

A GREAT FIRE AT BRYNMAWR IN 1912.

In 1912 the Gwalia boot and shoe factory at the top of Beaufort Street, Brynmawr, burned down and would eventually be rebuilt in Factory Road. The following report of the event appeared in a local newspaper:

“On Saturday night a terrible fire broke out at Brynmawr and resulted in the entire destruction of two large business premises and the partial ruin of a third. Between five and six o’clock in the evening an explosion of gas took place at the New Castle licensed premises and caused considerable commotion, but few would have imagined that a few hours later would furnish them with a greater sensation. Being “pay Saturday night” there was a large number of visitors in the town and the greatest consternation was occasioned when it became known about eight o’clock that fire had broken out at Messrs Morgan Brothers boot factory in Beaufort Street. About this time Mr. J.S. Sandbrook, manager of an iron-mongery business opposite the factory saw signs of fire in the machine room on the second floor and at once proceeded to the police station but found that the entire staff were away on duty. Returning to the scene he found that in less than 15 minutes the whole place was in flames. The police had assembled and the fire, fanned by a strong north-west wind, was likely to spread to the Griffin Hotel and the offices of Mr. J.G. Bishop, solicitor, at the top of Beaufort Street. The Brynmawr Fire Brigade, now warned of the outbreak, soon arrived but at this stage a sad mishap occurred. Mr Alex McNeil, landlord of the Griffin Hotel, no doubt anxious for the safety of this extensive premises, mounted a ladder with the view of gaining the roof of the adjoining premises of Mr Bishop and cutting off the fire when the ladder broke and he fell headlong to the ground. He was conveyed home in an unconscious state and Dr. Lowe, who was called, certified the patient was suffering from concussion of the brain. Meanwhile the flames spread with remarkable rapidity and by 8.45 pm. the interior of the factory presented the appearance of a furnace, consequent no doubt upon the extensive woodwork and large amount of leather in stock. The Brynmawr Fire Brigade, under Capt. Webb. were now doing their utmost with the scanty supply of water at their disposal, their efforts being directed to confining the flames to the building in which the fire originated. This, however, was soon found to be hopeless. The fire extended itself to the warehouses in the rear, threatening to envelope all the neighbourhood and the householders accordingly set to work to remove their goods

with all possible haste. A wire, and special messenger on horseback, were dispatched to the Nantyglo and Blaina Fire Brigade. In a short time the brigade was got together and proceeded to the scene of conflagration where they arrived about 9.30, pm. Provided with ladder escapes only knowing from experience of an intense fire at three years ago at Brynmawr that their appliances did not fit the Brynmawr hydrants. The local employees of the London & Northwestern Railway Co. under Stationmaster Kavanagh, also appeared and rendered valuable assistance but all efforts were evidently handicapped through an insufficient supply. The Ebbw Vale Fire Brigade under Captain W. Sandbrook, who had also been apprised of the outbreak, arrived in about three quarters of an hour, their appliance being greeted with cheers. Their appliance proved equally useless under the circumstances, and this brigade turned their attention to seconding the efforts of those already assembled to prevent the fire spreading down one side of Beaufort Street. A wire was dispatched from Brynmawr Railway Station to Abergavenny about nine o'clock and with all haste the Abergavenny Brigade proceeded up the steep incline to Brynmawr where they arrived about 10.30 pm. Their large engine was soon got into position and manipulated with good effect upon the adjoining premises of Messrs H. Connop and Son, Provision Merchants, which was now being fast consumed. This was certainly the most effective appliance brought to bear upon the burning pile but even then pumping had to be occasionally stopped to allow the cistern to refill. Just before this a large portion of the frontage of the boot factory fell upon the pavement, the wooden supports having completely burned out. It was now evident that Messrs Cannop's premises could not escape, the fire having caught in the roof of a warehouse at the rear. This and the upper portion of the front soon went, and the scene which followed the ignition of the front shop beggars description. Herein was a large quantity of spirits, hams and equally inflammable goods and it seemed from the roaring furnace within the building that the next house and shop belonging to Mrs. Fessemeyer, Jeweller and furnishing dealer, could hardly escape. The united brigades concentrated their energies to cut off the fire at this point, the chief damage to Mrs Fessemeyer's premises being in the upper portion of the house from water and the axes of the firemen. By midnight it was evident that the fire had been got under control and it gradually subsided. But all day on Sunday water would be played on smoldering heaps of debris.

EXTENT OF THE DAMAGE:

The amount of damage caused by the fire is estimated at from £15,000 to about £20,000, part only covered by insurance. Both Messrs Morgan Bros boot factory and Messrs Connop's business were heavily stocked at the time. The former premises were entirely ruined and it was only after energetic effort (stocks of?) the latter was practically saved intact. While the fire was at its height and after the factory had been consumed, Mr. Gwilym Morgan DC, senior partner of the firm Morgan Brothers, arrived by the 9.30. pm. train from Bristol whither he had gone today to the leather market. He was met by his brother James Morgan C.C. who conveyed the sad intelligence to him. Both Messrs Morgan Bros and Mr. H. Connop have secured temporary premises for the re-opening of their businesses.

During the night our reporter met Mr. G. Morgan who stated that twelve months ago the premises were extended, and new plant laid to the extent of nearly £800, and consequently the stock had been increased considerably to meet the growing business. There were at least four tons of leather upon the premises at the time of the fire, and about 4000 pairs of boots. Over 10 hands will be thrown out of employment. The loss in this case is only partly covered by insurance. There is no clue to the origin of the fire as the place was locked up at midday as usual on Saturday when everything appeared safe. During the progress of the fire the safe containing the books etc was recovered, together with the documents etc in the adjoining office of Mr. J. Bishop, Magistrates' Clerk.

With regard to Messrs Connop & Son's place, this too is partially insured. Mr. T. Winfield, Manager, informed our representative that the first intimation was received from Albert Fessemeyer but there was little hope as a north-west breeze was blowing. Mr. Connop's wife and family – the little boy being dangerously ill at the time- were removed to The Laurels, Nantyglo, the residence of Mr. James Phillips JP, Mrs. Connop's father. The business was known as one of the best grocery and Italian warehouse establishments on the hills and had been carried on by the present proprietor for the past 16 years, his father preceding him with a business record of over 20 years. The papers and books were saved.

*The next building was that of Mrs A Fessemeyer, jeweller, where the fire was **got under control** before much damage was done to the stock, unless from water, and **on the second floor** where dwelling rooms suffered in like manner. When the **situation became apparent** the doors were locked and the most valuable stock **secured in the safes, a precaution which seemed to be fully justified** by events at other*

points. This, to, is a very old-established business and the loss, we understand, fully covered by insurance.

LOOTING THE PREMISES.

It is alleged that during the fire a number of miscreants looted the premises at the scene of the disaster under the pretext they were "lending a helping hand". Police and others had their suspicions and kept a sharp look out, particularly in the case of Messrs Connop's premises otherwise, it is stated, the loss of goods would have been very much heavier.

THE WATER QUESTION.

There seems to be a difference of opinion as to the efficiency of the water supply. While many strongly maintain that it is faulty, others hold the opposite view, but all seem to agree that the pressure and hydrants were defective. It was practically useless for the local appliances, including the two wheeled manual engine, and the hose was not all of a piece. The pressure improved somewhat on the water being shut off at several points and the fall of the reservoir directed to Beaufort Street, but even then the result was far from encouraging and it was not until the Abergavenny Brigade brought up their larger manual that anything like effective was done with the water. Prior to the burning of Councillor Bloom's premises, almost opposite, about three years ago, there were no fire appliances in the town. Since then however a Fire Brigade has been formed but with poor appliances. The District Council evidently consider that something is required in the way of improving the water supply for they have under consideration a scheme involving the outlay of some £2000 in which one alteration proposed is the substitution of a 9 inch main from reservoir to town in place of the present 5 inch. Of course the altitude of the reservoir has something to do with low pressure but a 9 inch main would probably improve it considerably.

All the buildings were two storeys in height, the only person resident being Mr. Morgan, father of Messrs Morgan, who lived at the back of the factory building, and Mr. Connop's family. Mr. Alex McNeil, landlord of the Griffin Hotel, recovered consciousness on Tuesday evening and every hope is felt he will have a speedy recovery."

Notes:

The Gwalia Boot Factory belonged to Gwilym Morgan & James Morgan – grandfather and great-uncle of Peter Morgan Jones. (The latter's son John

G.[Gwilym] Morgan would become an Exeter solicitor.) However this disaster would be overcome through great personal risk and effort, and would prosper greatly during the 1914-18 Great War when it became an important supplier of military footwear. Falling on hard times during the 1920's Depression, the factory was closed, but would eventually be re-opened in 1929 by Peter Scott's Quakers to make boots and furniture. During the 39-45 War, the factory was busily employed on war production, but not of footwear.

Reference water supply and fire appliances: a major problem was that Brynmawr, then in Breconshire, seems to have had hydrants unsuitable for brigades arriving from towns in neighbouring Monmouthshire.

Transcribed from a document provided by Edwin Jones of Brynmawr.

Peter Morgan Jones, July 2007