

Sidelights on the General Offices Fire 1905 Part I

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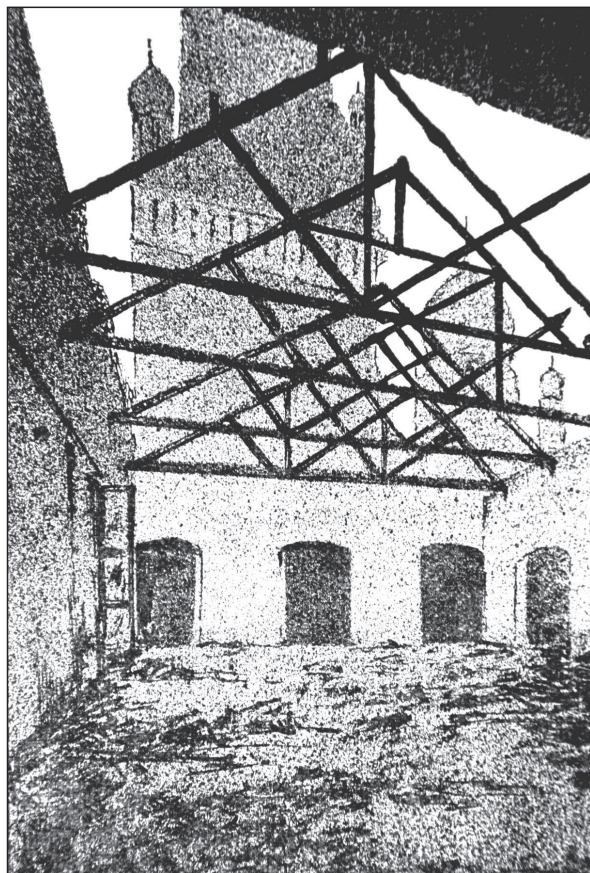
By E. J. A.

Part I

I am sure I am not alone in thinking how interesting was "D. B's" article in the November magazine in which he told us so charmingly of the history of our GLO building in Bombay. The description of the fire was particularly thrilling if I may so describe the story of a disaster that cost the Railway some 3 lakhs of rupees and destroyed many interesting records. But fires are thrilling, if terrible things and certainly the full story, or as much of it as I have been able to trace of the fire on the 15th November 1905, only eight years after the building had been completed, makes fascinating reading. Fortunately the story is not marred by

the recording of any casualties, fatal or otherwise, and apart from the inconvenience and expense and the destruction of certain records including the "P.F. registers of the R. M. Railway", the fire cannot be said to have been so disastrous as most, and for that we must thank the Bombay Fire Brigade. There are a few people still serving in the Railway who remember the fire - Mr. Graveston our Publicity Officer, and Mr. Sorabji H. Wadia, Head Clerk, Pass Section are two, but neither actually saw the building in flames. Mr. Sorabji said he arrived as usual next morning to find a large part of the building a smoking ruin, but nobody was allowed to stand and gaze at it for long. It was "Victorian discipline" in those days, said Mr. Sorabji, and Mr. Owen the Secretary saw to it that as many people as possible were soon on their job – a case of making the best of a bad one for a lot of people I imagine. But let the files tell their story.

Let us start with Case No. B. W. 0310 of 1905. Is there anything strange about the cover? Not very perhaps, but in the top right hand corner are the printed words "Precised to date," and in the bottom left hand corner "Keepwiths, Office Note (Record Section should make a special note on Notes in cases)." What was meant by Keepwiths? Military influence is seen in the wording of the heading of the file which reads: Case No. B. W. 0310 of 1905 General Offices B. B. & C. I. Railway Bombay. Fire in – (1) Restoration of. So much for the exterior. Now let us turn to the inside to see what we can find. The first thing that struck me was that the office note-paper gave much of the history of the Railway in a nutshell for it is headed: Bombay, Baroda and Central India Railway, including Rajputana-Malwa Railway. Includes the Rajputana State Railway, the Holkar State Railway, the Sindia-Neemuch State Railway, the



The Great Fire; Scene in the Central Building. Reproduction of the photograph which appeared in the Times of India, dated 16th November 1905

Rewari-Bhatinda-Fazilka State Railway, the Cawnpore-Achnera State Railway and the Godhra-Ratlam-Nagda State Railway. One of the many telegrams to the home Board regarding the fire discloses the fact that the Board's offices were not always in Westminster (or Guildford), for the printed address on a Reuters Telegram form reads T. W. Wood Esq., Secretary, B. B. & C. I. Railway, Gloucester House, 2, 3 & 4, Bishopsgate St., Without. London, E.C. The printed address suggests more frequent use of the cable than we are used to today.

Here are the first cables that passed between the Agent and the Home Board and *vice-versa* about the fire:—

November 15th, Agent to Secretary.

"Regret announce general offices took fire early this morning after illumination dome containing records gutted top floor and burnt out first floor badly damaged wings and ground floor safe."

November 15th, Secretary to Agent —

"Board distressed calamitous destruction head office building. Take promptest measures restoration and wire further to-morrow evening."

November 16th, Agent to Secretary —

"Major works comprise rebuilding whole top floor between wings and roofing over same which will be taken in hand promptly hope complete six months. New floors in dome and minor repairs will follow."

Later a letter dated 8th December 1905, in which the Home Board expressed both their distress and their anxiety to fix responsibility for the fire was received. The letter reads:

"The accounts that the last mail brought me from Mr. Owen and Major Hoskyn as to the lamentable fire at our Head Offices are fearful enough to read. It was a miserable wind up to

what appears to have been a thoroughly successful series of public festivities and rejoicings.

We shall of course suspend judgement until the Board know the results of the enquiry set on foot, which will, I hope, throw satisfactory light on an important point now observed *viz.* apparent absence from the building of any responsible official qualified to see by personal inspection that all went right."

The public festivities and rejoicings were of course in honour of the visit of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, afterwards King George V. His Royal Highness had left Bombay on our Railway on the night of the fire, and our staff must have felt some consolation for the damage to the building of which they and the whole of Bombay were so proud, when they received this gracious message of sympathy from him.

"The Prince of Wales has just heard that the offices of the B. B. & C. I. Railway have been destroyed by fire. I am directed by His Royal Highness to convey his sincere regret at this calamity. He fears that the fire may be due to the illuminations in his honour and as he is at present enjoying the arrangements made for his comfort by your management he feels a personal sympathy for the B. B. & C. I. Railway."

Many other messages of sympathy were received, notable among them being one from Mr. M. De P. Webb of Karachi. Mr. De Webb seems to have been quite overcome judging by his message, which read :

"Sincerely regret to read of the deplorable conflagration and great loss at your magnificent offices."

A Court of Enquiry composed of Messrs. J. R. Tickell, Chief Engineer, C. R. Hoskyn, Chief Auditor and Accountant, R. C. T. Huddleston, Ag. Traffic Superintendent, and A. C. Owen, Secretary to Agent, was held and their finding was as follows:

"We are of opinion that the fire originated on the first floor, somewhere in the vicinity of the Police Superintendent's office.

We are of opinion that the illumination of the office was not the direct cause of the fire, but that it was due to carelessness on the part of the men engaged in lighting up the building, who had matches and tapers supplied to them. The probability is that the fire was smouldering for some time in an inconspicuous way, until the morning land breeze sprang up and fanned it into flame, when it rapidly spread to the upper part of the building, its progress being assisted by wooden packing cases, which had contained the lamps and were left lying about in the verandahs.

We regret to record our opinion that due precautions were not taken to guard against fire. According to the evidence the Janitor cleared every one out of the building, having locked up any doors that were open, and retired to his own quarters at the north end of the building about 11 p.m., on the 14th. His own quarters are separate from the main building and are so situated that a view of the central portion of the building cannot be obtained from them.

Our present fire alarm apparatus has proved to be inefficient, and we recommend that the suggestions of Capt. Nicholls of the Fire Brigade as regards water supply and telephonic communication with the Fire Brigade be adopted, and that a building which has proved to be of an inflammable nature should not be left without night watchmen and tell-tale clocks, in future.

In renovating the portions of the floors which have been destroyed we recommend that steel joists and concrete flooring be adopted.

We desire to record our appreciation of the promptness and efficiency of the Municipal Fire Brigade, and also of the help which was afforded by the Naval and Military forces."

Mr. Royal Dawson, S. G. I., agreed with the report, a copy of which was sent to the Railway

Board, Calcutta. This report was coldly official in its wording and the story of the fire was more humanly told by Col. Olivier in letters which he wrote to – "My dear Bisset" and "My dear Lawrence", the latter being Sir W. Lawrence and the former was of course Col. Bisset, a one time Agent of the Railway after whom the Bisset Institute in Ajmer was named. From the letter to Col. Bisset we gather that the culprit for the fire was Mr. Deane the Executive Engineer, Bombay. Be it said for Col. Olivier that he tempered justice with mercy in dealing with this officer. The letter dated 28th November 1905 reads:

My dear Bisset,

I got back here on Friday morning and can now give some account first hand of the condition of the offices etc. In the first place I think we may congratulate ourselves that the actual loss in records is less than at first anticipated. The Chief Auditor informs me that no absolutely essential records are destroyed and that though we shall undoubtedly suffer some inconvenience, we have all that we want to enable us to carry on.

As regards the state of the offices, the Building as a whole is intact, the whole of the roofing will have to be renewed and we propose to do this with iron instead of wooden trusses. A good many floors will have to be also renewed and we propose to do this with steel joists, instead of wooden beams, the greater majority of the doors on the upper floors have been destroyed and will have to be replaced and a considerable amount of damage has been done to the details of arches etc. the renewal of all this has been put in the hands of Stevens the Architect.

The main staircase is much damaged and we have had to shore it up, the fire seems to have begun a little way to the North of the dome on the first floor, to have burnt its way through the 2nd floor just to the North of the dome, to have ignited the contents of the dome and spread outwards therefrom, burning the roofs of the two

main office rooms and the floor of the 2nd floor. When got under the flames had just attacked Hoskyn's own office and the second floor of the South wing and the doors on the inner side are burnt out except that his office and my office and those of the Chief Engineer, the offices above them *i.e.* all the offices in the North and South wings are practically intact. I am sitting in mine now and barring a little smoke stain near one or two ventilators, there is no sign of anything unusual.

My office and that of the Chief Engineer and of course the whole of the Traffic offices on the ground floor are working away in the old building and a flat for the Audit office has been taken in Hornby Road and connected by a telephone.

I hope the damage will be covered by between two and three lakhs. I have seen Deane on the subject, he is not happy as to his share of responsibility which is by no means small. As a matter of fact having once ascertained that the illuminations he proposed were suitable I left the matter entirely in his hands, considering that the most casual enquiry on his part would have led him to know the every extensive precautions which everyone else had made against fire, at the other buildings which were illuminated. I am afraid I cannot but feel that his failure to take any is most reprehensible. The sin however is entirely one of omission and is not due to want of energy or to laziness. I think he anticipated the worst, but though I gave him to understand that I recognized his responsibility, I told him that I would not make too bad a case of it against him.

* * *

Sd. H. D. Olivier."

The flat referred to for the Audit office is explained in a letter dated 29th November 1905 from the Chief Auditor and Accountant to the Agent:

"I beg to report that I have engaged the top floor of the building in Hornby Road, recently erected by Wheeler & Company, the Railway

Book Stall Agents for a period of six months at rental of Rs. 450 per month. If it is necessary to occupy the building for a longer period, we have the option to do so on a monthly tenancy at the same rate of rent. This was the only office containing sufficient accommodation which could be secured at a moderate rental for so short a period as six months, and it was only the fact of Wheeler and Company's connection with our Railway that secured the building for us on these comparatively easy terms."

A note on the file said that tents put up by the Chief Storekeeper *Parel* for Audit office were therefore not required. Another interesting titbit regarding location of offices is disclosed in the following note:

"As it is proposed to use the room on the Audit office floor south wing immediately above the *Loco. Superintendent's Office* temporarily, the Chief Engineer is requested to have it put in order and to have the punkah (or electric fan) put right."

Col. Olivier's letter to Sir W. Lawrence describing "the Royal Progress over our system" read as follows:

"My dear Lawrence,

I am sitting here in my old room and barring a touch or two of smoke stain above some of the ventilators there is no sign that anything has gone wrong during my absence. I think you will find that considering the data on which it was made my estimate to you was not at all a bad shot at what it will cost to put us right. We are still sorting records, the main staircase has been shored up with heavy timber baulks and all debris has been removed.

The action of the water playing on the hot stone has caused the latter to fly and flake away in a remarkable manner, if ever you want a picturesque ruin constructed in any portion of your family seat, I will undertake to carry out the same in the best possible style with a tin of kerosine oil and a garden hose.

I got here this morning in time to meet my wife, whom I find fairly well. I think we may say that the Royal progress over our system has worked well, I am glad I stayed as long as I did for if anything goes wrong, even so small a thing as a bath tap, it is to my mind more satisfactory to be on the spot than to hear of it at second hand. I think that all the minor defects which must naturally be inherent to a new train have now been found out and I hope permanently corrected. As far as I am concerned I thoroughly enjoyed my trip, there was quite enough to keep me pretty constantly employed and I enjoyed the pleasant society very much. Your own presence in the Camp made an immense difference to them and I always felt that if any troubles did arise I had a friend in need to fall back upon.

You however have a lot more in front of you and I can only hope it will go on as it has begun. One word on a subject I broached with you a day or two ago, namely rewards to staff. I fear the subject is one, the course of which does not follow the lines you would have preferred and this is also my view, but I should like especially to bring to your notice the fact that men like Messrs. Watson and the Electrician with the train deserve special treatment especially the former. I have the very best of reasons for knowing that when the train is in motion they are up all night and as they will be in charge of the train from start to finish I do think they are deserving of something rather special if you can manage it. It does not really lie within my province to mention Mr. Stewart I. C. S. the I. G. P. He is a quiet retiring man and unless collared is quite likely to slip off without waiting for even a thankyou for his constant and arduous duties. You won't mind my reminding you of him.

I am afraid this is a long letter for one so busy as you to read, so I will only add kind regards.

Yours sincerely,

P. S. Just one thing more if you have a chance, please tell Her Royal Highness how much I appreciated their kind gift of the photographs.

My wife is highly delighted with them also. I forgot to mention the subject when I said goodbye."

The letter contains an interesting piece of history for some of us, for the Inspector General of Police – Mr. Stewart, belonged to the I.C.S. We can only hope he figured in the Birthday Honours list, or was otherwise suitably rewarded for his good work. Mr. Stewart comes to our notice again in a letter on the file headed; From R. B. Stewart Esq., M.A., I.C.S., Inspector General of Police, Bombay Presidency, Poona, in which he asks for several items of office equipment, including lamps and candle sticks, to replace those destroyed by fire in the office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police *for Railways and Criminal Investigation*.

The files are not particularly informative as to the ultimate fate of Mr. Deane. The Board "marked their sense of Mr. Deane's failure by directing his transfer to another district." But it seems that Mr. Deane had foreseen the way in which the Board would mark their displeasure, and before their orders could be communicated to him he had moved the whole of his office to Bulsar, leaving the care of the Company's property in Bombay to the A. E. N. *Bombay Island*.

Mr. Deane's action naturally tended to take the wind out of the sails of those in authority. Probably the case closed and honour was satisfied when the Agent gave orders that "Mr. Deane would have to be transferred to another station as soon as convenient."

There is only one letter on the file from Mr. Deane. Was he trying to be helpful when he wrote this letter to his Chief Engineer?

Your No. 10029 dated 19-12-1905.

By the word "Installation" was intended, the act of installing, to place or install the Minimax Fire Extinguisher in any building it might be proposed to have at hand, this means of protection in case of fire.