

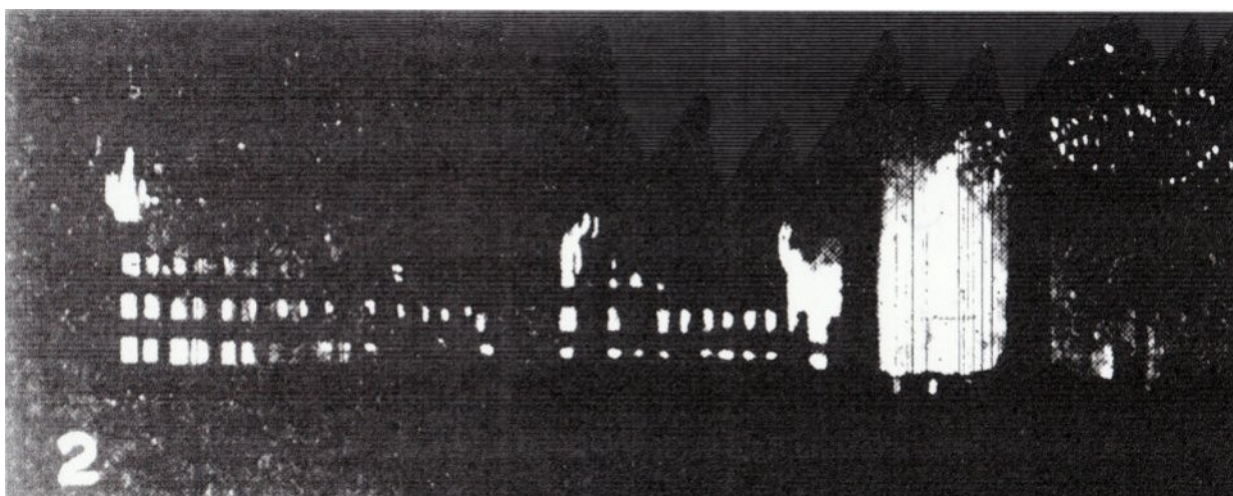
Sheaf Bank Works Completely Guttred Thousands Watch the Blaze About Four Hundred Men Rendered Idle

Sheffield's biggest fire! That was the opinion of everybody who saw the great blaze at Sheaf Bank Works, Heeley, on Saturday night. It was a magnificent spectacle; the great flames, leaping high into the heavens, could be seen for miles around.

There has been nothing that could be compared with it since 1893, when Hovey's fire in Angel Street, damage amounting to £75,000 was done. There was also the fire at Flowerday's wood yard many years ago. But the blaze at Messrs. C. T. Skelton and Co.'s works on Saturday night was much bigger, and the damage is estimated to be within the area of £80,000 to £100,000.

Magnificent but Devastating Scene

The alarm was given about eight o'clock. Everything had appeared to be all right before then; there was no sign of fire; but within a couple of hours the burning buildings presented a stupendously spectacular scene. Thousands upon thousands of people, attracted by the glow in the sky, converged on Heeley. Situated in Heeley bottom, the blazing work's looked more like a volcanic eruption, at which powerless people gazed in awed silence. They were gathered on all heights in the vicinity, particularly on the south side in Gleadless Road, and in adjoining streets above and behind the works. They viewed the fiery arena below, and saw the snarling and hissing flames drive back the firemen who had dared to contest their supremacy. The men looked like pygmies tackling a giant, and from the start there was no confidence in any of the anxious hearts that hoped to see the gigantic flames subdued. The tongues of fire flashed and curled, striking and licking to destruction everything in the way, and the heat was terrific "It's like Hell" said an onlooker. It was an inferno from which it seemed that nothing could be rescued.



Firemen's First Attacked Repulsed

Everything was in favour of the fiery monster's success. On the north side of the premises, parallel with the River Sheaf and beyond the railway, was a block of buildings 116 yards long and 12 yards wide. On the south side, and below Prospect Road was another line of buildings 130 yards long and 10 yards wide. The north block is five stories high and the south block consists of buildings two, three and five stories. Between the two blocks which stood parallel, is an intervening space of 60 feet. Along this was a wooden gangway over the boilers and stamping shop.

A wind from the north blew the fire from the block in which it originated across the inflammable material in the yard towards the opposite buildings. Very soon the north side was gutted, nothing but the tottering walls remaining. From below the flames leaped and danced and every window belched destructive fire towards the other buildings. When the firemen entered the yard to restrict the blaze to the north block they were driven back by the intense heat. They bent double to save themselves from the falling timber and to prevent their faces being scorched. A good deal of hose pipe they had to leave behind them to be consumed. Though the men had to retreat, for the risks they ran were tremendous, they doggedly renewed their attack at a safer distance.

The dome of the heavens was illuminated for miles around. As loaded tramcars neared the scene they passed from the darkness into the gloaming, then into light and later descended into Heeley Bottom in the glare from the furnace below. The whole of the intermediate district seemed to be ablaze, all windows luridly reflecting the fire. Houses in the immediate vicinity of the works were in great danger of ignition.

Many Houses Endangered

On the hill on the south side of the works they are like warrens, built compactly, with numerous courts and alleys from the streets. Over these for hours it snowed globules of fire which danced and rolled about on the roofs in an alarming way. Fresh outbreaks of fire among these houses were expected at any time. Alarms were frequently raised by chimneys starting to blaze. The burning charcoal fell through the chimney pots and ignited the soot below. These falling embers formed a huge arc over the district. Lumps varying in size up to an inch in length burst from the furnace like sparks from a blacksmith's forge on a huge scale.

From the higher ground the crowds in the backyards, alleys, and streets suffered the blinding smoke and the rain of falling fire, and strained their eyes on the burning pile. Approximately fifty householders adjacent to the works carried their worldly possessions into their backyards, or removed and placed them in the houses of friends further away. As the fire raged, and the danger to the houses became more imminent, prayers burst from the lips of both men and women. They yearned for the safety of the poor folk living close by. who jealously guarded their possessions in open yards. They covered their furniture with tarpaulins and sacking, damping these and flicking off the live embers as they fell.

To many onlookers who were unable to get a clear view of the fire, owing to the intervening houses, it looked at some periods just as though a lid had been placed over the raging flames, and that in their fury they shot from under it all around; and at other times as though the lid was lifted and that released fire shot up with renewed intensity. This was particularly so when at intervals, there came the collapse of cement floors, dividing walls and machinery, marked in every instance by huge volumes of fire and

showers of sparks shooting up. Spellbound, the thousands of onlookers were loath to leave. The scene was fascinating and wonderfully spectacular.

A Pathetic Scene

While the fire was intense with life, death had left its trail in a house in an adjoining road. A young woman of 26 was laying dead awaiting burial. Assisted by St John Ambulance men, and amid the fiendish crackle of the fire, took her body further distant. As it was being carried, a live lump of charcoal fell on the handkerchief covering the face. It was quickly removed and the mournful procession reached the house of an aunt where the body was deposited.

Over all towered a huge chimney stack in the middle of the fire. The flames swept round it and licked it fiercely, but it withstood all. Seared by the fire, illuminated by the lurid glare, it appeared as though it was at white heat. A colossus it stood in grand defiance. All about it was consumed. There was something fantastic about it - Phoenix-like, it soared above all the surrounding flame.

Just as the firemen thought they had seen the worst, had mastered the fury, bird flitted over the chimney. Flying at a lofty altitude, its breast and wings took the reflection of the fire, which gave it a golden appearance as it hastily passed by in terrified flight. It came as a harbinger of success to the long, brave and tedious toil of the firemen. They had worked splendidly, unceasingly and apparently untiringly. They had struggled and wrestled with heavily laden hose with dogged perseverance. Every man did more than his duty, and won the admiration of not only the unexperienced sightseers but also of their chief superintendent Hadwick.

An Army of Workers

Their work was at first hampered by the crowds, who failed to see what was wanted, if success was to be achieved was undisputed right to freedom of action by the brigade. This difficulty was overcome, however, by policemen from all divisions of Sheffield, special constables, Air service members, Defence Corps men, Boy Scouts, and an army of voluntary workers, who formed cordons in the street approaching the scene. The Boy Scouts were exceedingly useful at carrying messages to turn-cocks, and St John Ambulance men were ready for emergencies. The Chief Constable, who attended the fire with the Deputy-Chief Constable, has expressed the desire to tender his warmest thanks to all who helped in the numerous capacities possible. Supt. Hadwick had all his force in the field, as well as the volunteer firemen who he trained during the war. Though the latter were disbanded after the Armistice, they proved their efficiency in great style, working loyally side by side with the regular Brigade men. The Brigade was also assisted by MR. W. S. Skelton, one of the proprietors of the works; the works manager (Mr. H. B. Berry), and departmental foremen, who were able to give directions concerning the locality of the most inflammable materials.

How the Fire was Fought

It is no exaggeration to state that a million gallons of water were poured into the premises. Superintendent Hadwick reports that he had sixteen jets working on the building and about two miles of hose in use. Twelve lines of hose were connected with street mains and four worked from a motor pump. This pump, which is capable of dealing with 450 gallons per minute, was at full pressure from 8 p.m. on Saturday till

5.10 yesterday morning. From the street mains in Oak Street, Chesterfield Road, Broadfield Road, Sheaf Bank, Prospect Road, and Spencer Road directly linked up with hose, a much greater volume of water was used. When the call was received at the Fire Station, the Brigade turned out with a motor pump and tender, but, immediately the dimensions of the fire were seen, the whole available strength was called out - nine motors, including the fire pump and steamer; 34 men including four officers.

The first section worked at was near a lift, but this had to be abandoned and a withdrawal made towards the main entrance in Sheaf Bank. The works are difficult to approach with fire tackle, and when the men got into the yard they were subject to a fusillade of falling debris. The Brigade's anxiety was to prevent the fire from spreading to the cottages in Sheaf Bank and Prospect Road. Some of the courts run from Prospect Road and join the works wall. It was fully anticipated that these houses, particularly in Prospect Road, would become involved, for the road was carpeted with a thick layer of red-hot charcoal and the flames and heat were blowing that way. It was not until midnight that this danger was over. The men had got topside of the fire by then.

Superintendent Hadwick has never experienced a fire that made such rapid strides and was so intense in the heat it gave off over a wide radius. In the buildings were a big vat of oil and a tremendous quantity of other very inflammable material. A curious feature was the number of continuous explosions that no one could account for. These were innumerable in the south side of the pile - the last to ignite. Superintendent Hadwick pays very high tribute to the work of his men, two of whom are in the doctor's hands on account of temporary blindness cause by the heat and smoke. These are Messrs. Taylor and Bolton. Neither could see yesterday. Men of the Brigade who were sick turned out willing with the others, and men on leave reported for service as quickly as possible.

Terrified Householders

Occupants of houses in the immediate vicinity very early deemed it advisable to give vacant possession to the threatening intruder, and cleared their houses of all portable furniture. Some of them were frantic with fear for the safety of their homes, and smashed their windows top and bottom in order to expedite the removal. Others more deliberately took the windows out. Prospect Road and Sheaf Bank looked like being blocked with household goods, but it was essential that the thoroughfare should be clear, and backyards and houses of friends were sought in which to deposit the articles. The terror of the children and women was pitiable. They were helped in their exodus by very willing hands. Prospect Terrace was covered with furniture, and other stuff was piled in the Heeley Friends school yard. The school itself was open for the accommodation of the homeless, and hot drinks were served by a nurse. Approximately fifty homes were vacated.

The only house that actually caught fire was No. 6, Prospect View. Here the damage was slight, and is confined to the end of the roof nearest the works. Only a wall separated the fire from the house.

By 1.30 a.m., several of the people were returning to their houses with their possessions. All of them were back yesterday, though many complain that much of their belongings are missing.

Fire Heralded by Explosions

In a chat with our representative yesterday, Mr. Darley, caretaker of the works, who resides on the premises, said he went his usual round of the works at three o'clock on Saturday afternoon, and found everything correct. Shortly after seven in the evening he was sitting in his house when he heard a loud report. "It seemed so near to me," said Mr. Darley, "that I looked out of the window and saw a dense cloud of smoke rising from the warehouse on the north side of the works. Almost immediately following this came a burst of flame, which seemed to leap out from the walls. I then noticed a fire in the third storey of the warehouse."

Another person who summoned the brigade, Mr. George Ellis, of 32 Bedale Road, passed the works five minutes before the outbreak and noticed nothing unusual. On returning he heard a loud report and saw flames leap from the premises. He immediately ran to the nearest street fire alarm.

Fireman in Evening Dress

A railway signal-box within a few yards of the north block that first fired - just on the other side of the river Sheaf - was in great danger. The paint was blistering with the heat, and a jet had to be turned on to it, or it would have fired a few minutes later. Subsequently the Midland Railway Brigade took over the care of the box, which had been vacated because of the intense heat and danger. With Captain Burrows in charge, a constant stream of cooling water was applied, and this brigade also rendered valuable help in directing a jet into the nearest block. All trains were run on the slow line furthest from the fire.

Councillor Frank Else distinguished himself by joining the Sheffield Brigade as a volunteer fireman in evening dress. He had been attending a dinner, and on learning of the fire hurried to it. With a fireman's jacket on he did his best to lend a hand, and he is not without experience of fire brigade work.

The cause of the fire is unknown. The damage is covered by insurance. Unfortunately about 400 men will be thrown out of employment. The works were among the busiest in Sheffield, being less affected by the slump than most.

The National Laymen's Missionary Movement, at a meeting of which Mr. W. S. Skelton was in attendance where he was informed of the fire, passed a resolution of sympathy with him on the loss he has sustained.

When officials of the electricity department and the Gas Company were informed of the fire supplies of current were cut off.

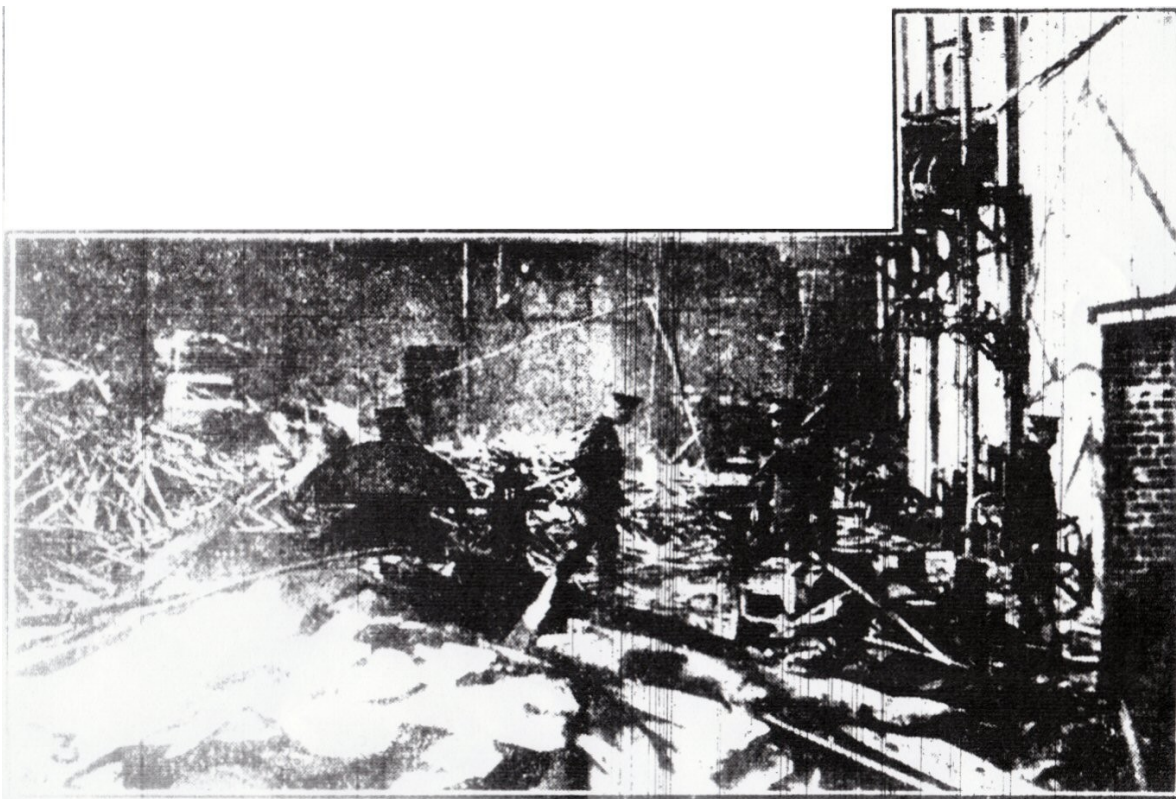
In January, 1918, the gangway in the centre of the yard of the premises involved were on fire, necessitating the attendance of the fire brigade.

The intense red glow in the sky attracted the attention of thousands of people in the surrounding country, and many were the telephone enquiries from Lincolnshire, Derbyshire, and Nottingham of what was happening in Sheffield.

After the Outbreak

Only yesterday, after the chaos, confusion, and excitement had subsided was it possible to form any idea of the terrible havoc wrought by the conflagration. Instead of the extensive works, which had found employment for hundreds of men, the spectator gazed upon a mere shell of brickwork from which white billows, of smoke curled leisurely up to the sky. The interior of the building, which but a few hours before had been divided into warehouses, machine and engineering shops, was a mere blackened mass of charred debris.

Huge girders were twisted into grotesque shapes, as if some giant had attempted to wrench them from their supports; pillars weighing tons were bent or broken, while great masses of machinery piled high among the wreckage paid eloquent testimony to the force and intensity of the fire. From time to time the dying fire made spasmodic efforts to regain its superiority, but in vain, for a steady flow of water on the affected parts quickly stopped any attempt at an advance.



It was almost impossible for the casual onlooker unacquainted with the works, to distinguish the different shops and warehouses. Here and there a piece of machinery rendered identity possible, but generally the interior of the building was reminiscent of a scrap heap.

It is doubtful whether any fire in Sheffield has ever aroused such great public interest. Throughout yesterday thousands of people from all districts in the city wended their way to the scene by motor-car, motor-cycle, cycle and “shanks’ pony.” The police, however, were there in large numbers, and assisted by a large number of special constables, and soldiers, kept the crowd at a reasonable distance from the ruined building.