

Fires at Honey Street Wharf



The Kennet and Avon Canal at Honey Street Wharf - Painting by Joseph Barnard Davis 1873/1879
reproduced courtesy of Wiltshire Museum, Devizes

A combination of timber yard, coal fired steam engines, agricultural fertilisers, timber framed buildings and thatch was always likely to be a fire hazard and so the Wharf at Honey Street proved to be with 3 major fires being recorded between 1854 and 1865.

Tuesday, 4 April 1854

“Fire at HONEY-STREET WHARF – A destructive fire broke out, on Tuesday afternoon, on the extensive premises of Mr. Robbins, of Honey Street Wharf, near Pewsey, occasioned by a spark from the chimney of a steam engine which was being employed for sawing timber, falling on the thatch of some buildings adjoining. These buildings which were 300 feet in length, contained a large quantity of valuable stock, including machinery, planks, boards &c., the whole of which was destroyed, together with a stable and carhouse, and a great portion of the granary adjoining. A shed full of foreign deals, and the dwelling house, fortunately escaped, although the flames raged around them on each side. It was not till 2 o’clock the next morning that the fire could be subdued, after it had communicated, in three separate places, to the premises of Mr. Huntley, on the opposite side of the road. By great exertion it was, however, got under without much injury being done to Mr. Huntley’s property, except that which his furniture sustained; and as this is insured in the Norwich Union Fire Office, we have no doubt Mr. H will be liberally dealt with. 2,000/ it is estimated, will scarcely compensate Mr. Robbins for his loss; but it is satisfactory to learn he is insured to nearly the full amount in the “Defender” Office. We are sorry to add that nearly 40 workmen are thrown out of employment by the misfortune, and the whole of the tools are burnt. The two Pewsey and Alton engines did good service; but owing to not being more frequently attended to (which is the case in too many instances), some time was lost before they were got into working order.”

Salisbury and Winchester Journal (Saturday 8 April 1854)

"FIRE AT HONEY-STREET"

S. ROBBINS having last week announced to his friends his gratitude for their services and attentions, this week has a similar duty to perform in reference to the Wilts Constabulary Force in this locality. He therefore hereby acknowledges the valued exertions of Mr. Superintendent Stratton, Mr, Inspector Burry, and Mr. Serjeant Wootten, together with the adjoining Constables composing his Staff, and most cordially thanks them for their untiring, continued, and efficient attendances until all the danger was past.

Honey-street, April 10th, 1854.

N.B. – Trade carried on as usual."

Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette – Thursday, 13 April 1854

"Fire at Honey-street. – It will probably be in the recollection of the readers of this journal, that on the occasion of the destructive fire which consumed a great portion of Mr. S.Robbins' premises at Honey-street Wharf, a rumour was in circulation that the Defender Company, by whom he was insured, had, through some informality in the policies, refused to compensate. In contradiction to such a rumour Mr. Robbins feels much pleasure in stating, that (tho' a considerable loser) as far as he was insured, the Defender Company most handsomely paid him all that he could demand."

Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette – 3 August 1854

Sunday, 12 December 1858

Destructive Fire at Honey-street. – About six o'clock on Sunday morning last, the stables of Mr. Sparkes of the George Inn, Honey-street, were discovered to be on fire. Being built of wood and thatched, the flames spread so rapidly that out of seven horses which the stables contained, two only could be rescued. The cries of the five which were consumed, whilst surrounded by the flames, was truly piteous. The Honey-street engine was soon on the spot, but not before the fire had communicated with the house; and the Pewsey and Allcannings engines did not arrive until nearly nine o'clock, and were then of little service. A report that a cask of gunpowder was in the house, occasioned great alarm for a time, and deterred persons from approaching the house. It proved, however, that there was but about 3 or 4 lbs. of this combustible, and this having exploded, the alarm subsided, and many persons risked their lives in endeavouring to save as much as possible of the property; but the house, stables, club-rooms, and warehouses were, we regret to say, completely destroyed. Some of the flakes of fire drifted to the opposite side of the canal, and communicating with a cottage in the occupation of William Davis, entirely consumed it. Fortunately, there was not much wind, or great deal more damage might have been done – as there was a barn and several ricks of corn near the inn. Soon after the fire was extinguished, a most disgraceful scene occurred. Regardless of the sacred day, the cellars were entered, and beer, wine, and spirits, flowed as freely as the water had just before flowed from the engines, it having been literally brought out in buckets; and there was nothing but drunkenness and confusion. It was a disgusting and horrifying scene, and it was kept up throughout the day. Mr. Robbins and a few other persons did all that men could do to prevent it; and but for their interference and exertions many lives would probably have been sacrificed – numbers having fallen into the canal. In their drunken freaks several of the wretches rubbed each others faces with treacle – others fought – and some played at skittles in the alley which had escaped the fury of the flames. It appeared altogether the act of devils rather than of Christian men. The amount of the loss sustained is estimated from £1800 to £2000. The buildings were the property of Mr. Samuel Robbins, and were insured in the Leeds and Yorkshire office; and the tenant (Mr. W.H. Sparks) was insured in the same office; but Mr. Sparks will suffer severely by the loss of an extensive business for some time. The origin of the fire is unknown, but it is supposed

to have been caused by the carelessness of the boatmen in charge of Mr. Adey's boats, who left the stables a short time before the fire was discovered. This is the third serious fire which has occurred at Honey-street within a few years. A barge was burnt on the canal, not many yards from the house, and two men were burnt to death¹; and subsequently Mr. Robbins saw mills and premises were destroyed.

Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette (Thursday, 16 December 1858)

Wednesday, 13 December 1865

GREAT FIRE AT HONEYSTREET SAW MILLS

A most disastrous fire, involving the destruction of between £3 and £4,000 worth of property, occurred early yesterday morning on the extensive premises of Messrs. Robbins, Lane and Pinniger, at Honeystreet, about a mile and a quarter from the Woodborough Station on the Berks and Hants Railway.

The works were perhaps the most extensive of the kind in the West of England, and consisted of immense sawing mills driven by steam machinery, with boat houses, large carpenter shops, painting shops, and several hundreds of feet of building in which the various departments of the business were carried on – besides an almost equally extensive range of buildings, with steam machinery, on the opposite side of the canal, devoted to the manufacture of artificial manures; and a stock of timber valued at several thousands of pounds: - in short, the premises, looking at them from the road, with the cottages of the work people, the neat little chapel standing in their midst, and the gasometer, which has recently been erected to supply the whole with light, bore the appearance of a little town. It is, we believe, 55 years ago that Mr. Robbins, the head of the firm, began business at Honey-street, and from that time to the present the place has gradually been growing in importance, until it reached its present proportions, supplying employment to a great number of hands, and doing an extent of business in the sawn-timber trade unequalled, it is said, by any firm within a radius of 50 miles.

The consequences of a fire upon premises devoted to such purposes may be easily imagined; and that they are not greater than we have to record is owing mainly to the stillness of the night, and to the favourable direction of what little air there was stirring.

The whole of the machinery devoted to timber sawing, &c., was, as we have said, driven by steam power, and for the more convenient application of this power it was arranged in a building upwards of 200 feet in length by 54 feet wide. Here were rack saws, band saws, circular saws, valuable lathes, planing machines, and other appliances for the ready conversion of timber; and on Tuesday evening at half-past 5, when the men left work, everything appeared safe.

Knowing the inflammable character of the premises and of the property with which they were covered, Messrs. Robbins and Co. had for a long time past taken the precaution of protecting themselves (as they thought) against the possibility of such a catastrophe as has happened, by employing a watchman, whose duty it was to keep a constant watch over the premises from the time the men left work (at 6 in the evening) until they returned in the morning; and had this man been faithful to his charge, much of the loss which has been occasioned, if not all of it, might have been averted. It was not until three o'clock in the morning that the fire was discovered, and the watchman was then found at home in bed. That it must have been burning a considerable time before, there can be little doubt, because when first seen (by one of the workmen in an adjoining cottage) nearly the whole of the roof of the building containing the steam engine and machinery was in flames. An alarm was of course instantly raised, and all the help that could be obtained was brought to bear, but it was evident at the onset that nothing could save the range of building in which the fire was raging, and with the gasometer close at hand,

¹ In the early hours of the morning of Saturday, 10th December 1853 two boatmen perished when the barge they were travelling in, and which was moored at Honey Street for the night, caught fire. The barge belonged to Mrs Gye, of Hilperton, but the newspaper reports do not name the victims.

(filled with gas) there was every probability, unless prompt steps were taken, of an explosion, which (if it had occurred) would have spread destruction on all sides. With a presence of mind and an intrepidity deserving of praise, the foreman of the yard ordered several men to cautiously let the whole of the gas escape; and this danger overcome, all hands were directed to an endeavor to cut off the fire from the surrounding buildings. Luckily, what little air there was stirring was from a north-easterly direction, or the entire premises must have been destroyed; for, composed as they are chiefly of wood, nothing could have saved them had the fire once got hold of them – and of fire engines there were none, or next to none, the one which was brought from Pewsey and the little one kept on the works being of no use whatever, except as a protection to the men at certain spots where an endeavor was being made to cut off communication. Everything which lay in the direction of the wind went: - first the engine and machinery rooms, with their upper stories, containing 150 sacks of corn, with chaff machines, and gritting and grinding mills; then the brass foundry; then the cottages of the workpeople which lay on that side of the yard; and then the immense range of building running parallel with the canal used for boat-building and as carpenters' and painters' shops, the whole of which, with their contents, were entirely consumed; sending up a flame which was seen for miles around, and the reflection of which on Devizes Green gave "the Crammer" the appearance of blood. In one of the shops there were no less than *seven thousand boxes* which had just been completed to send into Wales for the purpose of packing tin plate, and the construction of which (at the rate of 200 a day) had occupied a number of hands for several weeks past. All of these were burnt; with the paint shops and their contents; and at one time fears were entertained that the stacks of timber and the artificial manure works on the opposite side of the water would have been in a blaze, as a portion of them took fire more than once, and it was only by the utmost vigilance that they were preserved.

As it is, property to the extent of between £3 and £4,000 has been destroyed; but we are happy to hear that it was insured; and we have been given to understand that Messrs. Robbins and Co. have taken means to prevent any interruption to their business.

How the catastrophe arose, it is impossible to ascertain – the supposition is that, as the fires in connection with the steam engines are kept in all night, it must have originated here, and this supposition is strengthened by the fact that the focus whence the fire appeared to radiate when first discovered was close to one of the chimnies in connection with the boiler flue. But originate where or how it might, it is a most disastrous affair not only to Messrs. Robbins, Lane and Pinniger, but to the many hands employed upon the works.

Unfortunately Mr. Robbins was the only member of the firm at home at the time; both Mr. Lane and Mr. Pinniger being many miles away on business; and as Mr. Robbins is far advanced in age, he could of course do little in the middle of the night towards directing the operations of the men. From all we hear, however, they appear to have worked admirably, and to have used every exertion in their power to save their master's property. To the police, too, the greatest credit is due.

Seven years ago, on the previous day, the same premises were burnt down, when new machinery was put up, increased since by many valuable additions.

Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette (Thursday, 14 December 1865)