

Sidelights on the General Offices Fire 1905

Part II

March 1942



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By E. J. A.

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"D.B." described in his article how sailors from the Renown and Hyacinth, and troops quartered near the office, rendered invaluable help in connection with the fire, by removing records and controlling crowds etc. A draft letter on the file records the appreciation of the Railway in the following terms:

Messages to H. E. The Naval C. in C.
East Indies Squadron.
and Lieut. General Sir A. Hunter, KCB, DSO.
Commanding the troops.

Dear Sir,

At an extraordinary officers meeting which has been held this morning in connection with the unfortunate fire which occurred last night, it was resolved on behalf of the Agent, Col. Olivier who left Bombay yesterday with H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, to convey to yourself and the officers and men under your command the thanks of the Railway Administration for the promptness with which the ^{sailors}_{troops} turned out, for the great assistance which they rendered at the fire

Admiral Poe replied on behalf of the Navy and on his letter the Secretary noted for the information of the Agent: "I wrote a letter of thanks in your name for the help the blue jackets gave also the soldiers."

Mr. N. R. Medley, Actg. D. T. S. in his evidence before the enquiry said that when he arrived at 5-45 a.m. "the native sepoy's of the 121st Pioneers had already begun to remove records out of the Traffic Office."

Major Hoskyn was evidently an extremely practical Chief Auditor and Accounts Officer, for on arriving at the scene of the fire (on his way

back from Ajmer) he "pointed out to the Senior Fireman the location of the Cash Office and asked him to save cash which he did."

As was only natural, consideration was given to effecting improvements in the building in various ways, when the opportunity created by the fire, presented itself. As has been seen, the virtues of steel and concrete were already appreciated, and in a letter dated 23rd November 1905 the Chief Engineer wrote:

"I have let out the construction of the floors and roofing and the work is in hand. The former will consist of steel iron joists and concrete arches, and the roofing of the Audit Offices on the second floor will be made of steel trusses without any woodwork anywhere."

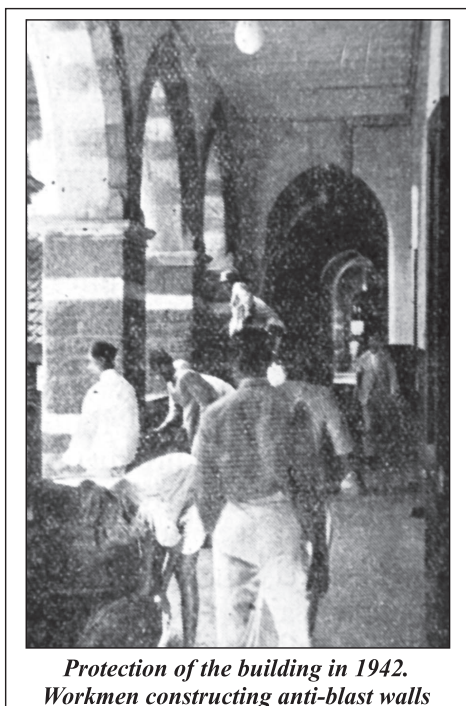
Electric bells were, it seems either a luxury or a novelty, for the Agent wrote a note to the Secretary saying:

"My room is being repaired and generally done up so I take this opportunity of asking that an electric bell may be put in.

My room is some distance from the sepoy's bench and I have sometimes to walk into the passage to attract their attention."

A sum of Rs. 4,092 was sanctioned "for payment to Messrs. Jafer Per Mohd. & Co. on account of 6820 lamps broken in consequence of the recent fire in GLO." Mr. Sorabji tells me that candle lamps were in use in those days and much to my surprise, he produced from his table drawer the lamp he used before electric lighting was installed in the offices – in 1907, so I am told.

It may come as a surprise to many that no less than five officers in GLO. owned motor cars in



*Protection of the building in 1942.
Workmen constructing anti-blast walls*

1905. They were : Messrs. Deane, Crommelian, Tickell, Cooke and Johnson. In submitting his plans for a "garrage (sic.) or shelter for motor cars" the Chief Engineer wrote as follows:

"I submit a site plan and plan elevation of a garage or shelters for motor cars the cost of which would be about Rs. 5,800.

When the general offices were in Church Gate Street, I understood that a stable was hired for officers' use at a rental of Rs. 50. The rent on Rs. 5,800 @ say 4 per cent would be Rs. 20 a month (abt).

There are now some 5 officers who own motors. Can I send an estimate for the shelter?"

With a fine sense of impartiality and an eye to the Company's interests, the Agent replied:

"I am afraid the cost is rather high Rs. 1,160 per motor. The question also arises why should motor owners be better treated than horse owners. I fancy for your scheme to have any success you must cheapen it and provide a combined stables and garrage."

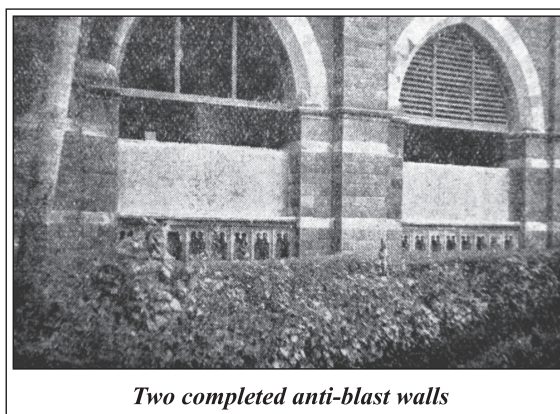
Mr. Stevens the architect who supervised the

re-building proposed to erect an "upper residential story at a cost of one lakh." At the moment, when transport difficulties are real and are likely to get more so, one is inclined to think that it is a pity some officers were not thus given the opportunity to sleep where they eat and eat where they work. Taking the long view, however, I think we must be thankful to the Board for not agreeing with Mr. Stevens proposal. In these sophisticated days one cannot imagine that quarters on top of our GLO. building would be popular.

Military land had to be hired in Queens Road for a "mortar mill and accompanying sheds for storing mortar, sand, etc. and for housing buffaloes." 888 sq. yds. of land was hired at a "monthly pay" of Rs. 55-8-0 or 1 As per square yard.

I like *pay* used in this way – a good example of "simple (and correct) stuff."

The Agent said that as the restoration of GLO was in hand, "the C. E. N. should arrange for a bath to be put in one of the retiring rooms – the most convenient room would probably be No. 32." Was the bath ever put in? If so, what happened to it? All I can tell you is that there is no sign of it now in room 32 where Mr. Bidulph, Head Clerk "M" Section of the F. A. and C. A. O.



Two completed anti-blast walls

and his staff may be seen at work.

The question of the fire alarms and fire extinguishers naturally received considerable

attention and I am afraid history will decide that this subject was not Col. Olivier's strong point. The fact that the fire warning arrangements only failed once, (when the building caught fire!) was not sufficient justification in the Colonel's eyes to condemn the apparatus. His report to the Home Board read:

"I agree that the present fire warning arrangements seem not to have acted, but it must not be forgotten that due to the use made of the building, and that from year's end to year's end there is only occasionally any chance of lights or inflammable matter being in use after dark, we were, I think justified in being satisfied with them, and the fact that they failed on one extraordinary occasion like the present does not show that we were wrong in our confidence. The proposals of the Committee will, however, be acted upon."

At the Enquiry he agreed that "the electric automatic apparatus does not appear to have worked at all."

Later when Mr. Stevens recommended the installation of Grinnells Automatic Sprinklers, Col. Olivier said he did not care about them as they were only suitable for mills and said that they should be omitted from the estimate. But the Grinnells Sprinklers were installed – and are still in being. The Chief Engineer's recommendation read as follows:

"I have given full consideration to the question of providing the General Office building with the best means of protection against fire, and I am in favour of the Grinnell Automatic Sprinkler and Fire Alarm System. Its chief recommendation is that it is automatic; and, as a general rule, the most disastrous fires are those which commence insidiously at night and are allowed to spread unobserved. The Grinnell Sprinkler is an efficient 'First aid' help in such cases, due to the fact that as soon as the temperature of the room rises to 155° Fahr, the solder holding a glass valve melts, permits the latter to fall, and allows the water to rush out in

the form of a continuous spray."

The apparatus is still tested regularly, as in the good old days, by holding a candle near the plugs to see if the wax melts.

Incidentally I noticed an advertisement of Messrs. Mather & Platt in this year's Annual for these self-save sprinklers. The advertisement stated that the Grinnell Automatic Sprinkler has a record of over 50,000 fires extinguished at an average loss of only £ 60 per fire.

Mr. F. B. Davern, Head Clerk of the Executive Engineer's Office, (promotion must have been quick in those days for Mr. Davern only had 3 years service) explained the working of the fire arrangements. He said that "in addition to the signal communication between the Fire Brigade and the office (which had failed twice in the fortnight before the fire), there is an automatic arrangement in every room in the office by which if the temperature rises to a certain height, communication is established and the fire alarm rings in our office and the Fort Fire Station."

Mr. J. Franklin, Telegraph Superintendent of Railways, said that in his opinion "the fire commenced in the roof and burnt downwards and for that reason it attacked the cable and gave no chance for the thermometer to act." He explained that the thermometers were placed in rooms of all floors but not in the dome, as no records were stored there. When the temperature rose to 110° F. the thermometers would cause a bell to ring.

Capt. Nicholls, Chief Officer, Bombay Fire Brigade, said that a test of the fire alarm system was made on the 18th November 1905 and that the alarm gong connected with the Fort Fire Brigade Station failed to ring. The test did, however, denote that the office alarm was in working order and Capt. Nicholls was therefore of opinion that the Railways *custodiers* were not on the alert when the fire occurred.

Mr. J. S. Brown the Officiating Consulting Engineer for Railways, however, seems to have been one of those simple minded souls who are able to put their finger on the spot when others fluster and flounder in doubt. He wrote : "I understand that your general offices were fitted with automatic fire alarms based on the same principle as the Grinnel Sprinkler (*i.e.* actuated by a rise in temperature) and that they did not act during the fire on November 5, 1905 simply because the fire did not originate in a room where such apparatus was fixed. I would therefore suggest that the Grinnel Sprinkler you now propose to adopt should be fixed in the passages and verandahs as well as in all the rooms."

That communications were defective is obvious from the fact that Sgt. R. Walker the janitor had to send his mali to the fire-station, to ask for the fire-brigade's help. The fire brigade's report said that a telephone message was received from a "Stranger" only after the mali had arrived. The "stranger" was Signaller Rustomji D. who was on duty at Church Gate station and considering he had but 11 months service he seems to have acted with commendable promptness. At the enquiry he stated:

".....I came across at once and called up the Janitor. I opened my telephone room in GLO and rang up No. 5000 (the fire brigade) and got a reply at once. After half an hour the fire engines began to arrive....."

To digress for a moment, Mr. Graveston told me something which is not on the file and that is that Sgt. Walker told him that on the night of the fire three of his hamals were trapped in the dome. In those days entrance to the dome was by means of a trap door, and this was always left open, but when the fire was noticed Sgt. Walker said he found the door locked, and he was only just able to free his men in time. Why did Sgt. Walker not tell this to the Enquiry? Perhaps he did, but it is not on record. Is it possible that foul play was responsible for the fire, and the

intended victims only just escaped a horrible death? Or was the story told to Mr. Graveston just an old-soldier's tale?

Capt. Nicholls said that on hearing of the fire he immediately ordered out all the available *steamers* and other appliances and proceeded to the scene himself on a *steamer*.

At the Enquiry Capt. Nicholls said that altogether seven *steamers* were at the fire.

The Court of Enquiry enquired about smoking. The Agent's Office Manual was produced showing a rule in which smoking was strictly prohibited. It was also stated in evidence that notices had been put up in English and in the vernacular over the Lavatories and record rooms "Smoking strictly prohibited."

The Committee of Enquiry's recommendations on the subject of watchmen were put into effect and "a staff of Ramoosees (chowkidars) were engaged."

In his half yearly report dated 30th June 1906 the Agent reported that the "work of restoration is progressing well and will soon be finished. The estimate has been sanctioned by the Railway Board chargeable in the proportion of Rs. 30,292 to Capital and Rs. 2,80,176 to the *Fire Insurance Fund*". The original estimate was put at about two lakhs which the Agent thought excessive in view of the fact that the whole building had originally cost only seven lakhs. The Chief Engineer had been asked to submit detailed estimate for "restoration of building and also for 'tell-tale' clocks, water supply, and fire hydrants, also to arrange for direct connexion by telephone with the Fire Brigade."

The direct telephone connection with the Fire Brigade (situated near Whiteway Laidlaw's) was put in at a cost of Rs. 369.

The tell-tale clocks are still in use. From their appearance they are the same ones that were bought after the fire, in 1906. What more could

be said for the workmanship of the watchmakers of those days? Every night the watchmen on duty in the building for the last thirty six years have had to record their movements and offer evidence of their alertness by means of these clocks, the Janitor checking them each morning.

There I propose to end my Inner History of the great fire and the re-building of our offices. Much of what I have recorded is to many of us of interest because it takes us back to the customs and outlook of a period before our time, but the files also have their practical lessons to convey, not only to Engineers but also to laymen. Legibility of the handwriting for example has made my task easy and pleasant—why should we have to tolerate the scribblers of today? On the Railway's telegraph forms of those days was printed a note that is so practical that one

wonders why it was ever deleted from the form. This is what it says:-

"Messages to be as concise as possible, and only forwarded when the business is urgent, and there is no time to make the communication by other means."

Finally a word in praise of our much maligned "files." If the story in WB0310 of 1905 makes fascinating reading in 1942, how much more so will it be in 1999 and possibly for many years after that, for our fine office building seems destined to be a beautiful land mark of Bombay for many centuries to come. In saying this I offer a prayer that the misfortunes of war may not cause its destruction like they have so many fine buildings throughout the world – and throughout the ages.
