

Crews Hole Tar Works – Early Days

‘Alarming and Destructive Conflagration’

Tuesday 3rd March 1863



Searches of the British Newspaper Archive

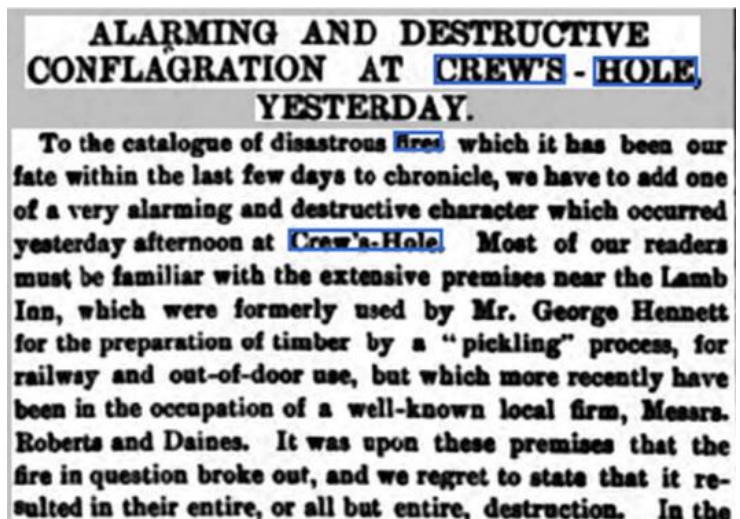
(www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) carried out by Susan Acton-Campbell in December 2020 have found more details of the major fire that led to William Butler becoming owner of the Crew’s Hole Tar Works in 1863. The research has also thrown new light on the beginnings of the works by highlighting the involvement of [George Hennet \(or Hennett\)](#) who was a major contractor working for IK Brunel on the construction of railways and other works in the south-west of England and elsewhere.

There were two reports published on the day after the fire, the first by the Bristol Daily Post.

Bristol Daily Post Wednesday 4th March 1863

Alarming and Destructive Conflagration at Crew’s-Hole

To the catalogue of disastrous fires which it has been our fate within the last few days to chronicle, we have to add one of a very alarming and destructive character which occurred yesterday afternoon in Crew’s Hole. Most of our readers must be familiar with the extensive premises near the Lamb Inn, which were formerly used by Mr. George Hennett for the preparation of timber by a “pickling” process, for railway and out-of-door use, but which more recently have been in the occupation of well-known local firm, Messrs. Roberts and Daines.



It was upon these premises that the fire in question broke out, and we regret to state that it resulted in their entire, or all but entire, destruction. In the preparation of timber for resisting the action of moisture materials of a very combustible nature have to be employed, and at the works in question great watchfulness and caution has been observed to guard against accident. Unhappily, however, all the precautions that men use prove at times unavailing, and so it proved in the present instance.

The fire was first seen by some of the workpeople at about three o'clock, and it spread with wonderful rapidity, throwing off much dense masses of smoke as have rarely been seen. When the creosote and other materials of a like character caught, a tremendous volume of flame was engendered, and it soon became apparent to those capable of forming a judgment that the hopes which existed of saving the building were very small indeed.

The Royal and Imperial firemen and others also exerted themselves to the utmost, and the factory being near the river a good supply of water was obtained. The devouring element resisted, however, the attempts to subdue it, until the premises, with tanks and other appliances, were reduced to a heap of ruins.

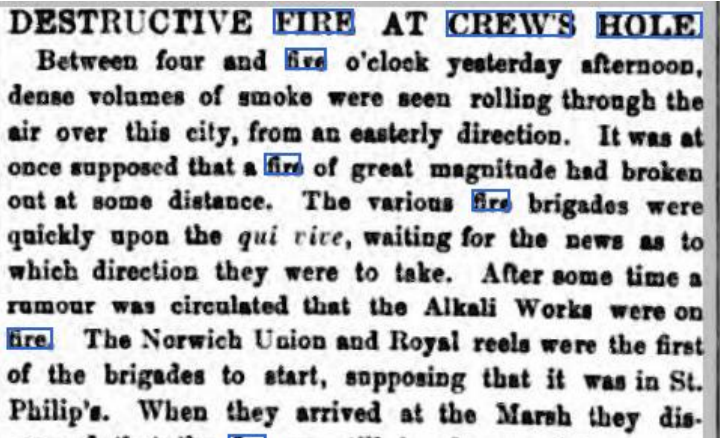
Our informant states that the scene was viewed by a very large concourse of spectators, many of whom lent ready assistance. He was unable to ascertain the mode in which the fire originated, nor could he ascertain, with any certainty, whether the works were insured. The light and smoke could be seen from many parts of the city."

The Western Daily Press said more about how the fire brigades responded.

Bristol Daily Press Wednesday 4th March 1863

Destructive Fire at Crew's-Hole

"Between four and five o'clock yesterday afternoon, dense volumes of smoke were seen rolling through the air over this city, from an easterly direction. It was at once supposed that a fire of great magnitude had broken out at some distance. The various fire brigades were quickly upon the *qui vive*, waiting for the news as to which direction they were to take. After some time a rumour was circulated that the Alkali Works were on fire.



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The Norwich Union and the Royal reels were the first of the brigades to start, supposing that it was in St. Philip's. When they arrived at the Marsh they discovered that the fire was still in advance of them. On they went until they reached the well-known pickling works of Messrs Roberts, Danes & Co., situate at Crew's Hole. At these works are manufactured the pickle used for pickling timber for railway and other purposes.

Nearly the whole of the works are carried on in the open air, large tanks being built up of massive stonework for the purpose of distilling the fluid known as creosote. There are three of these tanks or stills, and it appears that one of them was about to be drawn off by means of a large tap, when suddenly, about 4 o'clock, a pipe connected with it burst, the fluid escaped, and immediately burst into a dense body of flame. Instant exertions were made to stop the devouring element, but in vain.

Onward rolled the destructive agent, until a great portion of the yard was one bright sheet of flame, leaping high in the air, and of such immense heat that it was almost impossible to get near it. A shed about 150 feet long, at the side of the yard, then caught fire, and close adjoining this was a naphtha still. Both these were nearly consumed. Mr Newman, the manager of the works, who was constantly with the numerous body of workmen, then gave

directions for a quantity of ashes to be wheeled near, and thrown upon the flames. The men, who worked with almost superhuman efforts, obeyed with alacrity his order, and this in a great measure had the desired effect.

A small engine belonging to the firm was also brought to bear on the fire, but after working for a few minutes it became disabled, and was of no further service. No exertions were spared by those engaged in the work, but their efforts proved unavailing. The close contiguity of several open tanks of tar caused a great uneasiness to be felt, but owing to the exertions used, when our reporter, left at eight o'clock they were evidently getting mastery of the fire.

The engines of the Royal and Imperial brigades arrived shortly after eight o'clock. Mr Roberts, one of the firm, was soon on the spot, and his judicious advice did great service. No estimates can be formed as to the amount of damage, but it must amount to several hundred pounds, as each of the tanks or stills will hold nearly a hundred tons of tar. The firm we are sorry to hear, is uninsured. P.S. Porter and P.C.s 99 and 258 of the Gloucestershire Constabulary were soon on the spot, and succeeded in keeping the crowd back. Had the engines been sent from Bristol in the first place no doubt a quantity of valuable property might have been saved, as the Bath Canal is close to the premises."

Other Reports

There were further accounts of the fire published in both the 'Bristol Times and Mirror' and the 'Bristol Mercury' on Saturday 7th March. The fire was also reported in papers in other cities across the country.

As a follow up there was a further report in the Bristol Mercury on Saturday 4th April 1863:

"Thomas Rogers, landlord of the Bull beerhouse, St George's was charged with having sold beer on Sunday, March 8th, between prohibited hours."

In his defence he claimed that he had not served beer and "attempted to show that the men who were in the house had come over to that part of the country from Bristol for the purpose of seeing the site of the late extensive fire at Crew's Hole."

Mr Rogers was fined "20s. and costs, or, in default, one month's imprisonment."

George Hennett

From an historical perspective one of the most interesting aspects of the reports of the fire is the reference to the site being "formerly used by Mr. George Hennett for the preparation of timber by a "pickling" process". We know that the site was owned by Benjamin Somers from 1828 and that he leased it to various companies. We also knew that William Butler worked on the Bristol & Exeter Railway and that he was involved in managing the new tar works from very early in its existence before setting up his own Tar Distillery in Gloucester in around 1860. After the fire Roberts & Daines sold the works (and presumably the lease on the land) to Butler.

As far as we are aware, the involvement of George Hennett (sometimes written Hennet) has not been mentioned in any of the published accounts of the history of the tar works.

George Hennett was a contractor who did a lot of work for Brunel, indeed he seems to have become Brunel's go-to contractor. There is a drawing that refers to his cranes being on the suspension bridge towers and he seems to be involved in all the south-west railways at some point. He went bankrupt in 1853.

A report from a meeting of the Bristol & Exeter Railway in 1849 says:

'With regard to future works, he strongly urged that competition should be encouraged by a system of contracts. He witnessed a case within his knowledge, in which a work had been undertaken at the Crediton end of the Exeter and Crediton line for 2s 6d per yard, and completed to the satisfaction of the contractor, and yet Mr Hennett's charge was 5s or 5s 6d per yard (hear, hear). The truth was, if a strange contractor came in, Mr Brunel had the trouble of drawing plans, while he had only to say to Mr Hennett, "You know what to do" '

George Hennett was also mentioned in reports of a [fire at Temple Meads in 1841](#). This fire also involved creosote and tar which was being used to treat timber for the Bristol & Exeter Railway.

Abominable Nuisance

Further research via the Newspaper Archive found George Hennet mentioned in a report from the very early days of the works at Crews Hole. They are believed to have been established in 1843, this report was in the Bristol Mercury on Saturday 13th April 1844.

The report describes an application to the magistrates by a "gentleman of the name of Hare, living at St George's, Gloucestershire" heard by Mr Herapath. His complaint was that:

"just above the old spelter works, at Crews Hole, Mr Hennet, a contractor under the Great Western Railway Company; had constructed tanks for the pickling of timber, and when the contents were let off the effluvia became an abominable nuisance for miles around, and produced a most unpleasant and deleterious effect upon everything and everybody with its reach. It was of such a stifling nature, that it was impossible for any individuals to endure it; and even if they were in their beds, they were obliged to rise instantly and rush to the window for air. The deposit left by it resembled the paste of sulphur."

A Mr Burgess then raised 'a more serious matter' and said that he understood that:

"the residuum from the tanks all ran into the stream at the feeder ... and such was the deleterious nature of the creosote that all the fish in the stream had been destroyed."

There was reference to another 'action' and it was decided that the matter was out of the jurisdiction of the magistrate but that the water-bailiff would be sent for to survey the spot.

William Butler's Arrival

The [book published by the Butler Company in 1954](#) says of William Butler *"He came to Bristol in 1843 as Manager of the new Tar Distilling Works owned by Roberts & Daines at Crews Hole"*

Then in coverage of William Butler's retirement in August 1889, the Western Daily Press reported that, in his speech thanking employees of the company, William Butler stated that he *"came to the neighbourhood in February 1843, and since that time he had led a very active life."*

William Butler was born on 28th February 1819, so that he arrived in Crews Hole at around the time of his 24th birthday. In their book 'The Butlers & the Coal-Tar Distillery at Crew's Hole' ([ALHA Books](#)) Brian Vincent and Raymond Holland state that In 1841 William Butler's occupation was given on his son's birth certificate as 'platelayer'. At this time he is thought to have been working on the construction of the Bristol & Exeter Railway, having earlier worked on the Midlands County Railway in the Nottingham / Derby area near where he was born.

As a platelayer he would have been involved in the laying of the track, which for Brunel's broad-gauge would have included laying the bulk timbers along which the rails were fixed. It was these that would have been treated with creosote.

So it is likely that William Butler was working for George Hennett and as a platelayer may have become involved in the treatment and preparation of the timbers; perhaps even he was present at the fire of 1841 at Temple Meads.

Conclusions

From the above we can be sure that:

- Timber was being treated with creosote at Temple Meads in 1841
- George Hennett was involved in setting up the works at Crews Hole
- William Butler came to work in Crews Hole in February 1843
- In 1844 timber was being treated at with creosote at Crews Hole

It seems likely that it was decided to move the timber treatment process out of the City and set up a new Works at Crews Hole as a result of the 1841 fire.

Much of the Crews Hole site appears to have been vacant at that time, it was a large relatively level area adjacent to the river, so the transport of timber and tar to and from the site would have been relatively simple. Importantly, in view of the fire risk, it was also in an area that was sparsely populated.

It is easy to imagine William Butler, who it can be seen from his later success must have been a first class manager, moving up through the ranks to becoming manager of the Works as it was first setup and later developed.

At some stage, possibly as a result of the 1844 court case, the treatment of the timber ceased at Crews Hole and it focused the distillation of tar. The [site that the Butler Company later took over in Silverthorne Lane](#), St Phillips was also being used for the treatment of timber with creosote in the 1840s, and it seems the two sites worked together.

There was a fire at the Silverthorne Lane site in 1865 and 1863 wasn't the last major fire at Crews Hole - there was [another fire at the site in 1897](#).

Friends of Troopers Hill would be pleased to hear if anyone has any further information about the involvement of George Hennett in the Crews Hole Works.

***Newspaper reports reviewed via the British Newspaper Archive
(www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)***

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