

Creosote Fire – 1841 Near Temple Meads



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.

[John Bethell](#) (who was born in Bristol) patented a process for using creosote as a timber preservative in 1838. It was being used to treat timber for Brunel's new railways by 1841 if not before. Creosote replaced the earlier process of 'kyanising' timber (patented by [John Kyan](#)) – it was found the chemical used in kyanizing corroded any iron fastenings used in the timber.

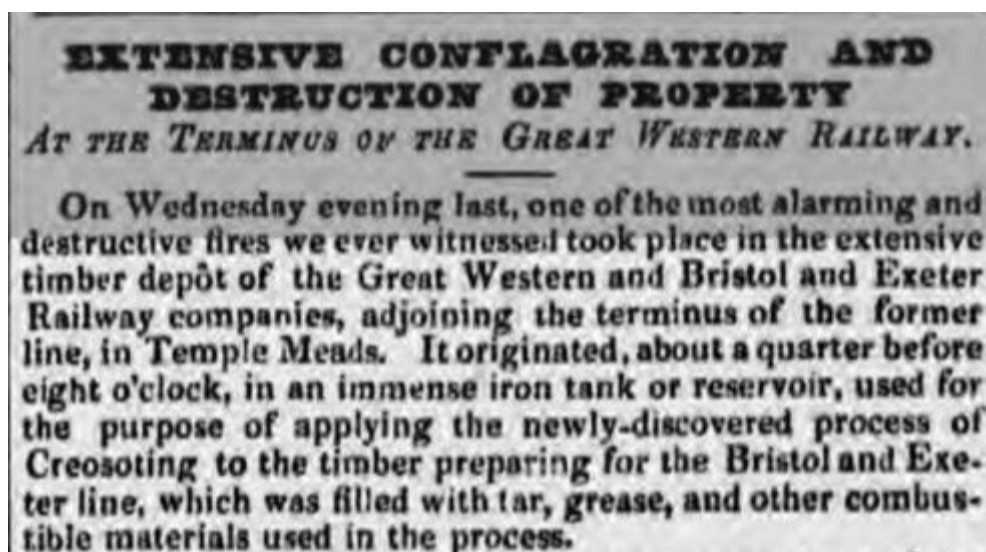
At the time Brunel was using [balk timbers under the rails](#) of his new broad gauge tracks rather than cross sleepers, this would have made replacement of the timber more difficult and the use of preservative more important.

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 in Bristol occurred on Wednesday 28th April 1841 and is described below. The extent of the fire was such that Brunel travelled from Chippenham to help direct the operation to extinguish it. Later fires were at [Crews Hole in 1863](#); in [Silverthorne Lane in 1865](#) and again at [Crews Hole in 1897](#).

It is clear that this fire near Temple Meads involved timber being treated in tanks of creosote as well as adjacent bulks of timber that had either been treated or were awaiting treatment. There is also reference to barrels of tar, so it is possible that the creosote was being distilled on site at Temple Meads.

The 1841 Fire



The above was from the Bristol Mercury on Saturday 1st May 1841, the report covered several column inches the following quotes indicate that even allowing for journalistic exaggeration the fire was significant:

“a fire was kindled which illuminated the city to its remotest extremities, and which we are assured, was visible at the distance of twelve, and even fifteen miles.”

“To give an adequate description of the grandeur and sublimity of the spectacle would be impossible. The pencil of a painter would fail in any attempt to depicture it; how much more, then, must it defy the power of the pen!”

“At one point was to be seen the burning reservoir, like another Vesuvius, vomiting forth masses of ruby-coloured and golden flame, and columns of dense black smoke”

The report in the Bristol Times and Mirror, also on 1st May 1841 adds:

“nothing could be more terribly sublime than the appearance of the conflagration. The intense violence of the flames which extended a considerable distance over the ground, produced the most awful appearance on the air, already darkened by the thickest smoke, while the crackling of the piles of timber in the blazing mass lent an additional and fearful grandeur “

“Immediately on its first breaking out the fire was discovered, and every means used to prevent its further spreading but in vain; the terrible element spread with fearful and irresistible rapidity to a large quantity of tar and other combustible matter in the neighbourhood of the tanks, which were soon enveloped in one mass of flame and smoke”

Controlling the Fire

There was no Avon Fire & Rescue Service or similar in 1841, each insurance company had its own teams who worked with the Police and others:

“In a short time the Norwich Union fire-engine arrived on the spot, and was quickly followed by the Imperial Sun, West of England, Crown, and other engines, and by those belonging to the police, the Great Western Cotton-works, &c”

“A large body of police, under the direction of the superintendent, Mr Fisher, and inspectors Bosworth, Webb and Bell, were also promptly in attendance, and rendered very efficient services, some of them being stationed at the entrance to the terminus to prevent promiscuous ingress, whilst others assisted in working the engines, removing timber, &c”

“It was soon evident that any attempt to extinguish the masses already ignited must prove futile and the energies of all present were consequently directed to the means of preventing, as far as possible, the further extension of the fire. With this in view hundreds of persons of all classes set about removing the piles of baulk adjacent to those already ignited.”

“Among the persons engaged in the accomplishment of this difficult work, the crew of her Majesty’s brig *Savage*, commanded by Lieut Bouker, were conspicuous. The light of the conflagration was visible from the Kingroad, and at about 11 o’clock these brave fellows, under the orders of Mr Hopkins, mate, manned their boats, and rowed for Bristol with alacrity and willingness, which will be best shown by the fact of their having accomplished the distance in little better than an hour. Upon

arriving at the fire they went to work in gallant style, and although late in the field, their well-disciplined services were of great value”.

“For a long time after twelve o’clock “the storm of flame” which “arched the horizon like a fiery cloud,” continued with unabated violence. It continued to rage with extreme vehemence till about two o’clock, when the exertions of the firemen and several gentlemen present (who worked hard with their coats off, in removing timber and rendering every assistance in their power), and also by the labourers and other persons connected with the company, began to meet with success in reducing the fire”.

“the business of removing timber was also followed throughout the whole night, both for the purpose of preventing communication and saving property”.

“At one time it was necessary to saw off part of a plank, of which one end was on fire, in order to prevent communication, and to effect this, two men (working as sawyers) gallantly ventured to a place where flames actually passed close over their heads. Indeed, so close were they, that, to prevent them from being injured it was necessary at times to keep the engines playing upon them, thus saturating their persons and diminishing their risk”.

“In the course of the night Mr Brunel, the companies’ engineer arrived. Mr B, had been at Chippenham, superintending the works in that neighbourhood, but upon receiving intelligence oof the occurrence he took a chaise, and within two hours he was on the spot, giving directions to those employed.”

“Immediately under the tanks there was a sort of pit, into which a large quantity of the boiling pitch and tar had run, and, we believe, completely filled it. This continued blazing and sent forth black smoke during nearly the whole of Thursday, and was, we believe, only extinguished by completely filling the pit with water. On this day Mr Brunel continued on the spot, and directed the necessary operations for preventing any renewed outbreak of fire, and many labourers were employed in removing timber and getting barrels of tar out of the river where they had been rolled for safety, &c, &c. All the engines and firemen were in attendance, and used every exertion iin completely extinguishing the remains of the conflagration, which we are happy to say was effected without any considerable difficulty.”

The Cause

The Bristol Times and Mirror speculated on the cause of the fire:

“We have been at some pains to find out the probable cause of this serious calamity, but have not been enabled to discover positively how it originated. There are many contradictory accounts, but all agree in stating it was the result of an accident and not the act of an incendiary as many were inclined to believe; indeed the circumstances of so vast and tremendous a fire was of itself sufficient to suggest the idea that it was the result of a pre-conceived and diabolical plot, to gratify the evil and destructive passions of unknown individuals. But we repeat, (and have great pleasure that it is so) was not, and from all we have learned, could not have been the case. From what has transpired, we believe the fire was occasioned by a spark, or snuff from a candle used by the workmen, falling into a large quantity of combustible materials employed in Creosyting [sic] (a process nearly similar to Kyanising,) the timber. Another account states that a lighted candle fell into the inflammable material, and thereby ignited it, while others say that the cause was the boiling over of the stuff itself and its communication with the timber adjacent to the place in which it was being used. There

can, however, be no doubt that the real cause was that first mentioned, and to that alone it is to attributed.”

The Audience & View Points

The fire obviously became a major spectator event:

“Every point from which a view of the destructive catastrophe could be commanded was crowded with spectators; all the streets in the neighbourhood, the road near the terminus, Pile-hill, and even the more distant elevations of Brandon-hill, Clifton, St Michael’s-hill, and Spring-hill, teemed with spectators, and the lurid light shed upon them by the flames produced a novel and even pleasing effect. Hundreds of persons flocked in from the surrounding country, and it is calculated that the fire could not have been witnessed, at different periods of the night by less than 50,000 persons.”

“a scene that that possessed a strange and powerful interest for the spectator, who could not but for a short time forget, in its vivid brilliancy, the devastation which was going on around him. But it was not alone to those who could witness the flames in the immediate vicinity, that the scene presented its strange attractions (because despite the loss, the danger, and all the evils consequent on so extensive a calamity, no person could avoid feeling that it was strangely attractive); to those on the heights from which the view might be obtained it appeared awfully picturesque.”

“During the height of the fire it was strange to observe the effect the reflection of the flames appeared to have on the faces of the multitude who occupied every “coign of vantage” which might command view of the scene, particularly so on Pile-hill, where the people were placed over one another as in an amphitheatre, and their countenances being all exposed, they appeared almost superhuman from the dusky red glare reflected on them from the flames”

Some of the other more well-known gentlemen got special mention:

“It might seem invidious, when all exerted themselves so well, to particularise individuals; but we cannot help bearing testimony to the truly efficient services of some who came under our immediate observation. His Worship the Mayor, and Messrs Herapath and Lunell; the Secretaries of the Companies, Messrs Oaler and Badham; and Mr T R Guppy, exerted themselves untiringly in visiting various quarters of the depot, urging more laboriously employed to renewed efforts, and giving valuable assistance and directions, Inspectors Bosworth and Webb, and, indeed, all the police we saw, were most persevering in their exertions; Mr Clark, superintendent, Messrs Wood, Jennings and Compton, clerks to the company, and Messrs Ennett and Adams (we believe also connected with the company) and Mr Collins, commercial traveller for the house of Harwod & Co, London, exerted themselves in an extraordinary manner, as did Inspector Burton and the Railway police, and the engineers and firemen of the several offices.”

Location

The site of the fire is described as “the extensive timber depot of the Great Western and Bristol and Exeter Railway companies, adjoining the terminus of the former line, in Temple Meads.”

There was great concern that the fire might spread:

“Indeed, it would be as impossible to award too much praise to the persons engaged in the arduous labour of removing the timber, as to attach undue importance to the accomplishment of the work. Had it not been effected, the whole of the valuable property in the yard must have fallen a sacrifice

to the devouring element, whilst the magnificent buildings of the terminus, the floor-cloth, flax, and other manufactories, and, indeed all the building immediately adjacent, might have been exposed to the most imminent peril. As it was, the extensive saw-mills of Mr Kidd, an oil-warehouse, and several of the houses in the densely populated district of Temple-backs were, for some time, placed in jeopardy; growing trees of large dimensions, immediately contiguous to them, were reduced to ashes, and, but for the well directed efforts of the firemen, these valuable properties would probably have been destroyed”.

This description makes it reasonably clear that the location in the area that later became the Great Western Goods Depot. As shown on the 1855 Ashmead map below, there was a dock here that would have been used by boats to transport the timber to and from the site. Mr Kidd’s saw-mills were at the north end of Pipe Lane (see Goads Insurance maps) and the original terminus was also adjacent to this site.



Impact

Given the severity of the fire and the number of people involved it was remarkable that there were no fatalities and apparently only one serious injury:

“Considering the pressure and great extent of the crowd very few accidents occurred, and those with one or two exceptions were of a slight nature. One gentleman, a commercial traveller for a London type house, met with a severe casualty. It appears that he got up on a sort of shed near Pipe-lane, on which were a number of people; after being there a short time, the tiled roof of the shed fell in with those who were upon it and his leg was unfortunately broken in two places. PC 144, was

also injured, and got a sprained ankle through his leg having been jammed between two pieces of timber.”

There was significant damage to property in the yard:

“On visiting the spot on the morning after the occurrence, we were surprised at the appearance it presented; for when we recollected the fearful extent and progress of the flames; on the previous evening, we could hardly believe that the place presented such comparatively slight traces of so destructive a casualty. But on going over the ground and making some enquiries, we found that on spots where there appeared but a few half-burnt logs and an inconsiderable heap of charcoal, the timber had been piled up so high as twenty feet, and had been totally consumed by the violence of the fire, which left scarcely a trace behind of the ponderous planks. At the place where the fire commenced, and where barrels of tar were consumed, heaps of iron hoops, the only portion of the barrels consumed, were to be seen; and even the great iron tanks, massive and stout as they were, were very much injured. In the centre of those the fire had actually penetrated through the thick plates of iron, and melted a great portion of it, so that the centre part had sunk in considerably.”

It also seems that the railway companies were fortunate both that the fire did not seriously delay the railway construction works, or cause them financial loss, the insurance companies were the only ones to suffer in this respect.

“The property destroyed, the value of which has been estimated at about 10,000/, belonged almost exclusively, to the Bristol and Exeter Company; but, fortunately for the shareholders, the Directors about six weeks since, very prudently insured for 30,000/ so that the loss will not fall on the company. More fortunate still, the accident will not retard the opening of the Bristol and Exeter Railway, as fixed for the 31st inst. A few days previous to the fire, eight trow loads of timber had been sent to various stations on the line, which, with a quantity placed during the previous 24 hours in the sulphate of copper tanks, will suffice to complete the permanent way from Bristol to Bridgwater”

“It was reported at the time that the timber belonged to the contractor, Mr Hennet. That was not the case. It was the company’s and Mr Hennett was only so far connected with it that he was entrusted with its inspection while undergoing the process of preparation.”

[George Hennet](#) (a contractor working for Brunel) was also involved in the very early days of the tar distillery at Crews Hole, which we believe was established only two years or so after this fire. The new location was most likely needed because as the Bristol & Exeter Railway neared completion the land at Temple Meads was needed for the good depot.

All quotes taken from reports in the Bristol Mercury or Bristol Times and Mirror both published on Saturday 1st May 1841

Newspaper reports reviewed via the British Newspaper Archive
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