

Leeds Mercury 21st February 1818

Colne Bridge Cotton Mill Fire

Thomas Atkinson the third son of Joseph Atkinson was the proprietor of an extensive woollen manufacturing concern at Bradley Mills. He also owned a cotton mill at Colne Bridge. Eighty persons were employed at the mill, and it was the practice to work machinery in the night and during the day.

On the night of Friday, February 14th 1818, a most destructive fire broke out in the cotton factory of Mr Atkinson situated at Colne Bridge, about three miles from Huddersfield. It appears that the machinery in part of the building in part of the building worked by day and night.

At 5am, a boy of the name of James Thornton had been sent down for rovings from the card room with a naked candle, instead of the glass lamp provided expressly for the purpose. One of the overlookers after he was gone, feeling a sense danger of such an act of imprudence hastened after the lad, but in vain, for just as he was entering the lower room, he saw the flames rising from a quantity of cotton and carded laps, several skips of which were standing under the stairs instantly in a blaze.

Thornton distressed at the sight of the mischief about which he had inadvertently committed, ran upstairs to communicate the appalling tidings that the factory was on fire. He then hastened back to the top of the stairs and escaped out of the building, but so rapid was the progress of the flames that a girl who followed him dropped through the landing and perished in the flames. All this occurred in the short space of two minutes and communication by the stairs being now cut off, the situation of the persons still in the mill became alarming in the extreme.

To add to the horror of the scene, the flames ascended through a tunnel, which communicated, to the top rooms, were several thousand pounds weight of cotton lay ready to catch the blaze to spread the awful conflagration. The card room, too, where the fire commenced was filled with cotton in different stages of process and gave progress to the flames.

To attempt to save any part of the property seemed a hopeless effort, and the attention of the persons assembled was wholly directed to the rescue of the persons within, who were all girls, from the fate that awaited them. With this view, a ladder was placed against a small window at the end of the factory, near the manager's house, and at the greatest distance from the place where the fire had first appeared. But every endeavour to induce the children to approach the ladder was unavailing; on breaking the glass a dense column of smoke which soon burst into a flame; issued from the opening, and it is possible that before the humane effort to rescue the children was made the suffocating influence of the ignited cotton had terminated their suffering.

Renewed efforts prompted by a glimmering hope, were made to ascertain the place where the poor children might have fled and to rescue them from the flames but in the midst of

exertions the roof and floors fell in and hope gave place to despair. In less than half an hour, the entire building, all the machinery, and every article of the stock were destroyed. From a combination of unfortunate circumstances, the fire was more like an explosion or the conflagration of stubble, than the destruction of a substantial building. Not a vestige of property was saved in the mill but the counting house and warehouse, being protected by a strong iron wall were preserved.

When everything combustible was consumed, diligent search was made for the remains of the children, fourteen of them were found in the course of the day; the others have doubtless been reduced to ashes. At the time of the fire, 26 persons were at work in the mill of whom nine escaped and seventeen perished.

Nine days after the factory holocaust at Colne Bridge, Huddersfield which shocked the nation, Sir Robert Peel the elder moved the second reading in the house of commons of his factory Bill declaring "It was his intention if possible to prevent a recurrence of such a misfortune as that which had lately taken place." It was his wish to have no night work at all in the factories.

Children Who Died

Martha Hey age 9 Baptised 1809 Kirkheaton Daughter of Jno & Esther.

Mary Hey age 9 Baptised 1808 Kirkheaton Daughter of Jno & Lydia.

Elizabeth Drake age 9 Born 1808.

Abigail Bottom age 10 Born 1808.

Elizabeth Stafford age 11 Baptised Feb 1807 Kirkheaton Daughter of John & Mary.

Frances Sellers age 12 Baptised Dec 1805 Kirkheaton Daughter of Thomas & Frances.

Ellen Haytack age 12.

Elizabeth Ely age 13 Baptised Mar 1805 Kirkheaton Daughter of Abraham & Martha.

Mary Moody age 13 Baptised Dec 1804 Kirkheaton Daughter of William & Rachel.

Ellen Stocks age 13.

Mary Denton age 14.

(Transcribed by Steven Hill)