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BARNSTAPLE

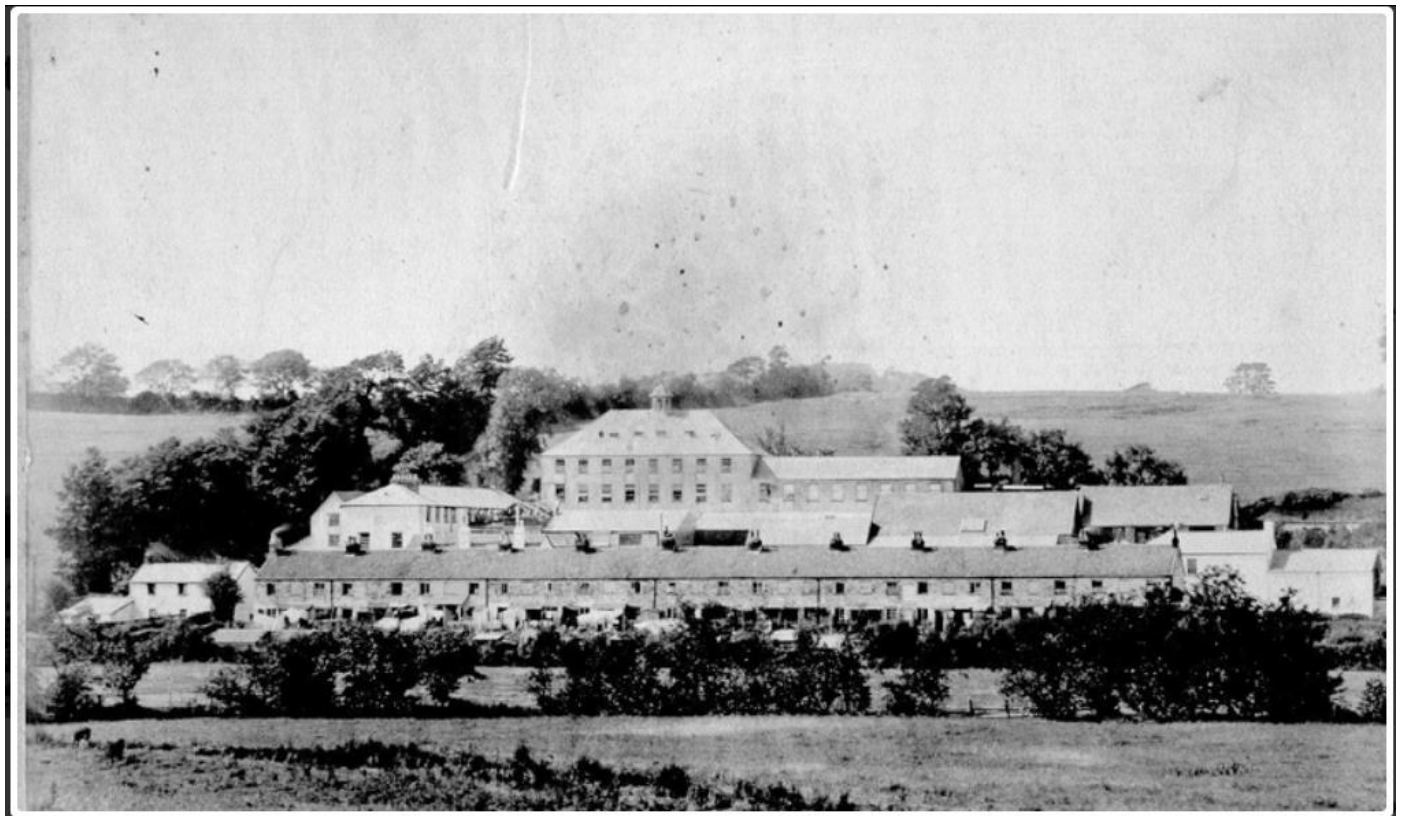
GREAT FIRE at RAWLEIGH FACTORY

TOTAL DESTRUCTION of the EAST WING of the BUILDING.

GREAT LOSS OF PROPERTY.

There are, perhaps, few towns of size and importance which have enjoyed such an immunity from serious outbreaks of fire during the past quarter of century as Barnstaple. Until the present year, no conflagration of any extent has occurred within the borough since the year 1849, when the extensive tan-yards belonging to Mr Samuel Adams, in Bear-street, were entirely destroyed. Several fires have broken out in different parts of the borough within the past ten years, but by prompt effort they have been extinguished without any serious damage being done. The first extensive fire of recent times occurred few months since when the Toy Manufactory, at Bradiford, belonging to Mr Manley, was burnt the ground, and have now the painful duty to record similar catastrophe—the total destruction of portion of Rawleigh Furniture Factory. The beautiful valley of Rawleigh lies, as our local readers are aware, the north-east side of the borough, and approached a point where the boundaries of

the parishes of Barnstaple and Pilton meet. At the entrance of the valley Pilton House, with its adjacent Park, the residence Charles H. Williams, Esq., M.P., and following for about a quarter mile the bank of the river Yeo which flows through the valley, the little hamlet of Rawleigh is reached. The Factory is immediately adjacent to the property of Mr. Williams, and is situated the foot of Rawleigh Park. A manufactory has existed Rawleigh ever since 1774, when a portion of the present building was erected. In that year an attempt was made to introduce the manufacture of woollen goods into the town, or, rather, to revive manufactory which had been carried on on small scale for some time previously. To this was soon added the manufacture of cotton goods, and two extensive mills were erected and brought into operation on scale sufficiently large to furnish employment to thousand persons, including ninety woolcombers. A great part of the business done here was in the fabric of " chains." Woollen cloths, calicoes, and what were locally known as Rawleigh flannels (which were composed of a cotton chain with a weft of woollen) were made to a considerable extent. A number cotton spinning machines were also introduced. A brisk business continued to be carried on until after the breaking out of the war which succeeded the French Revolution, when



it declined very materially; and in 1795 a fire, supposed to have been the work of incendiary, entirely consumed the cotton mill with its machinery, which led the abandonment of the concern. After this date also the woollen trade, which at one time was so extensive, was confined to a single manufacturer who made blankets and serges, principally for exportation. A manufactory of cotton hose was commenced 1796, but it ceased on the demise of the projector, about 20 years afterwards, and was never again revived to any large extent. In 1821 the building which remained uninjured at Rawleigh (the portion of the Factory which has for the second time escaped destruction) was taken by some gentlemen from Nottingham and Derby, and converted into a manufactory for bobbin net, which was carried on on a somewhat extensive scale. A dissolution of partnership took place between the proprietors of this concern, however, about four years from its commencement, which led to the establishment of a new one in Vicarage-lane; and the individual who set this manufactory on foot having one also at Derby, the little town which sprang up around it received that appellation. The business at Rawleigh again declined, and for a time the works were entirely closed. The manufacture of woollen shawls and other articles was afterwards carried in the same building by the late Mr Frederick Maunder, but this proved equally unsuccessful, and about fifteen years ago the Factory was again closed, and remained so for several years. About six years ago, the building was taken by Messrs Shapland and Petter, who found their workshops in Bear-street not sufficiently commodious for their increasing business. At the time of their removal Messrs Shapland and Petter principally carried on one branch their present business, viz., the manufacture of mouldings; but on their removal to Rawleigh the manufacture of furniture became an important department; and by the enterprise of the proprietors the business greatly developed. Of its extent some idea may be formed from the fact that about a hundred hands are regularly employed at the present time. The articles turned out of hand consist of entire suites of furniture, in every description of wood, marble mantel-pieces, mouldings, beading, and general fittings. Large quantities of goods are sent to London, Bristol,

Manchester, Liverpool, Scotland, Ireland, and many other parts. The present Factory consists of a square block of buildings. The main building is on the north side, at the foot of Rawleigh Park, and consists of three sections. The first section, which is the largest of the three, consists of four stories, and rises to a considerable height. This is no doubt the original woollen factory which was undisturbed by the fire of 1795, since it bears evidence of being a complete building in itself. This part of the building is occupied almost entirely by machinery and the workshops of the men employed the cabinet-making department. The middle section is a somewhat smaller building, and is not quite so lofty, having only three stories. It is, however, of considerable extent, and is used for the purpose of storing and packing the goods as they come out of the workmen's hands. The last section consists (or rather consisted, for it was in this portion of the building that the fire originated) of the engine house, in which was a large boiler used to generate the steam necessary for drying purposes. Over the engine house were drying rooms, in which mouldings were placed after they came from the mill adjoining. The steam was conveyed from the boiler to these rooms by means of pipes. Immediately adjoining, on the east side, was the wing of the building which was yesterday totally destroyed. It was chiefly occupied by saws, circular and perpendicular, moulding and other machines. The main floor of the mill was eight feet from the ground, and supported on brick pillars, and underneath quantity of pine in blocks was stored for drying previous to being cut up for mouldings. Underneath the floor was also the shafting by which the machinery above was driven. The machinery consisted a rack and bench for circular saws, perpendicular saws, planing machines, self-acting bench for circular saws, moulding machines, and grinding stones. In a top storey of the same building was a large quantity of flooring the order for which had been executed on the previous Saturday. Behind this building were five cottages (which have been completely destroyed), and the Nursery of Mr. Ireland. On the west side of the building are extensive offices and stores, at the rear of which is one of the three large water wheels which supply the motive power. On the south side is the residence of one of the

partners, and, adjoining the saw mills on the eastern side, the marble works and sawpit. Parallel with these, on the other side of the road, stands a row of twenty-two cottages, belonging to the Factory, chiefly occupied by the workmen and their families. As we have stated, the fire originated in the boiler-house. During the morning Mr. Gauntlett, who is the chief manufacturer of mouldings for the firm, was at work with his brother Arthur, in the mill, the one being engaged at the sawing bench, and the other at the moulding machine. At about quarter to ten Arthur Gauntlett noticed a curl of smoke proceeding from the furnace. By way of parenthesis, it should be stated that at the end of the mill there was a gallery about 9 feet high and 14 feet wide, which extended across the whole width of the building. This communicated with one of the drying rooms by means of another landing or gallery, and this led into the "stoke hole" as it was called by the workmen, where the fuel for the boiler was kept. In this drying room, as we have already stated, there was a quantity of yellow pine prepared for moulding, stacked and ready for drying. When Gauntlett reached the gallery he was met by a large body of flame coming out of the "stoke hole." He was compelled to beat a retreat, and he rushed back into the mill, and made his escape from the building. In an instant the mill became enveloped in a sheet of flame and the Gauntletts, with a few others, ran into the building to endeavour to get out some of the timber. The flames spread, however, with extraordinary rapidity, and before any effort could be made to save the building the whole of the interior was in a blaze. The rafters soon caught fire, and the fall of the roof was the work of only a minute or two. In the meantime, Mr. Arthur Shapland sent off a messenger to the town, and the West England engine, under the efficient management of Mr. Giles Carter, was most promptly on the spot, accompanied by a number of the borough police. It became evident, however, that the flames had completely taken hold of the building, and efforts were directed to saving the rest of the premises from destruction. The whole stock of timber soon became one burning mass, and the sight which the building presented was grand and imposing in the extreme. The flames shot up to an immense height, and the red, lurid glare could be seen for miles round. Hundreds

were soon attracted to the spot from every quarter, and several brave and intrepid men plunged boldly into the thick of the fire, and strained every muscle in their gallant efforts to second the attempts of the firemen, the police, and the workmen to arrest the progress of the devastating element. As soon as the intelligence of the fire became known Messrs Miller, Bros., kindly stopped their Factory, and sent a large body of men down to the spot. The men in the employ of Mr William Gibbings, coach builder and Mr Furse, machinist, were also kindly dispatched to Rawleigh to lend any assistance in their power. Capt. Williams, M.P., was early on the spot and his brave and untiring efforts to save the building from total destruction were the theme of general admiration. The police, who have generally the reputation of not being available in case of an emergency, were not found wanting on this occasion. Mr Superintendent Blanchard and Serjeant Songhurst were soon on the scene, and worked with a will, and six other members of the force soon followed. When the extent of the fire became known a second engine was sent for, and Mr Hicks arrived with the borough engine, which was of invaluable service at the rear of the building. Among those who were foremost in rendering help, besides those we have already named, were Messrs. Frederick Symons (who was one of the first to arrive), William Gould, Thomas May, John Pulsford, John Bridgman, Henry Moore, John Fear, Anthony Nutt, J. B. Gordon, W. Gammon, jun., W. Fisher, Sydney Bridgman, W. Symons, jun., H. Vellacott, Evans, C. Rafarel, &c, &c. Such was the inflammable nature of the material that all efforts to subdue the fire seemed futile. Columns of flame shot up into the air, and hanging thickly over all a cloud of crimson smoke, the whole encircled by myriads of fiery sparks which fell in showers in all directions. Fortunately, there was very little wind, and to this must be to some extent attributed the safety of the remaining buildings. What saved the Factory from total annihilation was, however, the fact that there was a fire proof partition between the engine house and drying rooms, and the centre section of the building. At the commencement of the fire hundreds of men and women were engaged in carrying out timber and furniture into the road adjoining, but as the fire increased the heat emitted from the

burning building became so intense that it was almost impossible to stand within twenty-five yards without being scorched. Gallant efforts, however, were made under the superintendence of Mr W. Gould and others to get out the large baulks of timber. Several horses were on the spot, and a considerable quantity was got out of the yard. At half-past ten, notwithstanding the efforts of the firemen, the roof of the engine-house ignited, and the whole building was soon in a sheet of flame. The greatest consternation now prevailed lest the fire should be communicated to the adjoining stores. There was also considerable apprehension lest the boiler should burst, but fortunately there was very little water in it, and it was gradually eaten out by the devouring element. The flames seemed also to threaten the cottages on the south side, and the women inhabiting them became panic stricken, and removed the whole of their household furniture to the bottom of the gardens at the rear. Here a great number remained until the fire had been got under, and the cottages were no longer threatened with destruction by the devouring flames. The danger anticipated was heightened by the fact that the marble works which abutted on the road were immediately contiguous to the mills. The large and costly blocks of marble, some of them ten feet square, were got out with considerable difficulty and placed in a place of safety, not, however, without much damage being done. This being done the roof, which was covered with a highly inflammable material, was speedily stripped off. The five cottages on the eastern, behind the mills, were next caught, and it was soon evident that they would share the general destruction. Three of the cottages were used as dwelling houses, and the other two as stores for marble. They one by one succumbed to the fury of the flames. One of the houses was occupied by a single woman named Anne Beer, who earned a livelihood by straw-bonnet making. She had occupied the cottage for more than thirty years past, and it was most distressing to see her anguish when the intelligence was communicated to her that of her whole little stock of household furniture only a couple of blankets had been saved. Some benevolent ladies acted the part of the Good Samaritan, and saw that she was properly cared for. The other two cottages were occupied by Mr J.

Rottenberry, for many years foreman to Mr Arnoll, confectioner, and his son. The father had entered upon possession about a week previously, and the son only about three days. A portion of the furniture was got out of the windows, but was greatly damaged. We may state incidentally that a subscription list has been opened in behalf these unfortunate sufferers, generously headed by Captain Williams, M.P., with £5. Any donations may be left at our office on their behalf. The entire row of cottages were entirely gutted, and nothing is left of them but a heap of ruins. It was with the greatest difficulty that the adjoining premises of Mr Ireland, nurseryman, were saved. At the back of the cottages Mr Ireland has a large greenhouse which is usually filled with stove plants. These had all to be removed to different parts of the nursery for safety. The intense heat of the brick work shivered the glass in many parts to atoms, and greatly damaged the wood-work, but it was saved from destruction. The dwelling house adjoining also caught several times, and the whole of the furniture was removed to a place of safety. The borough engine was judiciously brought play, and a portion of the roof was stripped off, which had the effect of preventing the fire spreading. The most exciting scene, however, was yet to come. The fire had now taken full possession of the engine house, and the shells of the two buildings presented the appearance of seething caldrons of flame. The efforts of the firemen seemed utterly powerless; the material burnt like tinder, and the only hope of saving the building seemed to be to prevent the fire spreading to the stores. Hundreds of spectators thronged the acclivity at the rear of the Factory, and the various eminences in the vicinity from which a sight of the burning buildings could be commanded. Here and there, scattered in endless confusion, were upwards of eighty thousand pieces of moulding which had been thrown out of the windows for safety. How to save the main building was the all-absorbing consideration. Those acquainted with the building felt perfect confidence in the fact that the partition wall was fire-proof, and, therefore, the chief danger lay in the ignition the roof. Captain Williams, however, hit upon the expedient of diverting the mill leat at the rear of the building and allowing the stream to run into the engine house. A corps of active sappers

and miners was soon found and the idea carried into execution, the gallant captain himself standing up to his waist in water superintending the operations. For some time this immense volume of water appeared to have no effect upon the burning mass, and the wall was only kept from becoming red hot by the constant play of water upon it from the engines. At this point Mr John Fear (from the Lace Factory) and man named Home, of Pilton, courageously mounted the roof, and got as near the end as the intense heat would permit them. By this means the first appearance of fire in the roof was guarded against. When the timbers first fired Capt. Williams also mounted the roof, and assisted in unslating a portion of it. In this way the fire was kept from spreading, and by dint of almost superhuman exertions it was gradually "got under." Several hours elapsed, however, before the flames were effectually conquered, and the engines continued to play on the ruins up to a later hour. The value of the mouldings and timber in the factory was estimated at about £3,000, and that of the furniture, veneering, &c, at several thousands more. What amount of damage has been done it is impossible accurately to estimate, but, making an approximate calculation, the stock destroyed and injured will amount to between £3,000 and £4,000, and the buildings destroyed to, perhaps, £2,500 more. The premises are the property of W. C. Hodge, Devonport, and the bulk of the buildings, including the engine house, drying rooms, and cottages, are, we understand, insured in the West of England and London Offices. The sawing-mills on the eastern side, which have been destroyed, have been erected by Messrs. Shapland and Petter since they have become the lessees of the premises, and this, it is said, is not insured. The stock, however, is insured to the extent of £4,500 in the Liverpool and London and Globe Offices. The origin of the fire is not accurately known, but it is believed to have originated in the carelessness of the boy who had charge of the "stoke hole" in allowing shavings and light wood to lie scattered on the floor. It is supposed that the flues were not clean and that the combustion of the foul air drove the flame out of the furnace door and thus ignited the light wood. As evening approached the scene presented was of a most desolate description. Nothing remained of the

eastern wing of the building but a charred heap of ruins. The remains of the machinery showed the intense heat which prevailed the drums being melted and the shafts bent completely down. Valuable articles of furniture lay here and there, and the material saved from the fire was scattered about in heaps, some partially burnt and some saturated with water, whilst a portion of the furniture saved from the cottages was huddled together in an adjoining field. Numbers visited the spot up to a late hour. By this unfortunate event a considerable number of hands will be thrown out of employment.

The majority of the men employed the Factory worked with a will to save the property of their employers; but we regret to be obliged to add that others evinced a culpable indifference, and did not care to lend a hand even to prevent the destruction of the Factory.

Only one accident occurred throughout the day, and that not immediately connected with the fire. As Mr T. P. Seldon was rapidly riding towards Barnstaple to give some orders for refreshments for the men, a woman passing across the road was knocked down, and received a severe bruise and cut in the head. She was attended to by Dr. Budd, who happened to be on the spot, and taken to her home, but is since reported as doing well.