

PARTIAL DESTRUCTION OF SMITHILLS CHAPEL BY FIRE



We regret to state that this venerable structure was partially destroyed by fire on Monday last [10th] About three o'clock in the afternoon, some men who were at work in the neighbourhood perceived a strong smell of fire, and one of them observing large quantities of smoke issuing from the roof suspected that all was not right, and communicated his fears to the domestics in the hall, which is contiguous to the chapel. It was soon ascertained that the chapel was on fire, and the chapel bell was immediately rung and a messenger dispatched for the fire-engine of J H Ainsworth, Esq., whose Bleachworks are within a short distance of the place. Peter Ainsworth, Esq., the proprietor and occupier of Smithills Hall, who had only returned home that day from a visit to Shropshire, had left the house about half-an-hour before the fire broke out, and was in the neighbourhood of Smithills Dean when his attention was arrested by the ringing of the chapel bell. He immediately rode off to the chapel; and by this time his brother's workpeople were on the spot with their fire-engine, and had commenced playing [their hoses] on the roof of the building. A mounted messenger was despatched for assistance from Bolton, and Inspector Beech, the superintendent of the fire brigade, lost no time in calling out his men and proceeding with the *Bumble* fire-engine, drawn by four horses, to the scene of danger. They were immediately followed by the *Etna*, from the works of Messrs. Ormrod and Hardcastle of this town.

Meanwhile the fire continued with increasing fury, and at one time threatened the destruction of the entire pile of buildings, in consequence of the great quantity of woodwork about them. Mr Ainsworth, therefore, seeing that nothing could save the roof of the chapel, directed the Halliwell firemen to play upon the north side of the chapel, which communicates with the rest of the buildings; and on the arrival of the *Bumble*, Mr Beech took up a position on the easterly side of the chapel. Up to this time considerable difficulty had been experienced in getting the pipes to bear upon the seat of fire, which was between the ceiling and the roof; but when this had been accomplished, its further spread was soon prevented, and by vigorous exertions of all parties, and there being at hand, fortunately, a good supply of water, it was got under [control] about seven o'clock but not before the roof had fallen in, and the gallery over the western entrance, and most, if not all, of the pews, which like the roof, were of old oak, had been destroyed. The pulpit and the reading desk, of carved oak, and of great antiquity, do not appear to have sustained very much injury, and may probably be restored; and the outer walls, which are of stone, appear to have sustained but little damage. The handsome memorial window of stained glass, which was placed over the altar, was blackened by intense heat; but hopes are entertained that it also may be saved. Mr Ainsworth's pew, which adjoined the Painted Chamber, on the north side of the chapel, and at the back of which was an elaborately carved oak screen, was destroyed. The gallery was built by the late Mr Ainsworth, at considerable expense, and he also renewed the memorial window some 40 years ago [c.1816].

The domestics of the hall and the inhabitants of the district rendered what aid they could to suppress the fire; and the Revs. J.S. Birley, T. Berry, A Packer, J. Jaques (incumbent of the chapel), and other gentlemen who were in the neighbourhood when the fire broke out, also

rendered very great assistance; and, as indicted above, had it not been for the active exertions of all parties, combined with the fact that the whole of the woodwork about the place was old oak and would not therefore burn as readily as deal, the whole chapel would have been destroyed, and probably the ancient mansion itself. As it is, the damage is not so great as was at first feared.

The chapel was insured in the Phoenix Fire Office for £200, and the damage will probably amount to £350 or £400. It is not, however, intended, we believe, to replace the gallery, and consequently the cost of rebuilding the chapel will perhaps not very much exceed the amount of insurance. The origin of the fire is not certain, but it is not improbable that it arose from the over-heating of a flue. The chapel was warmed by hot air from a stove in the vestry on the north side of the building, and there was a fire in the stove on the previous day.