

Fire at Butlers Tar Works 1897



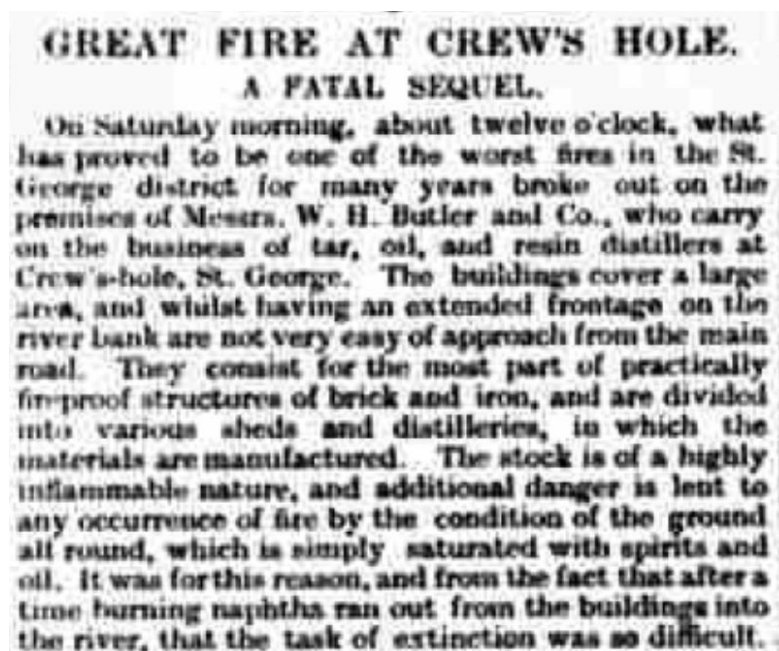
Friends of
Troopers Hill

Butlers Tar Works at the bottom of Troopers Hill in Crews Hole is believed to have been established in 1843. The initial purpose of the works was to treat timber for use on the Great Western and other railways with creosote. Creosote was distilled from coal-tar, which was a by-product of the manufacture of town gas. Crews Hole became the site of the tar distillery that took coal-tar from gas works in Bristol and further afield, including Bath.

Some of the history of the early use of creosote in Bristol can be traced from newspaper reports of major fires that engulfed the early works. The first of at least four great fires occurred in [1841 near Temple Meads](#). Later fires were at [Crews Hole in 1863](#); in [Silverthorne Lane in 1865](#).

The last of these four fires was at Crews Hole on Saturday 31st July 1897 and sadly this fire led to the death of one of the employees at Crews Hole, George Lacey, who attempted to extinguish the fire.

Newspaper Report



Below are some further quotes from this extensive report.

“Seen on the land side, one of the most remarkable features of this fire was the dense volume of intensely black smoke pouring from the burning oils; indeed passengers by the mid-day trains on the Bath line were first appraised by the seriousness of the fire by seeing the smoke. The river itself was for a considerable time ablaze with the flaring oil, which, streaming out of the buildings and across the road covered the water for some distance.”

“it was the centre of the naphtha house that the fire originated. From what it can be gathered it appears that the workmen were engaged in distilling resin in a copper pot in the centre house, when the liquid boiled over, and, catching fire ran along the ground. Two of the workmen, Edward Iles, of Nag’s Head, St George, and George Lacy [sic] (57), of Crews Hole, seeing the serious consequences which would ensue should the fire spread, made a determined effort to check its progress, but they both became so burned that they had to be rescued by others and taken to the Royal Infirmary.”

“Meanwhile the flames had gained ground, and every moment received fresh impetus as the casks and tanks of oil in their path became ignited also. Universal hydrants have been lately placed on the premises to guard against fire, and these were set up and worked with a will.”

The article continues describing the attempts of the fire brigades, who arrived after an “anxious time”. The first was the St George Volunteer Brigade, then the Imperial Fire Office manual engine followed by the “steam fire float from Bristol” “a tremendous volume of water was delivered into the naphtha house, which was now a roaring furnace, but for a time the fire seemed to burn as fiercely as ever.”

Once it became clear the at naphtha house could not be saved attention turned to stopping further spread.

“The firemen were working all the time under great difficulties, the smoke and sickening smell from the burning oils making it impossible to remain long in close proximity to the flames. Any number of helpers were at hand, however, and, led by Mr Butler’s sons, aided the firemen with buckets and spades. The fire was completely in hand by half-past three, but the last steam float did not leave till about 7pm, the St George brigade returning later.”

The report states that some 5,000 gallons of naphtha was destroyed in barrels and about 1,200 in an iron tank. Together other losses and damaged to buildings the total cost was said to be between £2,000 and £3,000 – a loss to the company as it was reported that they were not insured.

It was later found that the “oil which ran into the river was not naphtha, as supposed, but a resin oil, which is inflammable only at very high temperature, such as was the case on Saturday.”

Edward Iles was discharged from hospital having had his wounds dressed, but sadly George Lacey died on the Wednesday morning.

“Stephen Lacey, of Soundwell road, Kingswood, a boot salesman, identified the body of the deceased as being that of his father, a stillman, in the employ of Mr Butler, oil and colour manufacturer, of Crew’s Hole.”

Record in ‘The History of Wm Butler & Co (Bristol) Ltd’

The fire is also recorded in a book published by Butlers in 1953.

“A serious fire broke out at Crews Hole Works in July, 1897, which was the cause of the tragic death of one of the employees. This fire was one of the greatest spectacles the citizens had seen in many years, as the burning oil from the Works spread all over the river and there was no means of getting it out, so that it had to burn until all the oil had been destroyed.”

George Lacey's Grave

George Lacey's grave stands in Avonview Cemetery, not far away from that of Mr Butler himself who died in October 1900 having retired from the business and handed it to his sons in 1889.

While it is in need of some TLC, the words on the stone on George Lacey's grave can still be read.

The inscription reads:

*In loving memory of George the beloved husband of
Emma Lacey
who was burnt in Mr Butlers Works, Crews Hole
who died August 4th 1897 aged 57 years
We mourn our loss our loved one
Our loss is only thy gain
For God hath taken thee from us
To a world thats free from pain*

*Also of Emma dearly beloved wife of the above who
died March 16th 1926 aged 84 years.
Then let our sorrow cease to flow
God has declared his own;
But let our hearts in every tone
Still say thy will be done*

*Also Edith the beloved wife of Aquila Elbrow and
daughter of the above who died June 11th 1942 aged
67 years*

[This stone was erected by his loving wife]



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