

The Fire At Purton Mill, Saturday 11th August 1883**Mike Smith September 2023**

The article I wrote entitled "Steam Passenger Boat at Purton on the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal" was originally written for the Stroud Vintage Transport & Engine Club's Newsletter. Soon after it was published, I was contacted by the current owner of the "Mill House" at Purton who sent me a couple of contemporary newspaper reports on the fire and the auction that followed.

The first one is a report on the fire that occurred on Saturday, 11th August 1883 and was published in The Cheltenham Examiner on Wednesday 15th August 1883.

That article is reproduced below exactly as published.

DESTRUCTIVE FIRE AT PURTON NEAR BERKELEY

On Saturday night a fire broke out at the Purton Steam Flour Mills, which are situate on the banks of the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal at Purton, about two miles from Sharpness and four from Berkeley. The premises were locked up at three o'clock on Saturday afternoon when everything appeared to be quite safe, but about 10 o'clock at night Mr. Robertson, a shopkeeper living near saw a fire was raging in one of the upper stories. An alarm was immediately given and a messenger dispatched to Berkeley for Lord Fitzhardinge's fire engine, which arrived soon after eleven o'clock, but the flames quickly extended to the ground floor and the premises were completely gutted, nothing but the bare walls and the wreck of the machinery remaining: and the whole of the stock and machinery with the exception of the engine, which was only partially damaged, were destroyed. The building is lofty and extensive, consisting of five stories and was substantially built of brick, and erected about 20 years ago. By the present owner Mr. Timothy Hadley. The origin of the fire is unknown, although it is supposed to have been caused by the overheating of the bearing of some portion of the machinery. The damage is estimated at £7000. The premises, machinery and stock are insured in the General and Norwich insurance office for £5000 only.

Lord Fitzhardinge was Charles Paget Fitzhardinge Berkeley, owner of Berkeley Castle. The horse-drawn fire engine arrived at the scene very quickly, albeit too late to be of much assistance.

The second article is an announcement of the auction and was published in the Gloucester Journal on Saturday, February 16th 1884, six months after the fire, and is reproduced here:

Salvage from Fire***PURTON FLOUR MILLS***

About 2 miles from Sharpness Docks and 4 miles from Berkeley, Gloucestershire and within 50 yards of the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal.

Messrs D. Legge and Son

Have received instructions from Mr Timothy Hadley

TO SELL BY AUCTION

On the premises on Tuesday 26th February 1884, -

A nearly new TUBULAR BOILER ("Galloway's"), 20ft long, 6ft diameter, 3/4in plate, 34 H.P. nominal with fittings complete, in perfect condition and uninjured by fire.

A CORNISH BOILER, 24 ft long, 5ft 4 in diameter.

Powerful HIGH and LOW PRESSURE ENGINE, with 13ft Fly Wheel.

Five pairs FRENCH STONES, 3ft 10in diameter, with Iron Hurstings, 4ft 6in Driving Gear, Pinions, and 6in Shafting.

Fourteen heavy 7 and 9in IRON COLUMNS with Shoulders; 120ft , 2½ and 8in. WATER PIPES, pair of IRON DOORS, STEAM PIPES, 3 IRON ELEVATORS, about 30 tons of SHAFTING and SCRAP IRON, 2 cwt LEAD, ½ cwt BRASS, &c, &c.

Also about 50,000 Bricks in convenient lots and the whole of the Brick work as it stands, being the remaining portion of the Purton Mills.

With the exception of the Tubular Boiler all of the lots are more or less injured by fire.

Sale to commence at 10 o'clock.

Catalogue will be ready one week previous the sale, and may be had of Mr F. S. Hadley, Purton, near Berkeley (who will also show the lots), or of the Auctioneers, Berkeley. 2576

The report on the fire tells us the mill was built "about 20 years ago", which would mean some time in the early 1860s and it is reasonable to assume the engine was installed when the mill was built. The engine is described in the auction announcement as a "*Powerful HIGH and LOW PRESSURE ENGINE, with 13ft Fly Wheel,*" so this would have been a two cylinder compound engine, but we know nothing more about it.

The mill was known as Purton Flour Mills. The auction lists "five pairs of French stones", which were typically used for flour production, and no other types of stone are listed, so we can assume the mill only produced flour for human consumption and did not produce animal feed.

These newspaper reports provide us with a fascinating insight into the activities of a late 19th century flour mill, but, as usual, leave us with so many unanswered questions.



An enlarged section of the picture from Mike's original article, showing the mill.