

Facts about Fires
A Gossip on Causes and Effects
New Sheffield Record

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During the history of the Sheffield Fire Brigade up to the commencement of September, the highest number of fire calls received during one month was twenty-nine. Now a fresh record has been set up. Forty-one calls were made during September. The average damage per month caused by fires attended by the Sheffield Brigade during the last twenty years is over £1,800. In one year 1893, the average damage per month was over £5,725. By way of contrast, the damage during the whole of the following year was only £3,661. Many erroneous impressions exist with regard to fire in Sheffield, and probably will always exist. Fires have a strange fascination, a magnetic power that has never failed to attract the interest of the curious. Those figures may startle and also set at rest the minds of some of the curious. In several months the fire calls have totalled twenty-nine. February and November, 1905; April 1904; and February, 1901, all reached twenty-nine.

A popular fallacy is that there are more fires at Christmas than any other period of the year. Statistics show that the largest number of fires occur during the summer months, owing to the dryness. Another idea which has currency in the city is that if the Brigade is called out £5 has to be paid. Nothing has to be paid for the services of the Brigade in the city.

Some startling facts may be adduced about fires. There is often much mystery about their origin, and spontaneous combustion is a theory that has greatly exercised the minds of scientists. It covers a multitude of sins of carelessness. Some people even believe that the human body is liable to spontaneous combustion. Liebig, however, reassures the nervous reader. He holds that a living body in which blood flows is not liable to such contingency, but a fat, dead body charged with alcohol might burn. Fabric dyed with indigo and finished with a preparation of linseed oil, may, if stored in a confined space, take fire spontaneously. Terrible facts are recorded concerning forest fires which have often assumed gigantic proportions. The Miramichi fire, which occurred on the 7th of this month, eighty-one years ago, commenced its journey of destruction sixty miles above the town of Newcastle on the Miramichi River, New Brunswick. Before ten o'clock at night it was twenty miles below Newcastle. In those nine hours it had destroyed a belt of forest eighty miles long and twenty-five miles wide; on two and a half million acres of land almost every living thing was killed; on the river banks fish in heaps were found dead: five hundred and ninety buildings and a number of towns, including Newcastle, Chatham, and Douglas town, were destroyed; and one hundred and sixty people and nearly a thousand head of stock perished. A sadder story still has to be told of the Peshtigo forest fire of 1871, which also occurred in October. Two thousand miles of Wisconsin were involved, and the people who perished numbered between twelve and fifteen hundred.

Fires in which this district is peculiarly interested are those that involved the coal mines. Such a fire eats its way along the seam of coal. It defies all efforts that are made to smother it, though tons of water may be pumped into the mine. A Leicestershire mine for more than twenty-five years had fires raging in parts of its workings. The outcome was the Whitwick disaster.

For some time the great fires which periodically occur in the oil deposits of America would not own the mastery of man. Attempts to extinguish the fires by throwing earth on them resulted in some of the workers losing their lives. Eventually an experiment was tried with steam, and resulted in the valuable discovery of the best method of preventing and extinguishing the oil fires. A number of portable engines generated steam, pipes were connected and taken near the flames and a jet of such force was furnished that the flames with which it came into to contact were blown out or smothered. On the Texas field the steam jet has been used several times since, and with success on every occasion.

Frequent causes of fires are rats knowing Lucifer matches, and so kindling a flame. Again fires have often originated in factories and work through the rubbing of the leather belting against the edge of the aperture through which it passes from floor to floor.

The story is told how a cow destroyed a city and caused the destruction of property worth £39,000,000, 250 lives, and 18 000 houses. In Chicago in 1871 a cow was being milked by its owner at night. The animal kicked over the oil lamp, the shed became alight, the flames spread and caused a fire with the disastrous results mentioned. Afterwards there was found the scorched leaf of a Bible with these words from the first chapter of Lamentations: - "How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! How is she become as a widow! ... She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks."