

£10 “FIRE RISK” FINE
MR. HERBERT DRUITT’S MUSEUM COLLECTION
IN A CONGESTED STATE

Mr. Herbert Druitt, of "Woodstock," Barrack Road, appeared at Christchurch Police Court on Thursday to answer a summons alleging that he failed to comply with certain directions given by the Regional Commissioner in view of the exceptional fire risk at 15, High Street, and "The Red House," Quay Road, under the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act, 1939.

Inspector W. P. Thomas deposed to having served a copy of the order on Mr. Druitt on 26th April last. The order required all corridors, passage-ways, staircases and top floor rooms to be cleared the contents of all other rooms to be so arranged as to leave a clearance of at least three feet between any article and the walls and ceiling. Also all doors and windows were to be put in a state to give easy access to the premises.

Chief Officer W. J. Bryant, of Christchurch Fire Brigade, gave evidence that he had inspected the premises and found them very congested. At the Red House he had to go upstairs sideways because of the things stored on the stairs, and the rooms were in a very congested state

Lost His Way.

At 15, High Street, staircases and passages were loaded up on both sides, mainly with books and boxes. He could only obtain access to one room by stepping over articles on the floor, and in another room he could not find his way to the door without guidance. The attics were fairly clear, but the stairs were congested, and it would be impossible to take a line of hose up to the attics. He also visited the premises in company with the Regional Chief Fire Officer.

Capt. V. D. Smith, Sub-Controller Civil Defence Services, gave evidence of correspondence between himself and Mr. Druitt in respect to the congested state of the buildings.

Asked by Mr. J. G. Glover, for Mr. Druitt, if any reason had been given by Mr. Druitt for not complying with the order, Capt. Smith said Mr. Druitt told him he had been trying to buy a hut, as he had no other place in which to put the things.

Front door blocked.

Inspector Thomas said when he served a notice on Mr. Druitt he inspected the premises, and found them chock-full, three weeks later on a second visit, he found two stairways at 15, High Street had been cleared, but nothing had been done to any of the rooms. The front door was completely blocked up. Mr. Druitt told him he had done all that it was physically possible for him to do and had done nothing in respect to the Red House.

Mr. Druitt described himself as an archaeologist and author. He said the reason why he had not complied with the directions was that it was impossible to do so. Beyond a little casual help he had neither the strength nor the means to do what was required of him. He had tried to find extra accommodation but found the cost excessive, and he had received no advice from the Regional Commissioner nor the local authorities in the matter.

The contents of the two houses, said Mr. Druitt, were very valuable and had taken him years to collect. He quoted authorities to prove the value of the collection, mentioning a beaker dated 2000 B.C.

His Case.

On Mr. Glover asking him to keep to the matter of the summons, Mr. Druitt retorted that it was his case and would be conducted as he wished it.

Mr. Druitt said he was very concerned that inexperienced people might move the things and do irreparable damage. He did not mind what happened to himself, but would be prostrated if anything happened to his collection.

Mr. Glover tried once more to bring the evidence into a form of question and answer, and asked if Mr. Druitt had ever applied to the local authorities to help him. Mr. Druitt said he did not do so directly, but thought he had suggested help might be given to him. He had told the Inspector that it was impossible to move everything. He had not shown any hostility to the directions, but had tried to see what could be done. He did tell Capt. Smith that it was a task too difficult for him to undertake.

Mr. Druitt quoted, "That the law does not compel the impossible," and said the reason he had not complied with the directions was due to physical inability and to obtain assistance and accommodation.

Mr. Glover said it had to be considered whether the orders were capable of being put into force. His client had this collection of great antiquity and considering the number of the exhibits and their nature, where was he to put them? It would require a large country mansion to house the collection, and there was also the difficulty and expense of getting the collection conveyed out of the town.

Mr. Druitt had quoted that the law did not compel the impossible, under the circumstances Mr. Druitt had been asked to do an impossible task.

After retiring, the magistrates decided to convict and imposed a fine of £10.

The magistrates were Major W. O. Campbell (chairman), Mr. J. H. Burroughs and Miss K. D. Chance.