

The Big Blaze

Sheffield Works Guttled in Seven Hours

£100,000 Damage

Many Thrilling Incidents at Night Conflagration

Heroic Firemen

("Yorkshire Telegraph and Star" Special)



Fire at Messrs. C.T. Skelton, Sheaf Bank Work's,
Heeley, 23rd April 1921

Two features stand out prominently when a calm survey is taken of the great fire at the Sheaf Bank Works of C. T. Skelton and Co. Sheffield on Saturday. The first was the magnificent work of the Sheffield Fire Brigade and the second the arduous duties carried out by the police and numerous volunteers.

The Brigade fought the fearsome flames for seven hours in which respite was impossible. Every fireman was given a duty, and the failure of any one might easily have resulted in an appalling loss of life and property. But throughout the ding-dong battle the men never lost heart, and their dramatic counter stroke in the early hours of Sunday morning, when they arrested the fire right in the centre of the main wood store, is deserving of more than mere praise when consideration is made of the fact that several were suffering severely from fatigue in addition to temporary blindness from the heat and smoke.

Then, too, the police were badly handicapped in the early hours of the fire. Thousands of people swarmed from all parts of the city, and with the usual impetuosity of a crowd endeavoured to reach the works.

The danger of impeding the already harassed firemen was quickly realised by Superintendent Denton, who had but a handful of men at his disposal, and he called for

volunteers. The response was prompt, and civilians, Defence Corps soldiers, R.A.F. men from Coal Aston, quickly formed a cordon which effectively controlled the masses.

Flames Seen for Miles

Never in Sheffield has a fire spread so quickly, or given off such intense heat over a wide radius. At 8 p.m. there was not a sign of fire; at 10 p.m. the sky was lighted by a lurid glare from the burning buildings. The leaping flames could be seen for miles and formed a magnificent spectacle against the darkening sky. A huge billow of white smoke mounted in the direction of Gleadless and, suddenly, following the crash of masonry and debris, a dense cloud of golden sparks would leap into the air to fall gently on the surrounding houses.

From time to time a train would come puffing up the incline from Sheffield, adding clouds of black smoke, which gradually mingled with that from the fire, bringing out in vivid relief the crimson tint of the burning buildings. Huge red tongues of flame shot up to a dizzy height, and in the centre, gaunt and black, reared the lofty furnace chimney, apparently contemptuous of the efforts of the flames to consume it in the general destruction.

The north side of the works, which run parallel with the River Sheaf and the railway, were quickly consumed, in spite of almost superhuman efforts of Superintendent Hadwick and his men. These premises, which were 116 yards long and 12 yards wide, in a short space of time, represented a huge furnace. Jet and jet of water was thrown on these premises in an endeavour to restrict the blaze, but the task was an impossible one.

Heroic Firemen

Debris and masonry fell like hail and in the midst crouched the firemen, bent almost double to escape from the terrible heat and falling timber. Retreating step by step they plied the hose, and thousands of tones of water were thrown on to the seething mass, but without the slightest effect. Hose abandoned and burned but still the fighters carried on, fighting doggedly and steadily. In the centre of the works yard ran a gangway which connects the two wings of the works, and recognising the vast importance of keeping the flames from reaching this wooden platform, a great concentration of water was thrown on to the structure, but all in vain. The gigantic flames fed by a strong wind blowing from the north side, closed on to the gangway, and in a short space of time the south side of the premises, some 130 by 10 yards in dimension, was a roaring furnace. Quantities of oil and varnish fed the blaze, and in a few minutes the whole of the five-storey building was enveloped. Fiercer and fiercer grew the conflagration. Huge masses of sparks and charcoal leaped into the air, falling on houses round the doomed building. Windows cracked, roofs caught fire, and so imminent was the danger that the police ordered the inhabitants to leave.

Within the Danger Zone

Sheaf Bank, Prospect Terrace, Prospect View, and Prospect Road, were all within the danger zone. At first people had been gazing in awe at the devastating spectacle thought the order was merely a precautionary one, and were merely content to remove personal valuables, but soon the nearness of the flames reminded them of the growing danger of their property becoming involved.

Quickly windows were broken, sashes removed, and furniture and oddments hurried away by helpers in the streets below. Pianos, bedroom suites, poultry, and clothing were hastily removed from dwellings, old and young assisted in the removal.

Meanwhile the roads were swept by burning sparks, and occasionally one could see hungry flames leaping over the works and lapping greedily at the roofs. Small fires burned up fiercely only to be stopped by the watchful firemen, and the adults did much to quell the terror of the children, who in some cases were frantic with fear at the site of the flames.

At one time the roads were littered with miscellaneous furniture but the congestion became so great that it was eventually carried and piled in front of the shops and in the Heeley Friends' School. At the height of the fire some fifty houses were vacated, and it was touch and go as to whether the flames would not reach the property.

About this time the scene was terrifying. Huge flames leaped into the air, millions of golden sparks overhung the conflagration, and amidst the roar and hissing came the dull thuds of falling machinery, walls and masonry.

Wonderful Spectacle

It was a wonderful spectacle, and the thousands of spectators on the surrounding hills gazed spellbound.

Only one house No. 6, Prospect View, caught fire, but this was quickly subdued and caught at the height of the conflagration, a wonderful counter-stroke on the part of Supt. Hadwick's men brought success after hours of exhausting, dangerous, and unceasing work.

At the extreme end of the south portion of the works was situated the main wood and timber store. Slowly but surely the flames crept to the fringe of this department. Within a few yards were tremendous stocks wood and implement handles, and a little further afield huge stores of timber, containing hundreds of massive tree trunks.

Once the flames had reached this inflammable stock, the house property would assuredly have been doomed; the firemen gained admittance by a small entrance in the wall and covered by an iron screen faced the roaring mass of flame. Thousands of gallons of water were poured on the furnace, and the battle raged for supremacy, and in the end the firemen won. But for that little entrance in the wall, the firemen could not have possibly coped with the flames.

Battling to the Last

From that time the fire was mastered, but it raged within its limited confines, and at intervals made great efforts to reach adjoining property. A steady stream of water, however, told its tale, and battling fiercely to the last the conflagration was gradually got under control. Far into the night the fire roared, and still the hills were covered with spectators, but shortly before three o'clock the worst was over, and the firemen were able to gain a brief respite.

All day yesterday the fire smouldered in different parts of the ruined building, which represented a scene of desolation. The spectator gazed upon a mere shell of brickwork

from which white clouds of smoke curled leisurely up to the sky. Machinery, tools, and masonry was piled several feet high, while huge girders and pillars were twisted and broken, and eloquent testimony of the intensity of the flames.

Fortunately the forge at the east end of the works, containing thousands of pounds worth of machinery was saved, as were part of the offices and caretakers house, but the remainder of the extensive works were completely gutted. It was almost impossible to recognise the various departments, except in a few cases by quantities of machinery - hand cranes and grinding machines, which were by debris and water. Saws, pick heads, and all manner of edge tools lay scattered on the ground, and in one or two instances were neatly packed just as they had been left before the fire commenced.

Still Smouldering

The firemen were still busy to-day, for parts of the building were smouldering. The centre of the works was running in water, and near the main entrance the ruins were partly submerged. The brickwork in many parts showed signs of collapsing - one large portion leaning over towards the railway, and a second was expected to crash into the central passage of the works at any moment.

It is certain that the whole of the shell now standing will have to be demolished, but this is not possible until the small fires are completely subdued. The big chimney, which alone survived the flames may too, share the general fate, but this will be a matter for the experts.

The six houses which form Prospect View have been practically abandoned. Huge cracks have appeared in the brickwork of the last three which adjoin the works, and there are signs that a collapse may come at any time. The inhabitants of these houses left on Saturday night, and the police have advised them that the dwellings are not safe for habitation. The top three houses are occupied during the day, but the occupants wisely decided to seek pastures new when night falls. As one expert put it "Anything might happen." Cutlers' Walk, which leads from Guernsey Road to the works, has been closed to the public owing to the danger of falling property.

Extent of the Damage

It is yet totally impossible to estimate the damage at the present time, but so far the figure of £100,000 has been mentioned.

Any unhappy feature of the conflagration is the fact that Messrs. Skelton's employees were notified on Saturday that they would commence to full time to-day.