

According to the *Herts Advertiser* and *St Albans Times* no major fires occurred in the St Albans area from 1871 until early in 1874. However, on April 4, 1874, that run of good fortune came to an end when a disastrous fire took hold of number 17 Fishpool Street on a Saturday morning.



The Scene of the Great Fire of Fishpool Street

Reproduced courtesy of Ian Tonkin

The very observant Police Constable Weeds was on duty at the Romeland end of Fishpool Street on April 4, near the *Rule and Compasses Pub* (number 2, Fishpool Street), when he noticed smoke issuing from number 17 and instantly raised the alarm. The property at the time was a 'confectionery manufactory' owned by Mr Edward Blackwell.

Across the road from the fire lived the enterprising Mr Oakley Senior, who quickly sprang into action. With help from neighbours he managed to force the gates of the yard and succeeded in placing horses and vans beyond the range of the fire.

In a short time three fire engines belonging to the Borough and County arrived at the scene, but there was a considerable amount of delay before they could get to work.

Many local folk stood calmly by, viewing the fire but showing little enthusiasm to get involved with the rapidly developing disaster. Their main concern was lack of payment if they engaged in helping to extinguish the fire. However, after encouragement from local tradesmen they commenced work — despite a serious shortage of water.

The building at number 17 was constructed of wood and the flames took hold very quickly. At around half-past two in the afternoon the roof fell in with a mighty crash.

Additionally, the flames had taken hold of the adjoining property, *The Crow Inn*, from where the landlord and blacksmith, Mr James Wright, had managed to usher his family out of the public house to safety.

Unlike earlier, without hesitation the local residents fell into action to remove furniture and other possessions from the stricken *Crow Inn*. Their swift actions were successful and much property was saved. Affection for the public house was clearly significant at the time.

The fire continued to rage until eight o'clock in the evening, when Mr Blackwell's premises had been reduced to smouldering ruins. *The Crow Inn* was also seriously damaged. Reports at the time praised the courage and industry of the fire brigade.

Sadly, the real loser of the disaster was Mr Blackwell, as he was totally uninsured. His losses amounted to the vast sum of between £300 and £400. However, Mr Wright at *The Crow Inn* was more fortunate as he was partially insured.

The scene of the fire continued to smoulder throughout Saturday and Sunday, and drew the attention of large crowds.

For over one hundred years the plot of land that once housed 17 Fishpool Street remained undeveloped. In later years it became a builder's yard and part of *The Crow Inn* garden. The current property, owned and occupied by Anthony Oliver, was built in 1976-7.



The formidable Mrs Sarah Wright, landlady of The Crow Inn around the late 1890s



17 Fishpool Street as a builder's yard in the 1970s
Reproduced courtesy of Anthony Oliver

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