

LIVERPOOL WAREHOUSE DISASTER.

TALK OF OVERLOADING.

THE INQUEST.

(From our own Reporter.)

LIVERPOOL, FRIDAY.

The inquest was opened this morning on the three men who lost their lives in the warehouse which collapsed in the Old Gorce, Liverpool, on Monday last.

In response to numerous appeals from members of the National Warehouse and General Workers' Union, a meeting of warehousemen will be held here next week to discuss the matter and demand an inquiry. Delegates will be invited from Manchester and other cities interested. This is considered by the Union to be an opportune moment for raising the whole question of warehouse working conditions, and for pressing upon the inquiry the need for measures to secure a reasonable degree of safety in warehouses.

To-day I had interviews with Mr. J. Cleary, who is the general secretary, and Mr. Farmer, who is the president of the men's union. Both are emphatic on the point that an inquiry must be held, not merely to fix responsibility in the present instance, but to review the whole of the existing system of supervision and inspection. Mr. Farmer said that if a Government inspection was made of warehouses in Liverpool alone at least fifty buildings would be condemned. "Before the war the growing frailty of some of the buildings was recognised, and often they were made to carry only half the load they bore in earlier days. But the Government's action, when the sub-

marine campaign was causing anxiety, of attempting to concentrate in Liverpool a two years' supply of food, particularly of cereals, put storage accommodation at a premium, and again brought into full service the old warehouses, which were expected to bear as much weight as the newer ones. Many of these houses have been full for months, with never a bag taken out of them, and it would be idle to say they are not suffering from the extraordinary strain. It is when they are relieved of their present load and a fresh stock is put in that a crack in the walls or in the weakened beams will take place and precipitate another disaster."

Mr. Cleary said the responsibility for a thorough system of supervision must be placed upon the local authorities or upon a Government department. This was not a matter which could be left to the discretion of the individual owner. He knew of a company (the Liverpool Warehousing Company) which employed a surveyor of its own, but he did not regard the general adoption of that principle as sufficient. If a company was hard pressed for accommodation it was scarcely to be expected that a surveyor would set his face sternly against his employers' overstocking their warehouses. Moreover, few companies were large enough to afford such an official. Mr. Cleary directed attention to the trying and often dangerous conditions under which the men work. In 93 per cent of the warehouses there was darkness relieved only by the dim light of a limited number of hand lamps. A few employers, undeterred by the increased premiums exacted by the insurance companies, had installed electric light, to the greatly enhanced comfort and safety of the workmen. In none of these cases had any fire resulted from the introduction of electric light.

To-day I made myself familiar with the interior of several warehouses. Lack of light is of itself a danger. Stairs are often crazed with age, and wind like the ascent to a church tower. In the "jigger" loft improvements would seem to be long overdue. I saw one such place where a man, in order to fix the ropes for "taking in" or "putting out," had to haul himself up an almost

perpendicular ladder in the dark, crawl into the "jigger" loft, and fix his ropes without the aid of a light.

Evidence of Identification.

The coroner's inquiry was conducted by Mr. A. G. Inglis. Formal evidence of identification was taken, and the inquiry adjourned until the 29th April, when the coroner will be assisted by a jury.

The Coroner said it was obvious that the case could not be gone into without further preparation. He had seen the building that morning, and evidently the clearing away process would take some time. Apparently there was another body under the wreckage, but of this he could not speak with certainty. He only knew what had appeared in the press. Before opening the proceedings he expressed his deep sympathy with the relatives of the dead men.

Evidence of identification was given by relatives concerning William Fearnett (21), 270, West Derby Road; Francis Audley (43), 5, Duncan Street; and William McKeown (41), 8, Kitchen Street. All three were employed by Mr. W. Smith, the tenant of the warehouse. Mrs. Audley recounted how she had parted from her husband on Monday morning and how, when she saw the reports in the afternoon newspapers, she went to the warehouse and waited until it was seen that Mr. Audley would not be recovered that night. Next morning she returned to the warehouse, and after waiting some time was told that her husband was alive. Later on she was informed of his death.