

On the night of Thursday 20 November 1913 Basson's timber yard, at the northern end of Marlborough Road, suffered a dramatic fire in which over 1,000 tons of wood were destroyed. It was believed to be arson, and that the fire had been started by suffragettes, several of whom had arrived in Oxford from London that day.

Since July 1912 militant suffragettes had been engaged in an arson campaign, and one of their first targets had been the Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George. When in opposition, Lloyd George had been a supporter of women's rights, but once in power he had done little to help the cause, and as a result many suffragists had left the Liberal Party.

Lloyd George was due to arrive in Oxford the following Saturday to hear deputations from various pro-and anti-suffrage groups and this, together with the fact that a large quantity of suffragette literature was found near to the site of the fire, led to speculation that it had been part of the suffragette's arson campaign.

A full report of the blaze (right), together with several pages of photographs (including that below), and an article on Lloyd George's visit to Oxford, appeared in the *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, 26 November 1913

For more information on the suffragettes in Oxford, see Katherine Bradley, *Women on the March: A Suffrage Walk Around Oxford City Centre* (1996).



(Image courtesy of Jim Tallett)

GREAT TIMBER FIRE AT OXFORD.

EXTENSIVE DAMAGE.

SUFFRAGETTE MESSAGE: "SEND BILL TO LLOYD GEORGE."

One of the biggest fires that has occurred in Oxford was discovered soon after eleven o'clock on Thursday night, and, fanned by the strong wind, was soon raging over a thousand tons of timber, the property of Messrs. Basson, Richards and Co., stacked in a field at the rear of Marlborough-road, Grandpont. Evidence was found in the vicinity that seemed to connect the outbreak with the militant suffragettes, who are always active in towns in which Mr. Lloyd George appears, and a party of whom arrived in Oxford from London on Thursday. The flames illuminated the sky for miles and lit up the whole city, attracting some hundreds of people, many of whom had retired for the night. At one time the fire assumed a very serious aspect in view of its close proximity to the gasworks, the wind blowing the glowing sparks over the buildings, but fortunately away from the gasometers.

The fire was discovered at 11.25 p.m. by Mr. Albert E. Hearn, of 18, Marlborough-road. He was going upstairs to bed, when looking through the window he saw a light burning in the timber-yard. He raised an alarm, and called Mr. Basson's foreman, Mr. Trafford, who lives close by, and an attempt was made by him, his brother, Mr. Reginald Hearn, and Mr. Trafford to extinguish the fire with buckets of water. They had nearly succeeded, when suddenly there was a loud explosion, and the whole stack seemed to catch fire at once. So loud was the explosion that many residents in the vicinity were under the impression that a gasometer had blown up at the gasworks. A telephone message was sent at once from Mr. Hearn's house to the Police and Fire Stations. All available officers and men were immediately sent to the scene. The City Fire Brigade were under the direction of First Officer Symonds, and at once ran two lengths of hose from a hydrant in Marlborough-road, while the fire engines pumped water from the river close by, but they made no impression on the flames, which raged with great fury over several stacks of timber and reached the height of a house. As a spectator remarked, it was a "jolly fine bonfire, and as there were no buildings near enough to be in imminent danger, the spectacle could be watched with less uneasiness than is possible on some such occasions. It resembled a huge furnace, and sparks from the burning timber reached as far as Carfax.

Shortly after midnight the scene presented a very animated appearance. Hundreds of people came rushing to the spot from all directions. Several undergraduates were amongst them, and some of them, in evening dress, commenced dragging away great logs of timber from the fire, and continued their operations until stopped by the authorities. A number of women also engaged in conflict with the flames, and displayed great energy. It was evident from the first that no hope could be entertained of extinguishing the flames, and that the best course to pursue was to protect adjoining buildings and the gasworks. One undergraduate caused a diversion by standing, with his coat wrapped round his head, close to where the timber was blazing, every now and again turning the hose upon himself. Eventually people in the vicinity got hold of the hose and pulled it away from him. A number of youths engaged in a game of football by the light of the fire shortly after one o'clock.

Councillor Basson watched the fire almost from the commencement, and received many expressions of sympathy from his many friends. He informed an "Oxford Times" representative that men were working in the timber yard up till five o'clock that afternoon, and at that time everything was left perfectly safe. There was over a thousand tons of soft wood involved, and the damage, which he estimated at between £2,000 and £3,000, was covered by insurance. Mr. Basson added that they had plenty of timber left at their St. Aldate's yard; it was necessary to have a big stock just now because the import season had closed.

Mr. Reginald Hearn gave our representative a description of the start of the fire. He said at about 11.20 his brother called his attention to the timber, and he noticed a small flame at one corner of the stack. It looked as if two candles had been lighted, and were just glimmering. "We ran to the stack with buckets of water," proceeded Mr. Hearn, "and found the fire was beginning to spread. We had nearly put it out, when all at once there were a number of explosions, and the whole lot of timber burst into a blaze."

THE FIRE BRIGADE REPORT.

The report from the Fire Station states: The call was received by telephone at 11.30, and at 11.45 the horse tender started for the outbreak. At 11.58 No. 2 steamer was on its way under the charge of Supt. Symonds, and at one o'clock another steamer departed. At 1.50 more hose had to be despatched. No. 1 steamer returned at 6.20, but the other steamer is still in attendance. There was danger to the Gasworks at the outset, but the wind changed at an opportune moment, and the flames were directed towards 'Harris' boathouse, necessitating water being played into but the other steamer remained in attendance, and the officers were: Chief Officer Symonds, in charge, Second Officer Cross, Supt. Castle, Supt. Symonds, Engineer Baldwin and Engineer Edridge.

SUFFRAGETTE MESSAGES: "SEND THE BILL TO LLOYD GEORGE."

A large quantity of suffragette literature was found some little distance from the fire. It consisted of W.S.P.U. leaflets, copies of the "Suffragette," and three postcards. On one of the latter were the words "Send the bill to Lloyd George," on a second, "Democracy has never been a menace to property—Lloyd George, Bath, November, 1913;" and on a third, "Gaul for arson—nothing for Carson."