

Glimpses of the Past

by George Toms

No. 20 'Fire'

Mercifully, there have been more false alarms than actual fires at the Falcon Works over the years. Occasionally the motor generator sets of the Test Department have set off the smoke alarms and provide the fire services with some action. The Fire Brigade was hard-pressed in 1882 when part of the original railway frontage of the works caught fire during the early hours of Wednesday 13th June. The LOUGHBOROUGH ADVERTISER reported the events the following day:

"About two o'clock yesterday (Wednesday) morning a destructive fire broke out on the premises of the Falcon Engine and Tram Car Works (Limited), in this town, resulting in damage estimated at nearly £3,000. It appears that about two o'clock a signalman on the railway observed the fire, which seems to have originated in the stores, and at once gave an alarm. In a very short time a number of workmen were on the spot, uniting in their efforts to extinguish the flames, which had evidently laid a firm hold of the building, and were spreading with great rapidity to the adjoining offices. Indeed so thoroughly had the fire enveloped the stores that within a comparatively few minutes after the discovery the roof of the stores fell in with a terrific crash, burying materials and fittings which were in stock.

The rapidity with which the flames travelled may be accounted for by the fact the stores were full of wood shelves on which the materials were systematically arranged, and these adding fuel to the flames would, however expeditious the helpers might have been, even had they been there to give their aid before the fire had got so firm a hold of the building, have rendered it impossible to rescue much of the property.

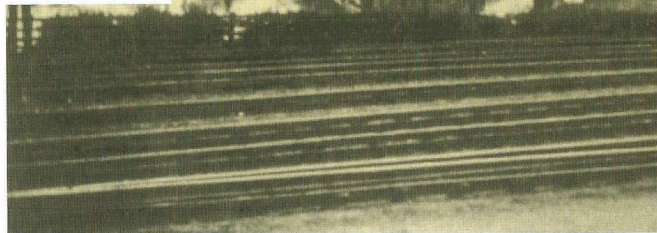
The fall of the roof carried with it the flooring of the second storey and dragged down part of the roof of the adjoining buildings, thus leaving the walls in a precarious and dangerous condition. The flames, directed by the wind, which was blowing in a northerly direction, burnt through the door of the offices, and at one time threatened to completely destroy them. But so vigorous were the efforts of the large number of helpers, under the direction of Mr Wootton, the manager of the works, that notwithstanding the short time that elapsed before the Fire Brigade arrived, under Supt. Blunt, after receiving their summons, the fury of the flames was greatly subdued.

The members of the Fire Brigade, on arriving at the scene of action, immediately laid lengths of hose to the Railway company's pond, and lost no time in playing upon the fire. It was ascertained that the roofs of the buildings which adjoined the stores had become ignited, and these were first extinguished.

In the meantime endeavours were made to save as much property from the offices as possible. Many of the books were saved through the windows, and the offices were tolerably well cleared of their contents. Fortunately beyond a severe scorching the offices were not damaged.

The Fire Brigade continued to play upon the fire until five or six o'clock, when all the danger was past. But subsequently some of the standing walls had to be demolished so as to avoid accidents.

The cause of the fire is at present a matter of conjecture. That it originated in the stores there can be little doubt. From enquiries we ascertain that there were no flues near it. But there was a boiler in an adjoining shop, and yet the probability of the conflagration being traced to that is removed by the fact that the fire burnt towards it, and not away



The fire rages during the evening of 30th July 1921, as seen from the Midland Railway goods yard.
Courtesy: Dave Dover of Reprint.

from it as would otherwise naturally be expected.

Mr Wootton was in the premises until about half-past eight on Tuesday night, and when he left did not observe any indications of a light in the stores, although it is, we understand, possible that a candle may accidentally have been left burning.

Most of the property will be useless for work, the greater part of it having been damaged by the heat, the stores had only recently been replenished, so that the loss will undoubtedly be very heavy. The building is, we understand, insured."

The rebuilt buildings affected by the fire were eventually demolished in the 1890s to make way for those which stand today. It is thought that they were situated near 18 Shop Despatch, between the present day Main Test, MEP Test and the railway.

Unfortunately, no photographs exist of this fire or its aftermath, but a later fire did not escape the attention of a photographer. This started during the evening of Saturday 30th July 1921, in the wood shed alongside the railway on the site of the present day Coil Shop, Three-Storey Office Block and Old Foundry Stores.

The corrugated iron wood shed, 240ft by 60ft, was utilised for drying and storing considerable stocks of timber for the adjacent tramcar and bus body building section. It had a sawmill at one end, where the Old Foundry Stores now stands.

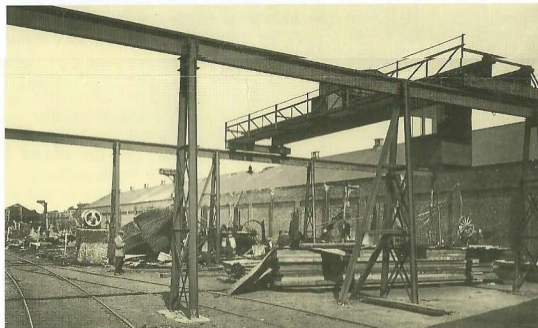
Shortly after half-past six in the evening two railway employees noticed flames rising from the sawmill end and immediately informed the watchman, who gave the alarm. First to turn out was the works fire brigade and then the Loughborough brigade was summoned. The latter came with a motor pump and on reaching the works it was found that the whole shed was well alight. A strong breeze fanned the flames in the direction of the Car Shop (today's 12 Shop) and further alarm was caused when the roof of this shop caught fire in several places. The automatic sprinkler system did not activate because the source was external, but valiant efforts by firemen met with success and by nine o'clock the Car Shop was out of danger. A telegraph pole on the railway also caught fire and some anxiety was felt for the safety of the railway warehouse on the opposite side of the tracks, but a jet from a hydrant saved it.

Meanwhile, the wood shed, by this time a mere shell, provided numerous sightseers with the spectacle of a monster bonfire. Next, the Midland Railway's fire train appeared from Derby, requested by the station master when the Company's property was threatened. With that threat gone it turned its attention to the wood shed, applying three water jets into the flames. Even these reinforcements were insufficient to quell the conflagration and Mr Walker, the Borough Surveyor, called up the Leicester Fire Brigade. Two motor pumps and crews quickly arrived on the scene. It was fortuitous – the Loughborough motor pump suffered a mishap and was taken out of action. The Borough steam pump was stationed by



Probably taken the following morning when dampening down was taking place, this view was taken from the Rempstone foot-path overbridge. Nearest the camera are the remains of the sawmill with a very solemn motor on its concrete plinth, while the gaunt roof supports of the wood shed remain amid the debris.

A similar, but later, view taken from ground level. Note the repairs being made to the Car Shop (centre).



By 11th July 1927 a new shed had been erected. This has been better known as the Coil Shop over the ensuing years, much extended and transformed from the original corrugated iron structure shown here. Also of interest are the preparations underway for building the three-storey office block next to the end. This new building was originally built as a two-storey structure.

Glebe Street and worked well with several lines of hose reaching 300 yards from the canal to the fire.

Although almost two hours had passed, the reinforcements soon made their presence felt, and the veritable furnace was gradually tamed. Flames, red hot girders and corrugated iron were eventually brought under control by the combined force of water poured in at the rate of 1,000 gallons a minute. The Leicester contingent left the scene during the early hours of Sunday morning, the Midland Railway Brigade later, but the local men were on duty until Monday morning.

The damage was extensive. The wood shed completely gutted, its stock of timber turned to ashes. Some tramcars in the Car Shop were slightly damaged by water. Casualties among the fire crews were Fireman Peaty who was overcome by smoke and fell from his position. He was taken to hospital and allowed home to Frederick Street after treatment. Fireman Jim Collins was forced to give up, but returned after hospital attention to resume his duties.

For the Midland Railway, only train services were disrupted by the hoses crossing its lines, but for Brush it was a disaster – the seasoned timber stock could not be replaced easily.

After the debris was cleared, the site was slow in being redeveloped and a new timber store was built on the Meadows side of the Falcon Works, close to the present day garage; indeed some buildings were developed from them and are in use today. No-one stated what was the cause of the fire, but the new shed was well out of range of sparks emanating from Midland Railway locomotives!

If you have any interesting old photographs or memories of Brush, contact George Toms, preferably by post c/o Test Department.