

At the first meeting of Sandbach History Society's 2023–24 season, Graham Dodd, trustee at Nantwich museum, gave an informative and entertaining talk on The Great Fire of Nantwich 1583.

Mr Dodd explained that fire was an occupational hazard in medieval and Tudor times and fire was “not a good servant but a bad master”. At that time, it was essential to have naked flames for cooking, heating and lighting. However, houses were built mainly of flammable materials with an oak frame, wattle and daub walls, stone floors and thatched roofs. They were also built very close together and next to commercial properties. If there was a fire, there was a significant risk that it would get out of control and spread rapidly through the nearby buildings.

Across Cheshire there were many instances of fires destroying town buildings at this time. The Great Fire of Nantwich in 1583 is famous because it is recorded in surviving diaries and journals; this evidence was referred to during the talk. In 1583 Nantwich consisted of 450 households and a population of 2000. The town's wealth was built on salt production and there were 200 wych (salt) houses where the brine was heated to evaporate the water and leave the salt. However, the fire, contrary to some beliefs, did not start in one of these salt houses.

On a very windy evening on December 10th 1583, Nicholas Brown of Waterlode on the west of the town centre, was spending the evening making his Christmas ale. He set his kitchen alight, and the fire spread quickly and consumed his house. The westerly wind caused the sparks and embers to spread rapidly across the thatched roofs and soon the centre of the town was on fire. This is depicted in a painting by the Victorian painter, Herbert St John Jones entitled “The Great Fire of Nantwich, Cheshire 1583”. The painting is owned by Nantwich Museum but at present it is being cleaned however Mr. Dodd expressed the hope that it would return to the museum soon.

Strangely, reports from the time show that Nicholas Brown was not held to account for starting the fire. According to the town clerk it was considered as an Act of God, a punishment from the Almighty on Nantwich. It was mitigated by the fact that whilst many commercial buildings were destroyed, only three people died.

In order to douse the fire, hooked poles were used to pull off the thatch and buckets of water drawn from the river. The efforts to control the fire were made more difficult when the licensee of the Bear Hotel decided to release his four bears (kept for bearbaiting) which caused panic amongst the people, especially the women according to Richard Wilbraham, a diarist at that time. Dodd said he was sure it would have caused alarm amongst all folk and hampered the efforts to douse the flames.

However, only part of the town on the east of the river was affected by the fire; the salt making area to the west was not touched. In the town the fire stopped before reaching

Churche's Mansion in Hospital Street. The graveyard in front of St Mary's Church acted as a firebreak and so the church building was not damaged. The main areas affected were Hospital Street, Beam Street and Hightown.

The diary of a constable at the time records that fortunately, on the day before the fire, 117 carts of munitions were removed from the town, otherwise the fire could have been much worse. The fire required dousing for two or three days and then smouldered for a further twenty days. The central area, forming one third of the town was destroyed.

Mr Dodd stated that according to the diary of Richard Wilbraham, 800 people lost their homes, 150 houses and inhabited shops were destroyed as well as 7 inns. However, many people found other accommodation with friends and relatives elsewhere in the town. Overall, only three women died, two women were burned in their houses and one woman was killed by a falling wall as she carried water from the river to the fire.

The rebuilding of the town after the fire was expensive and so both a national and local appeal were made for funds. The town was on the coach route from London to Chester and then to Ireland so it was an important stopping place. Ninety six appeal letters were sent out and Queen Elizabeth I contributed £1000, timber from Buerton Park near Audley and a remission of customs fees. Additional national donations made the total national sum £3257. However, the local donations totalled more at £4017; this was probably due to the fact that the salt industry was not affected by the fire and many prominent government officials, such as the Queen's Chancellor, lived nearby.

Mr Dodd explained that in order to commemorate the generosity of the Queen, Thomas Leece, who built Churche's Mansion, was commissioned to build Queen's Aid House and May 1st was designated as Queen's Day in the town. However, after a few years the name Queen's Day fell into disuse although Mr Dodd is hoping to organise an exhibition at Nantwich Museum to commemorate it on May 1st 2024.

A plaque was erected on Queen's Aid House recording the donation and a modern translation reads, "God grant our Royal Queen in England long to reign, for she has put her helping hand to build this town again." Most of the money raised was used for rebuilding the town centre in the same style as before, and the town did recover in a few years.

Finally, Mr Dodd described the development of the Nantwich Volunteer Fire Brigade in the eighteenth century and also the emergence in the early 1900s of the Urban District Council Fire Brigade. More information can be found about the Volunteer Fire Brigade in a booklet available at Nantwich Museum. There is also a booklet entitled "The Great Fire of Nantwich" by Jeremy Lake for those who wish to study the subject in more depth.