StratFire: Stratford Corporation's response to fires in the town

During the Reformation, two Stratford institutions were suppressed – the Guild of the Holy Cross and Stratford-upon-Avon College – and income derived from these sources transferred to the newly-established Corporation. This income came from leases on around 75 freehold properties and a share of parish tithes, amounting to some £95 a year. In exchange, this conferred certain responsibilities on the Corporation relating to support for the school, the vicar's salary and provision for 24 almshouse residents. This left nothing for the provision of relief in the face of adversity, such as that caused by fires in the town. Those in 1594 and 1595 appear to have been confined to High Street, Chapel Street, Ely Street, Bridge Street, Wood Street and Henley Street.

The Corporation was concerned to see that, if required, its own property should be restored and, in 1599, ordered that a survey of damage to these buildings should be carried out. Of these, 24 – one-third of the total - were reported as fire-damaged. Its preferred method of handling this was to ask the tenants of damaged properties to surrender their existing leases in exchange for a new, longer lease at the old rent, but requiring them to bear the cost of rebuilding within a specified period of time.

From the late sixteenth century, a standard method of dealing with local disasters such as fires was to issue briefs, read out in the local parish church, which were then taken around the country pleading for financial assistance towards rebuilding costs. For this, authority was sought through a petition to the Crown. Stratford Council would then meet to discuss which counties were to be visited to collect money, and who the collectors should be.

In 1594, it's not recorded why particular counties were chosen for collections. Unlike Stratford, not all counties had a lot of timber buildings, so some were unlikely to suffer the same problem of fire damage.

It's from a further fire which broke out in 1614 that we're best able to understand the methods adopted by the collectors. Then, rather than the Corporation, it appears that the claimants organised the appointment of their own collectors, arranged a timetable for the collections, and agreed how the money was later distributed.