

News from the past

A Fire in Mortlake Brewery *Mortlake Herald 16 June 1923*

A disastrous fire broke out at Mortlake brewery on Wednesday night doing damage to an extent estimated at £50,000. The blaze lit the whole neighbourhood and the reflection in the sky could be seen in most of the suburbs of South West London. The Terrace, Barnes was crowded with spectators, and crowds of people gathered on the wooden bridge and Church road bridges at Richmond, from which the leaping flames could easily be seen. So fierce was the fire that it appeared from Church Road bridge to be near the gasworks, and the gasometers stood out in sharp relief against a background of crimson and gold.

When the firemen arrived, at about 10 o'clock, the flames were shooting fifty to eighty feet in the air. Five brigades from Richmond and other districts were summoned but, despite their efforts, the great malthouse became entirely involved, and the domed roof fell in with a crash just as a fire-float arrived to fight the flames from the river. By this time the river was covered with boats containing spellbound spectators.

The work of the firemen was handicapped by the river as they could not take their appliances into boats to fight the flames from the river side. They therefore concentrated their efforts on the front of the building to prevent the fire from spreading from the malthouse to the offices.

Especially precarious was the task of two of the fire fighters, who, on a fire escape, directed jets of water into the heart of the flames from the top of the building up to the very moment that a resounding crash and a hail of sparks signaled the collapse of the roof.

The malthouse, or what was left of it, was still burning fiercely just before midnight, and there was considerable danger of the flames being carried by the wind to near-by houses. Fortunately,

however, the wind veered round to the north east and drove the flames away from the houses. The four kilns attached to the malthouse also caught fire and collapsed. It was not until half an hour after midnight that the firemen, after nearly three hours of hard fighting, had the blaze under control. Thousands of spectators were then gathered in the neighbourhood, while the river was dotted with boats and punts containing spectators who watched the efforts of the firemen on the fire float.

“We did not get the call until 10.20.” Captain Tinkler of the Richmond Fire Brigade, told our representative, “and by the time we got there the fire had a firm hold on the malthouse. Other brigades were at work on the water mains, and we linked up with the river, but the tide was out and we were handicapped. The building was eight stories high, and a plentiful supply of water was necessary in order to deal effectively with such a large fire. There were several fire engines there from London in addition to the local appliances, but want of water was the difficulty.”

The damage in building and stock from the fire, said the manager and head brewer, Mr. E. H. Ludlow on Thursday, was estimated at between £40,000 and £50,000. “Our brewer in charge was, last night,” he continued “going round the premises about 9.30 when he saw smoke issuing from the malting building. He gave the alarm. The malthouse, however, was quickly ablaze and although we were able to save the main building, one third of the malting department, the portion where the bins are, was burnt out, and from 13,000 to 15,000 quarters of malt in stock were destroyed by fire and water. The fire will not cause any loss of employment to our staff as the malting season is over. We closed down that department a week ago. The cause of the fire is unknown. It may have been the fusing of an old wire.”