

Warwickshire History

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Fires in Stratford-upon-Avon in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries

Stratford-upon-Avon experienced great fires in 1594, 1595, 1614 and 1641. Although it was certainly unfortunate to suffer from four such fires within fifty years it was by no means unique in falling a victim to 'That most terrible and ruthless tyrant' which ravaged many English towns during the Middle Ages and later. Gradually, controls upon the construction of buildings and the regulation of dangerous trades removed the threat, but the process was a slow one. The effects of fires upon the towns which were damaged were often extensive and Stratford presents an interesting case study in the response to this widespread problem.

Timber was the most common building material in the town during the period, as indeed it had been throughout the Middle Ages. It was readily available in the neighbourhood from the forests of Arden and Feckenham. Some stone was quarried locally but very little was used in building. Bricks were as yet too expensive both to make and transport to be in common use other than in the construction of chimneys. Almost all of the buildings were timber-framed with walls of wattle and daub. An equally serious fire hazard was thatch which was in widespread use as a relatively cheap method of roofing. Tiles were usually of low quality and they lacked durability.¹ Some of the 'fayer houses' in Stratford were slated or tiled, however, and the fires were blamed upon 'poore Tenements and Cottages Thatched with Strawe, of whiche sort very many have byn lately erected'.² Most of the barns, stables, workshops and other outhouses were also thatched.³ Thatched roofs made it very difficult to contain a fire which had taken hold since the sparks and fragments of burning straw were liable to be caught in the wind and carried to other thatched buildings some distance away. These conditions made it very difficult to establish an effective fire-break. Moreover, the town contained the workshops of blacksmiths, bakers, cobblers, tallow chandlers and above all of maltsters. All of these tradesmen required fire and the need to keep stocks of wood and furze for fuel increased the danger. The practice of lighting fires in buildings without chimneys of brick or stone was also condemned. These already considerable hazards were increased by dry weather and strong winds. A warm and dry spell made both timber and thatch apt to catch fire so that the summer months were especially dangerous.⁴ The strength and direction of the wind was an important factor, turning a small outbreak of fire into a serious blaze and controlling to a considerable extent the area destroyed. The fire in July 1614 came during a run of dry summers and the extent of the damage was blamed upon the fact that the wind was 'sitting full upon the Towne'.⁵

The fire-fighting equipment available was primitive. It consisted largely of leather buckets for carrying water and long firehooks for pulling

the thatch off roofs. Some German fire engines came into use in England in the early seventeenth century but towns were slow to adopt them and in any case they were helpless in the face of a large fire. It was not until the Newsham engine was perfected in 1721 that an effective machine became available for fighting fires.⁶ One method which could prove decisive was the demolition of buildings in the path of the flames to create a fire-break. A fire often spread so quickly, however, that, in the confusion, the prompt and decisive action required was not forthcoming and the opportunity was missed. No doubt many owners objected to the destruction of their property while the flames were still some distance away in the hope that it would survive the holocaust. The effects of a large blaze amongst buildings of timber and thatch meant that 'the flame and smoake thereof is soe greate, and violent that noe man is able to come neere those howses or to stand in the wynd to defend the fayer tyled howses'. In addition 'very many are unwilling to come to help their neighbours in that extremity butt rather stay home to defend theire owne property'.⁷ The means and organisation of fire-fighting were clearly inadequate and this helps to explain the extent of the damage done.

The fire on 22 September 1594 wrecked the western side of Chapel Street and parts of High Street, Wood Street and Henley Street. The blaze a year later on 21 September 1595 destroyed property in the heart of the town in the area bounded by Bridge Street, High Street and Sheep Street. Together these two fires 'consumed to the number of 200 dwellinge howses' although a slightly later estimate put the figure at only 120. The damage was estimated at £20,000 but this was probably rather high.⁸ On Saturday 9 July 1614 a 'suddaine and terrible Fire' broke out and in less than two hours fifty four houses were lost including many 'very faire houses, besides Barnes, Stables and other houses of office, together also with great store of Corn, Hay, Straw, Wood & Timber therein, amounting in all to the value of Eight Thousand Pounds & upwards'. Again Sheep Street seems to have suffered badly and indeed 'the whole Towne was in very great daunger to have been utterly consumed'.⁹ The fire in 1641 broke out on 10 March and much of the property gutted was in Bridge Street, then the principal street of the town. At first losses were put at £20,000 but a later list includes ninety two victims and a total value of £8,618 19s 6d. of which Mrs. Wilson lost £1,175 11s 2d. and Mr. Ainge, a baker, £1,000.¹⁰ Coming within the space of less than half a century these were formidable losses for a town of Stratford's size to bear; little wonder that in 1615 it was said that the town 'hathe been much impoverished by divers late great fyers'.¹¹

After the fires of 1594 and 1595 relief was sought from parliament. In 1597-8 the queen was granted six whole tenths and fifteenths to be levied upon moveable goods and chattels.¹² Stratford claimed that because

of the 'greate Impoverishment and the decaie of revenues and publique estate' the town was unable to 'undergoe the Burthen of the subsidies and taxe imposed upon them'.¹³ Upon enquiry it was discharged from payment of this taxation and was granted a share in the sum set aside for the relief of decayed and impoverished towns.¹⁴ Before the introduction of fire insurance in the late seventeenth century the most common method of raising money after a fire or similar disaster was the issue of a brief which was read in churches throughout the region and collections taken. A certificate of a *bona fide* claim was required and the victims had to submit a valuation of their losses. This was sent to the Lord Chancellor who, if satisfied, then issued the Letters Patent necessary for a brief. Stratford's petitions for such briefs were granted after each fire. After the conflagration of 1614 collections were authorised throughout the Midlands and also in southern and south-western England, six Welsh counties and Cheshire, County Durham, Lancashire and Yorkshire.¹⁵ The system was a slow one and in both 1614 and 1641 the Letters Patent were not issued until five months after the fire. Even so, in 1614 this interval proved too short for the sufferers were unable to agree upon the course of action; half of the time allotted for collections expired with only £80 collected so that an extension had to be requested.¹⁶ The sums raised did not equal the value of the losses. A list of donations made after the fire in 1641 totals only £870 3s.8½d., scarcely a tenth of what had been lost, although this may not be the figure eventually reached.¹⁷ It seems too that, as in many other towns, the division of the money collected was inequitable 'every one prefferings his own private benefitte befor the general good and charritable intention of these letters patents'.¹⁸ Whatever the problems, capital was found for the reconstruction of most of the property gutted on each occasion and some financial aid and materials towards rebuilding were provided by local gentlemen.

The immediate effect of these conflagrations was to render many people homeless. Some were accommodated in the surviving buildings, including the church, but many had to find other temporary shelter while their homes were being rebuilt. A common solution to the problem was to move into barns and other outhouses and often to convert these into permanent dwellings. This practice was condemned by the burgesses after the fire of 1614 as being in itself a serious fire risk. Many of the temporary structures erected for the homeless also tended to become permanent. The fires dealt a serious blow to confidence and it was feared that 'men of Ability are very loath and fearfull to erecte any fayer houses'.¹⁹ In order to encourage the rebuilding of its own property the Corporation offered new leases to many of its tenants, often waiving the entry fine and in some cases stipulating that the buildings should be re-erected within a given period.²⁰ The economic problems of the town led to delays in the reconstruction of

some properties. For example, in 1599 the houses of William Cawdry and John Coxe in Henley Street, which had been destroyed in 1594, were still not rebuilt, while in Wood Street Widow Burdett's tenement 'wasted with fire, 1594' also awaited renewal or at least for the offer of a new lease since 'Her frends would build if she might have a terme of yeares'.²¹ When a lease of a property in Bridge Street was granted to John Hemings in 1657 it was upon the understanding that he should 'at his own proper cost and charges erect, build and sett upp one good and sufficient messuage or tenement in and upon the demised premises, hit being heretofore Burned and Consumed by fire'.²² This must have been during the blaze sixteen years earlier. Many of the gutted buildings were, however, rebuilt fairly quickly. A number of the buildings in the centre of the town today date from the rebuildings following these fires although later alterations have often obscured the fact. Among the more notable examples which can be recognised are Harvard House and the Garrick Inn.

The risks of fire were already apparent to the Corporation and from the 1550s onwards they attempted to enforce regulations designed to reduce the dangers. The thatching of houses was forbidden, with a fine of £1 imposed for every breach. Also the members of the Corporation were to keep leather buckets, fire hooks and ladders for use in an emergency. It is clear that these orders were not fully enforced. In 1599 the property of Hamlet Sadler in High Street contained two bays of building 'newe burnt & newe sett up by him thatched wch should be tiled' and shortly before the fire of 1614 a survey revealed that three quarters of the Corporation had no leather buckets at all.²³ Following this fire it was decided to attempt a stricter control on roofing materials and other fire hazards within the town. In order to obtain the necessary authority the Privy Council was petitioned and on 16 March 1619 it ordered that, because of the risks of thatching and the storage of combustible materials 'made confusedly in most of the principall partes of the towne without restraite', no house or cottage erected in the future should be thatched, and those already standing which were thatched were to be covered with tiles or slates as soon as possible. No stacks of straw or furze were to be permitted in the town 'either upon the streetes or elsewhere'.²⁴ Coming almost five years after the most recent fire it was probably difficult to enforce the costs of re-roofing upon those owners who had undergone the expense of rebuilding their entire property in the previous few years. The injunction against the storage of fuel within the town may have proved impractical for tradesmen without land beyond the built-up area upon which to keep their requirements. Nevertheless there was some determination to enforce these regulations and in November 1619 George Badger, William Shaw and John Beesley were ordered to appear before the Privy Council for erecting thatched houses and cottages 'to the ill example of others and the indaingering of the towne'.²⁵ Possibly,



AMES

By the Grace of God, King of England, Scotland, France, & Ireland, Defender of the faith, &c. To all and singular Archbishops, Bishops, Archdeacons, Deanes, & their Officials, Pastors, Vicars, Curats, and to all spiritual persons: And also to all Justices of Peace, Justices, Sheriffs, Esquires, Constables, Churchwardens, and Headboroughes: And to all Officers, of Cities, Boroughes, and Townes corporate: And to all other our Officers, Ministers, and Substits whatsoever they be allowed within Liberties as without, to whom these presents shall come greeting.

WE are credibly certified by a Certificate under the hands of our Right trusty and well-beloved Sir Fulke Grevill Knight, Chancellor, Sir Ceccheur, Sir Thomas Leigh, Sir Edward Deereux, and Sir Thomas Holt Knights & Baronets, Sir Edward Grevill, Sir Clement Fisher, Sir Clement Throgmorton, Sir Richard Verney, Sir Thomas Lucy, Sir Henry Dymock, Sir William Somerville, Sir Thomas Beawson, Sir Henry Rainsford, Knights, Thomas Spencer, Edward Boughton, Bartholomew Hales, John Repton, William Combes, William Barnes Elquo, Justices of the Peace within our Counties of Warwick and Gloucester: That upon Saturday the thirtieth day of July last there happened a suddaine and terrible fire in our Towne of Stratford upon Avon within our County of Warwick, which within the space of little then two houres consumed and burnt fifty and so lower dwelling houses, many of them being very faire houses, belesse houses, stables and other houses of Office, together also with great store of Come, Hay, Straw, Wood & Timber therein amounting in all to the value of Eight thousand Pounds & upwards: the force of which fire was so great (the wind sitting full upon the Towne) that it dispersed into many places thereof whereby the whole Towne was in very great danger to have been utterly consumed & burnt: We reason therefore of two severall fires happening in the said Towne within these Twenty yeares to the losse of Twenty thousand Pounds more, not onely our said poore Subjects who have now suffred this great losse, are utterly undone and like to perish, but also the rest of the Towne is in great hazard to be overthrown & undone, the Inhabitants there being no waies able to releaseth their distressedoughness in this their great want and misery: And whereas the said Towne hath been a great spark of the Towne whereunto great recourse of people is made, by reason of the lockely Sparker, Fairces, and other frequent meetings which were there holden and appointed, now being thus ruined & decayed, it is in great hazard to be utterly overthrown, if either the resort thither be neglected, or course of travellers obstructed, which for want of speedy reparation may be occasioned. And forasmuch as our said distressed Subjects the Inhabitants of the said Towne are very ready and willing to the uttermost of their powers to redresse & new build the said Towne againe, yet finding & performinge thereof far beyond their ability: They have made their humble suit unto us, that we would be pleased to provide some convenient means that the said Towne may be againe repaired & repaired as well for the releefe of the distressed people within the same, as also for the restoring and continuing of the said Sparker, and here humbly besought us, to commend the same god & laudable good and the charitable furtherance thereof to the benevolence of all our loving Subjects, not doubting but that all good & well disposed Gentlemen will for common charitie and love to their Country and the redress of our Commendation thereof be ready with all willingness to extend their charitable reliefe towards the comfort of so many distressed people, & for speedy performinge of so good and charitable a worke.

KNOWE ye therefore, that we (tendering the lamentable estate and losse of our said distressed Inhabitants, together with the humble suit of all our foresaid Justices made unto us on their behalfes) of our especial Grace & speciall compassion, have given & granted and by these our Letters Patentes doe give & graunt unto our wellbelovd Subjects William Wyat, Richard Tyler, Isaac Hinchcocke, Richard Mounford, and William Harding, Inhabitants of the said Towne, and to their Deputie & Deputies, the bearer or bearers hereof, full power, licence, & authority, to aske, gather, receive take the Amones and charitable benevolence of all our loving Subjects to habesent inhabiting within our Counties of Warwick, Leicesters, Northampton, Worcester, Gloucester, Oxford, Buckingham, & Berkes, with the University of Oxford, our Cities of Coventry, Peterborough, Worcester, Gloucester, & Beiloll: And in all other Cities, Townes corporate, parishes, villages, and in all other places whatsoever within our said Counties, & not elsewhere, to collect the new building, & repairing, & reliving of the said Towne of Stratford upon Avon, & the relieving of all such our poore withered Subjects their wives & Children, as have suffred losse & decay by the misfortune of the said fire.

WHEREFORE We will and commaund you & every you, that at such time & times as the said William Wyat, Richard Tyler, Isaac Hinchcocke, Richard Mounford, & William Harding, or their Deputie or Deputies, the bearer or bearers hereof, shall come and repaire to any your Churches, Chapells, or other places, to aske and receive the gratuities & charitable benevolence of our said Subjects, quietly to permit & suffer them to do, without any manner your lets or contraventions. And upon the said Pastors, Vicars, and Curats for the better stirring up of a charitable devotion, deliberately to publish & declare the intent of these our Letters Patentes unto our said Subjects, exhorting & persuading them to extend their liberal contributions in so good & charitable a doo. And you the Churchwardens of every Parish where such Collection is to be made (as aforesaid) to Collect & gather the Amones & charitable benefices of all our loving Subjects, And what shall by you gathered, to sende in the backe side hereof, and deliver the same to the bearer or bearers hereof, when as thereunto you shall be required. Any Statute, Lawe, Ordinance, or provision heretofore made to the contrary in any wise notwithstanding.

In Witness whereof we have caused these our Letters to be made Patentes for the space of One whole yeare next after the date hereof to endure. Witness our selfe at Westminster, the first day of December, in the Twentieth yeare of our Majestie of England, France, and Ireland, the Eight and fortieth.

Steward.

God save the King.

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as the memory of the fire faded, the observance of these regulations lapsed for it seems improbable that the fire of 1641 could have been so extensive if they had been strictly followed and in 1657 some twenty one persons were presented for having recently erected thatched buildings.²⁶ A new Book of Orders issued in 1665 repeated the earlier regulations and ruled that all thatched buildings were to be tiled before 29 September 1665. The penalty for each breach of these orders was raised to £5 and that for making a fire in a building except in a chimney of stone or brick was set at £1. The requirement of keeping leather buckets was extended to all householders paying an annual rent greater than £4.²⁷ A fire engine was acquired in 1684 and a second one was added ten years later.²⁸ These measures finally proved effective and there was no recurrence of a fire on a large scale. They were aimed at reducing the danger of fire and did not attempt to impose uniformity of style and construction upon the buildings erected or to alter the plan of the town in any way as was done at a number of places following a 'great fire'; for instance, at Northampton after 1675, at Warwick after 1694 and at Blandford Forum after 1731.²⁹

The results of the fires in terms of both the fabric of the town and the movement towards eradicating fire hazards are fairly clear but there were also economic and social consequences which are harder to assess. Stratford's economy rested essentially upon its position as a market town for the surrounding countryside where 'great recourse of people was made, by reason of the weekly Market, Faires and other frequent meetings which were there holden'. There was considerable concern that this function would be put at risk not only because of the losses of goods and property but also the disruption and uncertainty after a fire. In 1614 it was feared that 'the Town is in great hazard to bee utterly overthrowne, if either the resort hither bee neglected or course of travellers diverted, which for want of speedy repayration may be occasioned'.³⁰ This fear was certainly justified for a number of towns lost their function as markets following a fire. In the early seventeenth century, for example, both Gamlingay in Cambridgeshire and Heacham in Norfolk suffered this fate.³¹ Associated with its role as a market Stratford contained a considerable malting industry drawing upon supplies of barley from the neighbouring Felden region. This was an important aspect of the town's economy, many having 'thereby only time beyond man's memory lived by exercising the same, our houses fitted to no other uses, many servants among us hired only to that purpose'. The bad harvests and consequent 'dearth of corn laid upon our land and upon our county more than many others' led to high grain prices in the last decade of the sixteenth century which imposed a further strain upon the economic and social life of the town.³² Barley prices rose sharply and in the period 1595-9 stood roughly fifty five per cent higher than in the previous five

year period.³³ Indeed, the rising prices of all the bread grains made food-stuffs much more expensive and caused considerable distress among the poorer sections of the community. Already the decline of the textile trade had led to some hardship. Although never as important as the Coventry region, Stratford's textile industry had provided employment in and around the town especially for the poor 'by clothinge and making of yarn'. Competition from other regions and from abroad meant that the industry declined during the course of the sixteenth century and by 1590 this had led to 'great penury and misery' amongst many who had been dependent upon it.³⁴ The fires of 1594 and 1595 therefore afflicted a town which was economically weak and dealt it further blows. By 1598 the poor in Stratford were said to number 600, perhaps a third of the population. It was still recovering from these problems in 1614 and was then described as 'an ancient but a very poore market Towne'.³⁵ As a result of their losses the wealthier inhabitants were unable to provide relief on the scale required 'being in no waies able to relieve their distressed Neighbours in ... their great want and misery'.³⁶ Vagrancy was a continual problem in Tudor and Stuart England and fires were a contributory cause. Whether Stratford's economic situation and slow recovery from the fires led to migration from the town is uncertain but it is possible that some of the poor may have chosen to take to the road and a very uncertain future.³⁷

Nevertheless, the community proved to be a resilient one and the town was eventually able to recover its former prosperity. Probably its position as a market town for south-west Warwickshire was unassailable for the market and fairs survived and were strengthened by the development of the Avon navigation during the 1630s and later. Andrew Yarranton, writing after the Restoration, believed that 'At Stratford or thereabouts is always the best and cheapest Wheat and Malt in all them parts of England'.³⁸ The fire of 1641 appears to have caused less hardship than the three earlier ones and while the textile industry all but disappeared from the town the fires probably did no more than accelerate a process which was already well under way. Thus, while the four great fires altered the appearance of Stratford-upon-Avon quite considerably they merely checked the development of the town and it is doubtful if they had any long-term economic consequences.

Stephen Porter.

NOTES

1. Terence H. Lloyd, *Some Aspects of the Building Industry in Medieval Stratford-upon-Avon* (Dugdale Society Occasional Papers, no. 14, 1961), pp. 7, 17, 19-20; Alec Clifton-Taylor, *The Pattern of English Building*, (London, 1972), pp. 218-9, 265, 300.

2. Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Record Office (S.R.O.), Corporation records, Misc. Docs. vii, 114.
3. S.R.O., Corporation records, Misc. Docs. xii, 54.
4. D. J. Schove, 'Fire and Drought, 1600-1700' in *Weather* xxi (1966) pp.311-4
5. S.R.O., ER 1/1/65.
6. *Dictionary of National Biography* xl, p. 361.
7. S.R.O., Corporation records, Misc. Docs. vii, 114.
8. *Victoria County History of Warwickshire (V.C.H. Warws.)*iii, p. 223; S.R.O., Corporation leases and transcripts, ER 1/77/5; Corporation records, Misc. Docs. vii, 116; *Catalogue of the Books, Manuscripts, Works of Art exhibited in Shakespeare's Birthplace* (Stratford, 1944), p. 51. I am grateful to Dr Joan Thirsk for drawing my attention to this reference.
9. S.R.O., ER 1/1/65
10. S.R.O., Corporation records, Misc. Docs. iii, 32; vii, 108.
11. S.R.O. Corporation records Misc. Docs. vii, 7.
12. 39 Elizabeth, cap. 27.
13. S.R.O., Corporation records, Misc. Docs. vii, 109, 116.
14. *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1598-1601*, p. 154; R. B. Wheler, *History and Antiquities of Stratford-upon-Avon* (Stratford, 1806), p. 14.
15. S.R.O., ER 1/1/65; ER 1/1/70; ER 1/8/8.
16. S.R.O., ER 1/4/14.
17. S.R.O., ER 1/77/5.
18. S.R.O., Corporation records, Misc. Docs. vii, 120
19. S.R.O., Corporation records, Misc. Docs. vii, 114.
20. S.R.O., Corporation leases *passim*. I am grateful to Mr. Robert Bearman for drawing my attention to this point.
21. S.R.O., Corporation records, Misc. Docs. xii, 54.
22. S.R.O., Corporation leases, 2/24.
23. S.R.O. Corporation records Misc. Docs. xii, 54; xiii, 6.
24. *Acts of the Privy Council 1617-19*, p. 401.

25. *Ibid.*, 1619–20, p. 74.
26. *V.C.H. Warws.*, iii, p. 223, n.73.
27. Levi Fox, *The Borough Town of Stratford-upon-Avon* (Stratford, 1953), pp. 117–8.
28. *V.C.H. Warws.*, iii, p. 223.
29. H. M. Colvin, 'The Rebuilding of Northampton', in *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, v, no. 1 (1973), p. 3.; *V. C. H. Warws.*, viii pp. 429–30; *Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, Dorset*, iii, part 1 (1970), pp. 18–19.
30. S.R.O., ER 1/1/65.
31. *Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, Cambridgeshire* i, (1968), p. 99; Joan Thirsk (ed.) *The Agrarian History of England and Wales Volume IV, 1500–1640* (Cambridge, 1967), p. 472.
32. *Catalogue of Shakespeare's Birthplace*, p. 51.
33. Thirsk, *op. cit.*, Table 1, pp. 815–21.
34. W. G. Hoskins, 'Harvest Fluctuations and English Economic History, 1480–1619' in *Agricultural History Review*, xii (1964) pp. 28–46; *V. C. H. Warws.*, iii, p. 241; S.R.O., Corporation records, Misc. Docs. vii, 62.
35. S.R.O., Corporation records, Misc. Docs. vii, 114, 116. The population of Stratford was c.1,950 in 1670 and 2,287 in 1765: C. W. Chalklin, *The Provincial Towns of Georgian England* (London, 1974), Table 1, p. 18.
36. S.R.O., ER 1/1/65.
37. Paul A. Slack, 'Vagrants and Vagrancy in England, 1598–1664' in *Economic History Review*, xxvii (1974), p. 374.
38. Andrew Yarranton, *England's Improvement by Sea and by Land* (1677), p. 163.