and a large number of boxes of ammunition. That section of the Magazine was more or less destroyed, but the remainder was saved. In the meantime Lieutenant Myers, who attended with another motor engine, was held up at a barricade by Sinn Feiners with loaded revolvers. One of these weapons was placed at the head of the driver, and he was ordered to return.

(The Irish Times on Friday, 5th May, published the following:—"Lieutenant Myers, of the Dublin Fire Brigade, requests us to contradict the statement, in a recent issue, that he was held up at a barricade by Sinn Feiners with loaded revolvers while proceeding to the fire at the Magazine in the Phoenix Park.)

The following is the entry in the log book at the Tara street Central Fire Station :

"Monday, 24th April, 1916.

"3.58 p.m.—By 'phone from Ordnance Department, Island Bridge, 'phone No. 3739. Fire in Magazine Fort, Phoenix Park. Sent same to A Station to attend, C. and D. to stand by, also to police and water control.

"3.59 p.m.—Motor left for same.

"4.6 p.m.—Motor returned, street barricaded at Church street Bridge. Officer in charge of Volunteers refused to let brigade pass."

At 10.6 p.m. on Monday a box call came from the alarm at Nelson's Pillar that there was a fire in the Cable Shoe Company's shop in Sackville street, The fire looked dangerous, and at 10.24 p.m. the Buckingham street section sent for more help. The Tara street section also arrived. The fire was extinguished at 10.59 p.m. At 11.30 p.m. there was a call of fire in the True Form Shoe shop, also in Sackville street. This place, like the Cable Shoe shop, had been looted, and papers, etc. set alight. The fire was extinguished at 12.30 a.m. on Tuesday morning.

THE SECOND DAY.

Tuesday 25th began with three simultaneous fires in being. At 12 1 a.m. Tuesday continued Captain Purcell, we were told that No 4 North Earl street, was burning. The outbreak was extinguished at 12.53 a.m. At 4 11 p m on the same day the fire at Lawrence's, in Sackville street, began. A call for more help was made at 4.15 p.m. We fought it until a Quarter past eight when it was practically extinguished, and about half of Lawrence's premises were; saved.

While working at Lawrence's fire volleying and firing was going on at the General Post Office and Lawrence's was in the line of fire. While the Brigade was working a man and a woman were shot beside the engine at the Henry street-Sackville street corner. A man, the brother of one of the brigade turncocks was shot beside the engine driver at Cathedral place. The man leaves a wife and seven children. From the top floor of Lawrence s the Brigade by means of an escape rescued a man and woman from a top window.

THE THIRD DAY.

At 19 59 p m on Wednesday, 26th, Williams's Stores at the back of Henry street caught fire. The stores were being looted at the time. Five men whom the flames prevented from getting out by the way they had entered ran right through to Henry street when the firemen arrived. The fire was extinguished at 2 51 p.m. The Brigade saved the building but the contents had been looted. At 5.14 p.m. further fires took place at Williams's and were extinguished.

At 6.59 p.m. there was a fire at the North Wall in a quantity of jute. We did not go to it as the bridges were up and we could not get there. One of the company's men kept it down, and there was no fear of it spreading to anything else. An outbreak in Upper Sackville street was notified at 8.7pm on Wednesday, but it was small.

THURSDAY 27th.

We attended a fire at Harcourt street at 5.7 am on Thursday, 27th. It was in behind the Russell Hotel. By 7 o'clock we had saved half the house and we soon extinguished the fire. Here we found a rifle, a

bag of ammunition and two revolvers. A dead Volunteer lay outside at the corner. The Linen Hall fire was reported at 9.50 a.m., but was suppressed by the private appliance there.

#### WHERE THE GREAT FIRE BEGAN.

We were informed at 12.32 p.m. that there was a fire in the Irish Times Reserve printing office in Abbey street. As that area was the scene of terrible rifle firing at the time I did not, said Captain Purcell, allow the Brigade to attend. The fire spread very rapidly owing to the barrier of furniture and bales of paper that had been placed across the street. The barrier extended from the Irish Times Office to Wynn's Hotel, and carried the fire straight across to that side. That was where the great fire began. As to how it grew I know nothing, except that heavy cannonading was going on. The military were shelling that district.

#### THE FIRE SPREAD RAPIDLY.

At 2.52 p.m. we were informed that it had reached Sackville place, in the rear of the Irish Times building. All I could do was to observe through a glass from our tower the progress of the flames. I saw the fire creeping along Abbey street in both directions on both sides, on the one hand up towards the Hibernian Bank at the corner of Sackville street, and eastwards towards the Methodist church in Lower Abbey street, and then again on the south side Wynn's Hotel made a terrible blaze. I saw the fire gradually work up to Hoyte's corner, and through the shops in Sackville street down to the D.B.C. restaurant. That being a very high building I knew that it would stop the fire for a time, and as I saw the Grand Restaurant with its annex behind in Harbour Court at the rear I had a faint hope that the D.B.C. might survive. It made a brave stand for hours. Then I noticed an ominous light in the upper lantern windows. It was at once an indication that the place was doomed. Little by little the smoke and flames gathered strength, and then burst through the ventilators and windows. After another half hour the roof showed up alight and the lantern on top was wrapped in flames, and the whole made a weird sight.

It was then getting dark; it was about half past seven. Once that fire was fully under way nothing could have saved the block. It burnt away all night. I traced the fire's path from the station tower through the various shops down to Hamilton and Long's, and out to the rear of the offices of the London and North-Western railway Company, leaving a little oasis about the corner in which were Scott's, the tailors, Hopkins's, and Lanigan's, with Lipton's illuminated advertisement on the front on Eden quay, it was only after long hours that this corner succumbed.

#### HOPING AGAINST HOPE.

As to how the fire was going northward I could form no accurate opinion owing to the huge volumes of fire between us and Clery's. At intervals, when the wind wafted away great volumes of flame and smoke we got glimpses of Clery's still standing intact. I was hoping against hope that it might stop the fire. But before morning Clery's had gone the way of the rest.

For the time being the northern wall and gable of Clery's withstood the fire but the flames made their way behind Allen's and took in Sir Joseph Downes's new bakery and restaurant. At this period I got into telephonic communication with Hickey's on the north of North Earl street, and was able to learn of the situation on that side. This was at 5 a.m. on Friday, 28th.

#### FRIDAY'S FIRES.

It is needless to say, observed Captain Purcell, that it was with awful pain, amounting to anguish of mind, that I witnessed this terrible destruction that I felt I could have stopped easily if I could only have been allowed with any reasonable degree of safety to approach these premises earlier. However, added the captain, we took our courage in our hands. I decided that I would make an effort, even at the eleventh hour, to stop the ruin. We proceeded with the Tara street section to Cathedral place, and under cover of Hickey's shop and through the rooms above the warehouse we threw volumes of water into Sir Joseph Downes's restaurant, and extinguished the fire, which was right in front and likely to ignite Hickey's warehouse.

For the time being we saved the situation. Unfortunately, owing to the sniping that was going on in front from the Marlborough street direction, I could not risk the men's lives in the open, and was prevented from doing what I should have wished to do—to get at the rear of Downes's premises and examine the backs of Winstanley's and Meagher's, which were then intact. We worked there in the

open, and some of my men's lives were threatened by men who told them that if they did not clear off they would be shot. We had to retire. That was at 9 a.m. on Saturday.

#### SATURDAYS OUTBREAKS.

While we were thus watching or working on Friday at the great fire we had fires in other parts of the city at the same time. At 5.5 p.m. on Friday there came a call of fire in Lower Bridge street. That was attended by the Thomas street Section, and after several hours' work it was prevented from extending. Again at 6.40 a.m., while we were fighting at North Earl street, another call came from Harcourt street. This was a dwelling house, in which the fire was extinguished at 8.59 a.m. by the Buckingham street Section. On Saturday we knew that the G.P.O. was burning, but we could not go near it. As I had anticipated in regard to North Earl street, the fire worked into Winstanley's and Meagher's publichouse, and other shops at the corner of Sackville street. Then it crossed Earl street by another barrier of furniture into Tyler's boot shop at the north corner of Earl street and Sackville street. It crept eastward through Rowe's drapery house adjoining Sheridan's public bar. I had information on all this, but could do nothing to stop it.

#### MESSAGE FROM THE MILITARY.

At 3.40 p.m. on Saturday the Commanding Officer of the troops in Dublin sent me, said Captain Purcell, a special despatch to say that they had the leaders of the rebels in their custody, and that they would now cease military operations ; that matters in the city were getting normal, and that I might now make an effort to stop the fires in Sackville street and Abbey street. I immediately turned out the whole force of the Brigade. We proceeded to the great fire area and got to work. We had our two motor engines, and started on the north-west side of O'Connell Bridge, lifting water from the Liffey with four lines of delivery hose. We had out six other lines of hose from hydrants in the vicinity of the fires all at work. At that time the Post Office was gone, the Hotel Metropole and Eason's were going badly, and Manfield's at the corner, and five other houses from the corner of Sackville street, and extending to the south side of Abbey street, were burning.

#### FIREMEN DELIBERATELY FIRED AT.

We were making excellent progress towards stopping the fire on both sides of Abbey street when the bullets began to fly amongst us. We were being deliberately fired at. I had two men up on fire escapes, and bullets struck their ladders. Our engines were shot at from the directions of Westmoreland street and Aston's quay. Bullets hit the engines, going through the mudguards and through the tires. I instantly called the men off to take cover. I abandoned the engines and hose on the streets, and rushed the men in batches in motor ambulances home to their stations. Then we saw the fires ripping away in every direction from the west along Abbey street and along Henry street. At 4.40 and 4.50 p.m. I had transferred the men back to their stations. They had been allowed to work only little more than half an hour. At 5.30 p.m. I received a telephone message from the Pro-Cathedral in Marlborough street to say that Nagle's was burning furiously, and that Hickey's, the adjoining warehouse, was taking fire. This was the place I had taken so much trouble to save. Of course I knew that when it got to Hickey's, Boyer's new and extensive warehouse would be taken in, and that the fire would expend along the north side of Earl street and probably involve the cathedral in the rear.

#### VOLUNTEERS.

After our previous painful experience I felt that I was not justified in ordering any members of the Brigade to attend this new outbreak. But being fully impressed with the gravity of the situation I appealed for four volunteers from amongst the Brigade in my station to go and stop this fire. Four men instantly came forward and proceeded in charge of Lieut. Myers to the place and succeeded in stopping the fire at Nagle's before it had done much harm. They also insured the safety of the remainder of the north side of Earl Street, including the cathedral at the back.

#### THE CULMINATING CALL

While the men were working there, I received what I call the culminating call of the many from the doctors and clergymen in Jervis Street Hospital. That was at 8 p m on Sunday. I was informed that the flames were spreading closely in the direction of the hospital, that sparks were raining on the glass roof of their verandah, and they said that if I could not do something to stop the fire's course then I must make immediate arrangements for the removal of the patients. To the firemen's credit, they one

and all declared that they would save the hospital, even under the bullets. We immediately hurried our available force out, recovered our engines and other apparatus from O'Connell Bridge, and started on for the big fight. I also called for the assistance of any available men and apparatus from Messrs. Powers' Distillery and Guinness's Brewery. Both sections kindly responded to the appeal, and sent men and means which I ordered to work at various points. We fought during all Saturday night, stopping the fire where it was possible to stop it, and saved the hospital. In other directions since we had been prevented by shooting in the afternoon of Saturday from working, fires had multiplied and increased in volume a hundred fold. So our work now consisted of not attempting to extinguish what were already hopeless cases, but cutting off in sections and preventing the fires from spreading further. In this we succeeded.

During the operations the popping of rifle ammunition and the explosion of bombs left behind in buildings occurred, and gave us peculiar sensations, but they were not to be compared with the sensations caused by the sniping. By 7 o'clock on Sunday morning we had the conflagration, as we may call it, completely under control. But since then we have had to deal by detachments with other outbreaks of dangerous rekindlings over the whole area.

*\*Thomas P. Purcell, born in Johnswell, County Kilkenny, was appointed Captain of Dublin Fire Brigade in 1892. During his time in command, Buckingham Street fire station was built in 1901, Tara Street Central station was built in 1906 and Thomas Street in 1909. In the latter year Dublin acquired its first motorised fire engine and a motor pump designed by Purcell. See article by Maureen Hegarty, Old Kilkenny Review 2005 - Thomas Pierce Purcell, A Kilkenny Man to be Remembered.*