

Sheffield Fire Sensation £7,000 Damage in Woodyard Blaze

Owner Arrested Charge of Forgery

The prominence into which the destructive blaze in Leavygreave, Sheffield, last night brought Mr. John Holmes, trading as timber merchant and joinery manufacturer, through the fact that £7,000 damage was done to his premises, has to-day been increased by an occurrence which, though not primarily connected with the fire, is of sensational interest.

At a quarter to seven o'clock this morning two detectives visited Mr. Holmes' house, and arrested him on a charge of forging an acceptance of a bill of exchange for the sum of £20 8s. 6d.

Afterwards he was brought up at the Sheffield Police Court, where the prosecuting solicitor said: "I can give evidence that forgeries have been going on for over three years, and are most ingenious frauds."

The statement was also made that the premises burned down were insured only two days ago. Before his arrest Mr. Holmes estimated that the damage done amounted to £7,000, which was partly covered by insurance in the Alliance and Commercial Union offices. He also stated that he left the offices at 10.5 last night, when everything appeared to be all right.

The fire, which was discovered soon after midnight, provided one of the most picturesque and terrifying fire spectacles which Sheffield has ever witnessed.

The district is thickly populated, and from every house people streamed out, making the movements of the fire brigade necessarily somewhat slower than should have been the case, though a quickly gathering force of police did everything that was possible to secure for the firemen freedom of action.

The premises concerned stand next to the Leavygreave Hotel, and with houses in Upper Hanover Street running along the farther side of the road. They extend towards Brook Hill, where they adjoin similar premises of Mr. Oxley. and with what wind there was blowing towards Brook Hill there was at the outset strong probability that not only Mr. Holmes' house, which stands at the junction of the two yards, but Mr. Oxley's premises as well would be involved in the work of destruction. Not many yards away the Jessop Hospital for Women makes a lofty and very prominent feature, and fears for this building were momentarily created. However, as events turned out, this was never in serious danger, and as soon as the fire brigade reached the scene operations, were mainly directed to saving the hotel. The range of Mr. Holmes's buildings consisted of a brick frontage, with plenty of wooden erections everywhere else, and so complete was the hold which the volume of flame had secured on the whole place by the time the brigade reached it that saving any part of the actual area of the outbreak was virtually out of the question.

The call was received at Rockingham Street at 12.17, and Second Officer Hadwick with a steamer and other engines were on the spot within five minutes. By that time it was generally known that whilst a pony had been conveyed in safety from the burning stables, it had been found impossible to rescue another horse, which was burned to death.

12.50 another steamer from West Bar arrived, and with full pressure thenceforward obtainable, many hoses were quickly out; and a vast volume of water was being poured on the flames. A middle partition fell with a tremendous crash about half-past twelve, and roof after roof came down from the low range of buildings in the front where the hay chamber was, and in which room it was generally believed that the fire had originated. The stables were directly underneath, and thus the horses had little chance of escape. The whole fire sprang into full substance with marvellous rapidity.

So soon as the pressure of water had been secured three great streams were directed on to the gable of the hotel, and it was quickly seen that danger of extension in this direction was ended, but the machine shops had gone, and the whole extensive yard was one great sheet of flame.

A lean-to roof which rested on the hotel gable caused trouble till it fell just about one o'clock, and thenceforward the firemen were able to play with resistless force on the mass of debris at the base of the wall and uninterruptedly on the gable itself, whilst further hose had been carried through the hotel premises, and did splendid service in the rear of the building.

The outbreak was discovered by an employee of Messrs. Reuben Thompson who, in passing, noticed a bright light through the double doors. He at once telephoned from Mr. Thompson's office to the fire station, and then he, with Mr. Thompson and another employee named Horsfall, burst the double doors open with the intention of liberating the imprisoned horses. That, however, was found impossible, a big stack of timber was burning fiercely in the centre of the yard, and, though they made several attempts, the heat was too great and they could not reach the stable door.

Shortly after two o'clock another outbreak occurred in the vicinity of the hotel, but this was kept well in hand. Generally speaking, it might be said that at this time the fire had been got well under control, and there appeared to be no danger of its spreading. The task of the firemen had been very difficult, for the buildings facing Leavygreave were so built as to present considerable danger to them in their work, and the likelihood of falling walls was always obvious.

When the force pump of the big fire engine was getting to work on the south side, the crowd ran round there, and found the flames much as before, but certainly not gaining ground on the houses which stood in such peril to the east of the gateway. Five or six hundred people now stood in the wet roadway, many anxious, most interested, and one or two alive to their own advantage. It was a magnificent opportunity for the pocket-picking fraternity, and several complaints of lost watches were to be heard.

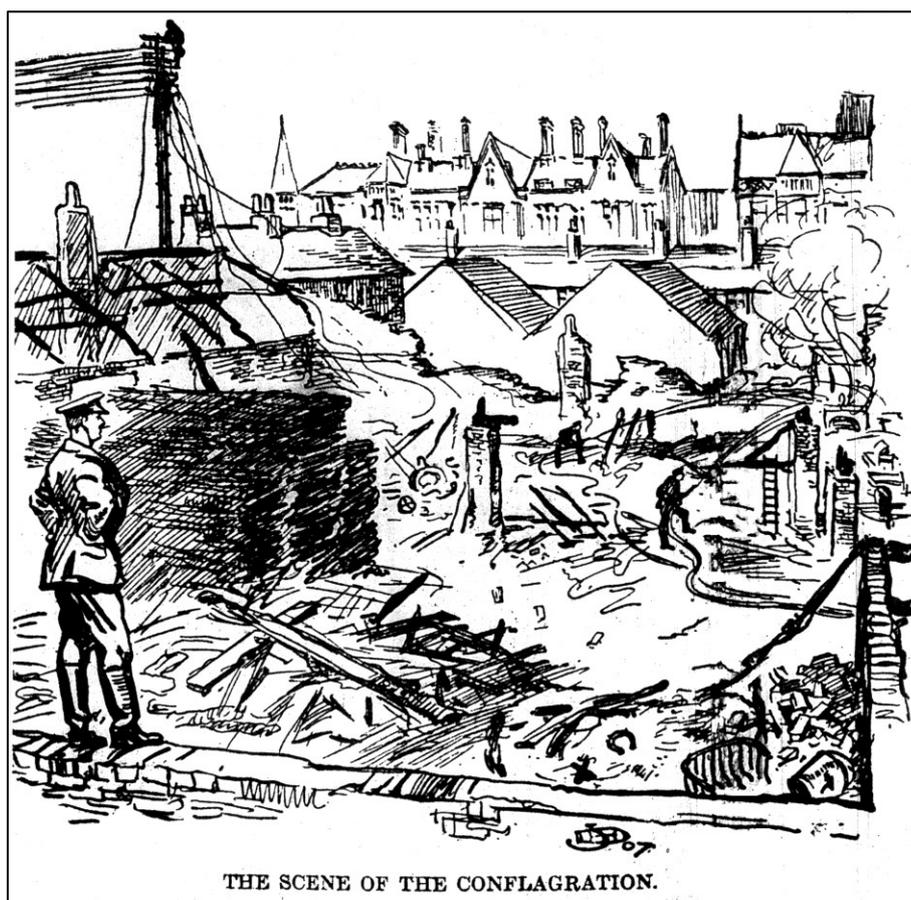
From the west and from the south the attack on the conflagration failed to gain any ground, but three or four hoses were led through the houses on the east, through the courts behind and along the roofs of outhouses. Following the firemen a mixed crowd, oblivious of their clothes, crawled on the, slates, dragging the hoses, and shortly before one the light overhead grew dimmer and the crackling paused in a measure, and it was

evident that cloud which rolled on the wind was composed of more steam than flame. Throughout today a group of firemen has been systematically overturning the debris with a view to preventing a reoccurrence of fire, and the woodyard will be watched by firemen during the next two days. The scene today is one of utmost desolation. Amid the massed of charred timber, £1,000 worth of comparatively new machinery, including a £200 gas engine, lies almost irreparably damaged. The thickening, planing and moulding machines are fit only for the scrap heap but the gas engine is not beyond repair. During part of the morning, firemen were stationed in the store room about the Leavygreave Road entrance, and the jets which they directed on to the wood dripped continuously in the entrance, making a watery portcullis.

Second-officer Hadwick, who had charge of the fire, was on duty from midnight until a quarter to eleven this morning, with the exception of an interval for a hurried bath. "Just before his all night vigil ended the woodyard was visited by the Chief Constable (Commander Scott), Chief Inspector Andrews, and Alderman Marsh (Chairman of the Watch Committee).

In an interview with the "Yorkshire Telegraph and Star" representative Mr. Hadwick stated that in view of the advanced stage of the fire when discovered, it was impossible for him to say what was the origin of the original blaze.

Early this afternoon telegraph workmen were busy renewing a wire which had been damaged during the fire.



Dramatic Arrest

Charges of Fraud Pending Significant Suggestions Prosecution Case Outlined

Events took a sensation turn this morning when the owner of the destroyed premises John Holmes appeared before the magistrates in the Sheffield City Police Court, charged with forgery. The Bench consisted of Councillor Wardley, Councillor Sandford, and Mr. T. Whitehead.

Holmes was arrested at 6.45 this morning at his house in Leavygreave by Detective-Officers Crabtree and Howard. The warrant was date September 13th.

The information was laid by Mr. John Bibby Asterley, bank manager, of Fargate, and charged Holmes that he feloniously did offer, utter, dispose of, and put off to the National Provincial Bank of England, Ltd., knowing the same to be forged a certain acceptance of a bill of exchange for the sum of £20 8s. 6d., dated July 1907, and purporting to be drawn by the said John Holmes under the name or style of Henry Holmes, and to be accepted by William Charles with intent thereby then to defraud.

Mr. Willis L. Oxley appeared at the Court a morning to defend the prisoner

Mr. A. Neal, who prosecuted on behalf of the Bank, said the prisoner was a timber merchant in Leavygreave and at his premises last night there was serious fire. The warrant against him charged him with the forgery of an acceptance to a bill of exchange which he placed to the credit of his account with the National Provincial Bank of England and drew upon it His (Mr. Neal's) application was for remand in custody till Thursday.

This was, he thought, the most serious charge of forgery that he had come across. He thought he would be able to demonstrate ultimately that this man had forged a very large number of acceptances, and had defrauded no less than five bankers in this city, and that this had been going on for a number of years.

He would also have other chargers against him. He asked for a remand in custody until Thursday, Mr. Willis L. Oxley asked that the man remanded, but not in custody. Up to the present he had no means of getting any defence together. As the Bench were aware, it would be necessary and convenient to all parties that this man should be given an opportunity of consulting his solicitor, and provide for his own defence. Substantial bail, he understood, would be for could be coming forward this morning such as their Worships may require. He understood the Assizes were not until December 15th.

It was stated in Court that the Assizes were November 18th.

Mr: Oxley, continuing, .said that to keep the man custody that time untried would scarcely commend itself to the Bench. Prisoner had known of this charge hanging over his head for, at any rate, a week, during which period had he desired; he could have cleared out of Sheffield. He had not done so, and had appeared daily, so the prosecutors had known they were perfectly safe. He asked that bail be made in such terms as the Bench thought fit.

Mr. Neal strongly opposed bail. Any assets the prisoner had had disappeared with the

fire – he did not want to say any more about that now. He was single, and had nothing to keep him in Sheffield. He thought the ends of justice would clearly be defeated if he were set at liberty. He could give evidence that these forgeries had been going on for three years, and were most ingenious frauds.

The Chairman: I don't quite understand. This fire was at Holmes'. Is this a member of the Holmes family?

Mr. Neal: He is the one member who carries on the business. The fire took place last night, and he was locked up this morning. If events had been otherwise, the event would have been less suspicious. Forged bills of exchange have been palmed off on five bankers in this city.

The Chairman to Mr. Oxley: Your plea is that because he has known of these charges hanging over his head and he has not decamped, there is very little reason for him to go and that he should be trusted further.

Mr. Oxley: Yes.

The Chairman: The fire only took place last night.

Mr. Neal: He only insured his premises two days ago.

Mr. Oxley: He knew that this was hanging over his head, and I had personally explained to him the seriousness of it.

The remand to Thursday was granted. No bail was allowed.