StratFire: the fires of 1594 and 1595

Of the fires in 1594 and 1595, that of May 1594 is the better documented.

'Stratford-upon-Avon… was burnt by mischance of fire above 100 houses and barns which were lost and burnt besides two thousand pounds worth in corn, barley and malt… The original of which fire came by the negligence of an old woman put in trust to tend the fire of a brew house and fell asleep...'

It was reported that the fire started at nine o'clock in the morning and continued until six o'clock that evening *'with great force, by reason the wind that day was somewhat big'.* This was despite men of the town moving their *'stuff'* out of their houses into the middle of the streets and to fields.

In line with practice at the time, Stratford Council met to decide which counties to visit to plead for financial assistance towards rebuilding costs, and who to send to collect this money. It's not recorded why particular counties were chosen, but most were in the Midlands – Oxfordshire, Staffordshire, Gloucestershire, Shropshire, Worcestershire, Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Northamptonshire. Others, however, were as far afield as Lincolnshire, Berkshire and the City of London.

As for those authorised to collect money, might it be that they weren't doing this for the public good, but rather because they'd suffered personally as a result of the fires? Certainly, judging by the collectors we know about, that's how it looks.

It was agreed that **Richard Quiney** (son of Adrian who had suffered loss in 1582) would collect in Northamptonshire, **Daniel Baker** and **Edward Maunde** in Staffordshire, **George Badger** and **Francis Smith** in Berkshire and Oxfordshire, **William Parsons** in Gloucestershire and **Adrian Sturley** in Derbyshire and Leicestershire. Initially, **Thomas Barber**, landlord of The Bear at Bridgefoot (not known to have suffered damage) was to travel to Worcestershire, but he was replaced by **William Wilson** who *had* suffered fire damage to his house in Henley Street.

In no time, £70 had been collected, set against some £31 in expenses. **Richard Quiney**, whose family are known to have suffered severely, collected by far the largest sum raised – some £36, later reduced to £22 to allow for his expenses. It is something of a surprise that Quiney's companion on his very successful visit to Northamptonshire was **John Sadler**, a leading maltster, since there is no evidence of fire damage at his house in Rother Street or at his mills. Perhaps the two families were close. **Richard Dixon**, alias Waterman, who also collected with Quiney, was a less savoury character. As victuallers, he and his wife were frequently fined for infringements of the licensing laws and, some years later, his son Thomas was stabbed to death by one of his father's customers on the site of the Falcon Inn.

While there is evidence that **Daniel Baker** suffered fire damage which it took him a number of years to rebuild on the site of what is now No. 32 High Street, it is unclear why he was paired with **Edward Maunde**, a prominent maltster who suffered no losses. But possibly it was because he was the stepfather of William Smith, with a disputed interest in a house in High Street (on the site of Nos 33-34 and next door to Baker), which might have been damaged.

From 1571, **George Badger** – allocated with Francis Smith to Berkshire and Oxfordshire – had owned a property next door to John Shakespeare's in Henley Street. By 1595, he was living in a house (rented from Stratford Corporation) in Sheep Street, not known to have been affected. Perhaps he subsequently declined the role, since he is not reported as having collected any money.

The position of **Francis Smith** was different. His father was the tenant of a Corporation house and shop in Middle Row which ran down the centre of Bridge Street – premises described as 'part ruinous'. While this does not establish with certainty that the building was fire-damaged, the fact that Francis was immediately appointed as a collector, and went on to raise funds, suggests that it had been. In exchange for undertaking to 'build newe', he was eventually (1612) granted an extended lease on the house and shop.

William Parsons' circumstances were very different. He had lived in a grand house on the corner of Wood Street and Rother Street since at least 1580. He was one of Stratford's leading citizens, appointed as capital burgess in 1579, promoted to the role of alderman in 1588, and served as bailiff from 1590-91 and as chief alderman in 1592-93. While there is no direct evidence of damage to his main house, there were large unfilled spaces nearby which the Corporation leased to new tenants on condition that they rebuild the properties. In 1596, Parsons took on the lease of the site of a house in Ely Street, with a covenant to rebuild. But, because he was beset with financial difficulties at the time, he was unable to meet the terms of the lease.

Adrian Sturley became involved as a collector through his son's father-in-law, having been appointed executor of the man's will (which related to the lease of a house in Wood Street).

About the fire of May 1595, there is less information.

It would seem that this was confined to properties in Henley Street, Wood Street, High Street, Chapel Street and Bridge Street. A few months later, it was recorded that – following both fires – the number of properties which had suffered damage now stood at 200 (almost the town's entire housing stock). However, not all of these needed to be entirely rebuilt, and houses next door to one another were not always equally affected. Of the estimated total of £12,000 worth of damage, some was probably to goods stored in barns and to orchards and gardens. But it can't be ruled out that there was some degree of exaggeration in this figure.

The Corporation was, of course, not the only freeholder in the town to hold properties which suffered fire damage. But there is little recorded information about non-Corporation tenements. This makes it difficult to establish how much was raised from collections in the months following the 1595 fire. Furthermore, collectors were allowed expenses, such as the hire of a horse at £5 for 100 days, which considerably reduced the total. But records show the net gain as being only £34 3s 4d, which went no way towards meeting the estimated total cost of £12,000.