

The Oxford Fire of 1644

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Fire was one of the many hazards of life in the early-modern town. The major causes of accidental fires during the period were the widespread use of combustible building materials – especially timber and thatch – the lack of adequate chimneys, the practice of trades with a high fire risk in unsuitable premises and the stocks of fuel, corn and hay that were kept within the built-up area. In addition, the sheer congestion of buildings in many towns hindered attempts to check the progress of a fire and if many of the roofs were thatched the flames could spread rapidly, defeating the efforts of the fire-fighters.¹ There were particularly destructive conflagrations in the early 17th century at Bury St. Edmunds in 1608, Tiverton in 1612, Dorchester in 1613 and 1623, Stratford-upon-Avon in 1614 and 1641, Wymondham in 1615, Banbury in 1628 and at Yeovil in 1640.

Many towns took some steps to attempt to reduce the risks of fire. At Oxford, both the town and university authorities introduced regulations which were designed to minimise the dangers. The Common Council's Acts and Ordinances issued in 1582 included several clauses concerning fire hazards.² Perhaps the most important were the injunctions that all houses which were not already roofed in tile or slate should be reroofed in those materials and that chimneys and flues 'made of earth or other matter' were to be rebuilt with stone or brick within specified periods. Roofs and chimneys were to be built only in the stipulated materials thereafter and it was ordered that all chimneys should be swept at least four times every year. The melting of tallow inside the town was also prohibited. The fines laid down for those who failed to comply with these orders included a charge of 3s. 0d. on every householder whose chimney caught fire and a much more substantial levy of £5 for not observing the regulations concerning the construction of roofs and chimneys. Nevertheless, it is clear that such orders could not be effectively enforced. The building materials used in civic properties were specified in covenants included in leases,³ but this affected only a minority of dwellings within the town, and there were other difficulties. It was, for example, not easy to impose the considerable costs of reroofing or rebuilding on the poorer householders and to take fines from them only added to the problem. Moreover, the town grew fairly rapidly in the years before the Civil War – chiefly because of the expansion of the university – and its population at least doubled between the 1580s and the 1630s.⁴ A consequence of this growth was the erection of badly built, poor-quality, housing to

¹ For general accounts of fire risks see: E.L. Jones and M.E. Falkus, 'Urban improvement and the English economy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', *Research in Economic History* iv (1979), 198–203. S. Porter, 'Fires and Pre-industrial Towns', *The Local Historian* x (1973), 395–7. K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), 15–17. C.J. Kitching, 'Fire Disasters and Fire Relief in Sixteenth-century England: the Nantwich Fire of 1583', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* liv (1981), 171–5.

² *Selections from the Records of the City of Oxford 1509–1583* ed. W.H. Turner (Oxford, 1880), 423–4.

³ *Oxford Council Acts 1583–1626* ed. H.E. Salter (Oxford, 1928), 309. *Oxford Council Acts 1626–1665* ed. M.G. Hobson and H.E. Salter (Oxford, 1933), 40.

⁴ *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 75.

accommodate the immigrants to the town. In 1637 the order prohibiting thatched roofs was renewed and three years later the university complained that within the previous forty or fifty years, and particularly since 1620, the townsmen had built many thatched cottages or 'squab houses' which were not only 'unseemlie to look too' but also 'verie dangerous for casualties of fire'.⁵ In the late 1630s and early 1640s dangerous kilns, the storage of fuel, thatched houses and dwellings without chimneys were reported in many parts of the town.⁶ A fire among thatched houses in Jesus College Lane (now Market Street) in 1640 destroyed a number of properties.⁷ Clearly, the regulations of 1582 had not been fully observed.

Attempts to restrict fire damage were also made by providing fire-fighting equipment; buckets, ladders, fire-hooks and squirts. Those who were admitted to the freedom of the town by serving an apprenticeship or by Act of Common Council were required to provide at least one leather bucket or the money with which to buy one.⁸ The requirement for those who were admitted after an apprenticeship was dropped in 1611, but the corporation was able to build up a considerable stock of buckets in its own hands from the admissions of freemen by council order and from other occasional purchases.⁹ In addition, the parishes were instructed to hold a specified number of buckets – a total of 110 in 1573 – and many of the colleges also kept fire buckets for their own use.¹⁰ Early in 1642 the town council ordered the purchase of two new ladders specifically for use in fire fighting and instructed that the fire-hooks – which were used rather like grappling irons to unroof thatched buildings in the path of the flames – should be repaired. It also ordered that this equipment should not be lent to anyone and was to be kept exclusively for use at fires.¹¹ An earlier council act had ruled that all the corporation's buckets should be marked 'to the intent they shall not be changed nor imbeselled away'.¹² This was a problem, for the general utility of buckets and ladders was likely to lead to their misappropriation, so that they were not available in an emergency. The town's fire-fighting equipment was completed by some brass, hand-held, water squirts, ordered in 1598.¹³ Fire engines came into use in England in the early 1630s and a number of provincial towns obtained an engine before the Civil War began,¹⁴ but Oxford was not among them. Nevertheless, the town was relatively well-equipped for fighting fires and, apart from the fire in 1640 and a few other minor blazes, it escaped a major conflagration in the 16th and early 17th centuries, despite the inability of both civic and university governments to enforce their regulations concerning building materials.

The Civil War increased the risks of fire. As in many other towns, the normal population was swollen by soldiers and their families, those made homeless by the

⁵ Oxford University Archives (O.U.A.), W.P. Q/9; S.P. E/9/5. I am very grateful to the Keeper of the University Archives for allowing me to consult the material in his custody.

⁶ O.U.A., W.P. R/10/16; W.P. Q/8-9; S.P. E/2/15.

⁷ *The Works of William Laud*, v, ed. J. Bliss and W. Scott (1853), 255.

⁸ *Council Acts 1583-1626*, 55, 85.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 219; *Council Acts 1626-1665*, *passim*. Oxford City Records (O.C.R.), P. 4.1, Keykeepers' Accounts, 1555-1644; P.5.2, City Audit, 1592-1682. I am very grateful to Mr Malcolm Graham of the City Library at Oxford for his helpful cooperation while I was working on the city records.

¹⁰ Turner *op. cit.* note 2, 348. *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England*, VI, ed. J.E.T. Rogers (Oxford, 1887), 585, 588, 591, 603.

¹¹ *Council Acts 1626-1665*, 104.

¹² *Council Acts 1583-1626*, 85.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁴ R. Jenkins, 'Fire-extinguishing Engines in England, 1625-1725', *Transactions of the Newcomen Society* xi (1930-1), 15-25. J.B.P. Karlake, 'Early London Fire-Appliances', *The Antiquaries Journal* ix (1929), 229-38. S. and B. Webb, *English Local Government: The Parish and The County* (1906), 225. Worcester City Records, Audit of Annual Accounts, 3, 1640-69, unfoliated. Norfolk Record Office, Norwich City Records, case 18a, Chamberlains' Accounts, 1626-48, f.367. B.H. Cunningham, *Some Annals of the Borough of Devizes 1555-1791* (Devizes, 1925), 98.

destruction of suburban property – a number of houses in St. Clement's was demolished¹⁵ – and a variety of refugees from the surrounding area. At Oxford the number of soldiers to be accommodated was considerable, especially when the royalist armies were not on campaign. The officers of the royal government and members of the court, together with their dependants and servants, also had to be housed. In January 1644 a listing of inhabitants showed an average of more than five such 'strangers' in each of seventy-four households in St. Aldate's parish.¹⁶ Later that year the townsmen complained that because of the billeting of officers and soldiers, their wives and children, those who had been made homeless in the fire of 6 October could not be rehoused.¹⁷ In such overcrowded conditions the hazards of fire were increased. There was a greater likelihood of a domestic accident as houses were subdivided and fires for heating and cooking were lit in rooms which were not equipped for the purpose. An influx of people also caused a greater demand for food and drink and so an increase in activity by bakers, brewers, maltsters and other suppliers whose premises were potential fire risks, leading in turn to larger stocks of fuel and corn. Military magazines, gunpowder mills and stores of match, gunpowder and other combustible materials were also established in and around Oxford. Both in their management of a magazine and in their quarters it is likely that soldiers were more careless of fire precautions than the resident civilian population. The magistrates' lack of control over the military meant that they were unable to regulate those whose activities presented the greatest hazard in wartime conditions. There was also a greater chance that fire-fighting equipment would be stolen, misused or neglected. The corporation's officers attempted to keep the buckets in repair during the war, but no new ones were bought.¹⁸

In addition to much deliberate property destruction for military purposes, there was also a number of accidental fires during the Civil War. The blaze in Wrexham in May 1643 was not specifically blamed on the soldiers, although troops were quartered in the town at the time. It destroyed 143 houses, roughly one-quarter of the town.¹⁹ An almost identical number of houses was lost in the fire at Beaminster eleven months later, which began when a quarrel amongst royalist soldiers led to the firing of a musket into the gable of a house. 'The most part' of the town was said to have been destroyed in the flames and the losses were later valued at £21,080.²⁰ There were less destructive, although serious, fires in Diss, Leighton Buzzard and Lowestoft in 1645 and minor outbreaks in several other towns during the war.²¹

The most extensive fire of the war years, indeed of the decade, was that which broke out at Oxford on the afternoon of Sunday, 6 October 1644. There are a number of unusually detailed descriptions of the blaze, from which it is possible to trace the path

¹⁵ *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood*, i, ed. A. Clark (Oxford Hist. Soc. xix, 1891), 99–100. Bodl. Lib., MS Add. D114, ff.7–8, 12.

¹⁶ V.C.H. *Oxon.* iv, 81–2. M. Toynbee and P. Young, *Strangers in Oxford. A Side Light on the First Civil War, 1642–1646* (1973), 10, 12.

¹⁷ *Council Acts 1623–1665*, 125.

¹⁸ O.C.R., P.5.2, ff. 257, 259, 262v, 263v.

¹⁹ Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Seventh Report, House of Lords Manuscripts*, 19. British Library (B.L.), Harleian 2125, ff. 66, 134v. *Commons Journals*, V, 1646–8, 603.

²⁰ R. Hine, *The History of Beaminster* (Taunton, 1914), 118–9. J. Hutchins, *The History of Dorset*, ii (3rd ed., 1863), 119.

²¹ House of Lords Record Office, Main Papers, 10 July – 2 August 1645, ff.112–3; 27 October – 11 November 1645, ff. 219–222v; 24 December 1647–1647 undated, f.130. *Lords Journals*, VII, 1644–5, 504. E. Gillingwater, *An Historical Account of the Ancient Town of Lowestoft* (1790), 60–2. Norfolk Record Office, Norwich Accounts, 1626–48, f.407v. B.L., Thomason Tracts (T.T.), E104(25) *Mercurius Civicus*, 25 May – 1 June 1643, 29; E246(13) *A Perfect Diurnall*, 6–13 February 1643, unpagd. Berkshire Record Office, A/Fac3, Abingdon Corporation Account for 1643–4.

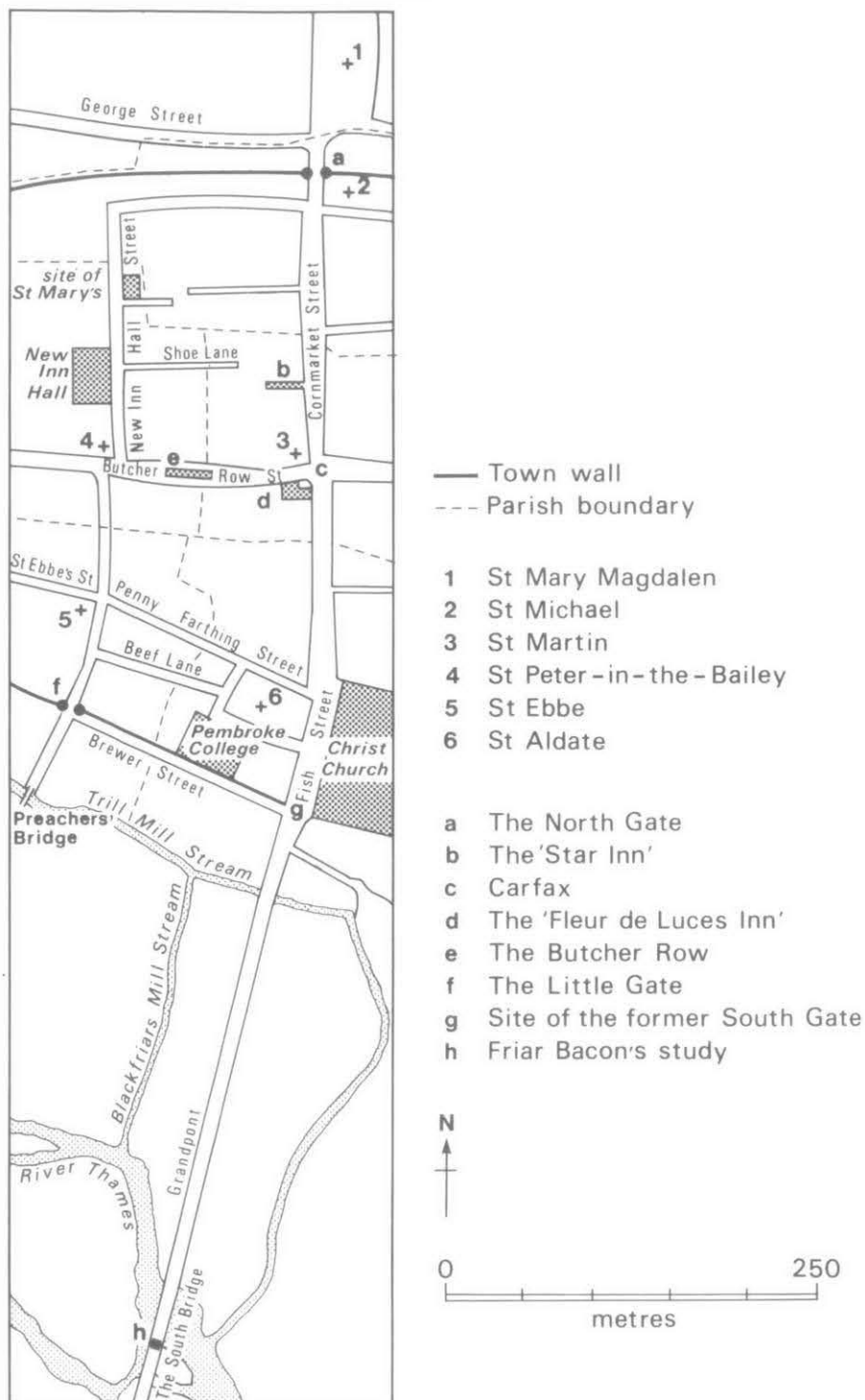


Fig. 1.

which the flames took through the town (Fig. 1). Several explanations of the cause of the fire were given and the one which was most widely reported was that it was the result of a soldier surreptitiously roasting a stolen pig in a poor house without taking proper care.²² The suggestion was also made that it was started deliberately.²³ As with many other early-modern fires, the real causes were probably unknown even at the time. Almost all of the sources agree that it began on the south side of the road leading from the North Gate to Broken Hayes – now George Street – outside the walled area of the town.²⁴ The property subsequently destroyed lay entirely to the south, confirming Wood's statement that the wind was 'verie high and in the north'.²⁵ The town wall evidently did not stop the southward spread of the flames. It may then have been in some decay – the royalists had constructed new defences further to the north – although it was shown to be still intact and standing to a considerable height in that vicinity on Loggan's map of 1675.²⁶ Perhaps the strong wind carried burning debris over the wall onto buildings on its south side, or the house in which the fire started was close to the North Gate and buildings which were encroachments on the former town ditch allowed the flames to spread up to and around the gate itself. One account graphically describes the fire 'raging in through the North-gate'.²⁷ The area destroyed lay to the west of the axial street line from the North Gate to the South Bridge, for there is no reference to property to the east of that line being affected.

Wood's account of the fire states that all the houses and stables between 'the back part' of the buildings in Cornmarket Street and New Inn Hall Street were burnt, with the exception of those of the dissolved St. Mary's College, the garden of which acted as a fire-break and checked the spread of the flames in that direction. This implies that New Inn Hall Street marked the limit of destruction to the west – some property on its eastern side also survived the fire – and that the buildings fronting onto Cornmarket Street escaped.²⁸ Another narrative of the fire, which was written soon after the event, apparently by an eye-witness, reported that the wind 'carried the fire about the middle of the right side the street between the Gate and Carfax Church [St. Martin's] . . . where it fastned and burnt up that side to the Church'.²⁹ This seems to indicate that the buildings at the southern end of the west side of Cornmarket Street were burnt and that those at its northern end were not, but the mid 16th-century Star Inn, less than one hundred yards north of the church, survived apparently intact.³⁰ Although the inn and other houses in that range may themselves have escaped destruction, it seems certain that their outbuildings and the property in Shoe Lane were gutted. St. Martin's church and a nearby tavern were damaged, but not destroyed. On the south side of Butcher Row – now Queen Street –

²² B.L., T.T. E12(17) *The true Informer*, 5–12 October 1644, 362; E12(11) *Mercurius Civicus*, 3–10 October 1644, 677; E12(16) *The Scottish Dove*, 4–11 October 1644, 399; E12(23) *The Kingdomes Weekly Intelligencer*, 8–15 October 1644, 609; E256(18) *A Diary, or an Exact Journall* . . . , 3–10 October 1644, 503. A. Wood, *The History and Antiquities of the University of Oxford*, II, ed. J. Gutch (1796), 473. This is a fuller account than that given in *The Life and Times* . . . , 111.

²³ *The Letter Books 1644–45 of Sir Samuel Luke*, ed. H.G. Tibbutt (Historical Manuscripts Commission, JP4, 1963), 25. *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1644–5*, 46.

²⁴ Wood, *University*, ii, 473. B.L., T.T. E256(18) *A Diary* . . . , 503. See also the lease granted to Thomas Bland, dated 23 February 1646, of four burnt tenements on the south side of George Street; O.C.R., D.5.6 Ledger of Leases, 1636–75, ff.69v–70. For subsequent changes in street names see *V.C.H. Oxon*, iv, 475–7.

²⁵ Wood, *University*, ii, 473.

²⁶ *V.C.H. Oxon*, iv, 92–3.

²⁷ B.L., T.T. E13(4) *The London Post*, 10–16 October 1644, 5.

²⁸ Wood, *University*, ii, 473. H. Hurst, *Oxford Topography* (Oxford Hist. Soc. xxxix, 1900), 89. J. Blair et al., 'Frewin Hall, Oxford: A Norman Mansion and a Monastic College', *Oxoniensia* xliii (1978), 82–90.

²⁹ B.L., T.T. E256(18) *A Diary* . . . , 503.

³⁰ E.M. Jope and W.A. Pantin, 'The Clarendon Hotel, Oxford', *Oxoniensia* xxiii (1958), 1–129.

almost opposite to St. Martin's, the Fleur de Luces inn was also preserved, although all of its stables and outhouses, together with the adjoining tenement, were burnt.³¹ The houses in Butcher Row between the churches of St. Martin's and St. Peter's-in-the-Bailey were destroyed, as was the Butchers' Row itself, which stood in the middle of the street. The strong northerly wind carried burning material across the street to property on its south side. Then 'spreadinge itselfe' the conflagration 'burnt all Saint Ebbs parish . . . downe to Pembroke Colledge and so all along irresistibly'.³² The rector of St. Ebbe's later noted that 'above four score dwelling houses' in the parish were burnt down and comparison of his Easter offerings lists of 1644 and 1645 shows a fall in the numbers of people recorded of 338 between the two dates.³³ St. Ebbe's church was not destroyed, nor were the buildings of Pembroke College, but the flames swept through much property lying between them in Pennyfarthing Street, St. Ebbe's Street, Beef Lane and Brewer Street. Some buildings in these streets did survive, however, particularly at the eastern side of this area, where there were some stone houses, and on the west side of St. Ebbe's Street.³⁴ The fire crossed the line of the town wall and burned some houses between the Little Gate and Preachers' Bridge, where its further progress to the south-west was checked by the Trill Mill Stream and the lack of buildings beyond it.³⁵ It continued to advance to the south-east. The account cited earlier describes the flames running on until they reached the South Gate 'commonly called Fryar Bacons studdy, in which street were most of the Brew-houses and Bake houses, with many and great stackes of Wood, Gorse, and Hey, great quantities of Malt, and other graine stord up against this Winter and expected Siege'.³⁶ The author's reference to the gatehouse on the South Bridge, rather than the former South Gate of the town, removed more than twenty years earlier, indicates that the fire crossed the Trill Mill Stream and spread as far south as the Thames. The description of a street containing brewhouses and bakehouses was equally applicable to Brewer Street and to Grandpont, but probably referred to the latter. Another report mentioned damage on the 'backside of Granpoole' as well as the destruction of brewhouses, and Luellin's poem 'A curse to Vulcan' also implies that the flames reached the Thames.³⁷ The west side of Grandpont, however, contained a number of substantial houses, built either wholly or partly of stone, which presented a line of buildings with some resistance to fire. There is no evidence from the parish taxation lists made after the fire that any householders in this part of the street were burnt out, and the excavations of sites on its west side have apparently not exposed a layer of fire debris that could be attributed to the 1644 blaze.³⁸ The likely explanation is that the brewhouses and bakehouses which are known to have stood in this part of the town lay along the line of the Trill Mill Stream and of the Blackfriars Mill Stream which ran roughly parallel to Grandpont. They were set apart from the houses because of the fire risk and – in the case of the brewhouses – to allow easy access to water supplies. Presumably the long gardens of these properties acted as a fire-break, preserving the houses, while the northerly wind swept

³¹ O.C.R., D.5.6, ff.65v–6.

³² B.L., T.T. E256(18) *A Diary* . . . , 503.

³³ Bodl. Lib., MS Oxf. Dioc., b.126, ff.4–11.

³⁴ D. Sturdy et al., 'Eleven Small Oxford Houses', *Oxoniensia* xxvi/xxvii (1961/2), 323–32. Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the City of Oxford* (1939), 173–5. Magdalen College Archives, Ledger N, 1641–47, ff.73v–4. I am very grateful to the President and Fellows for allowing me access to their records.

³⁵ Wood, *University*, ii, 473.

³⁶ B.L., T.T. E256(18) *A Diary* . . . , 503.

³⁷ B.L., T.T. E13(4) *The London Post* . . . , 5; E1163(1) *Men-Miracles. With Other Poemes* (1646), 40.

³⁸ Bodl. Lib., MS D.D. Par. St. Aldate's, d.3, ff.6–13. B. Durham et al., 'Archaeological Investigations in St. Aldate's, Oxford', *Oxoniensia* xlii (1977), 83–203.

the flames through the brewhouses, bakehouses, other outbuildings and stocks of fuel, which had little resistance to fire, until the Thames near the South Bridge halted their progress.

The fire did not die out until almost midnight, when it had been burning for ten or eleven hours. In that time the flames had run for almost 1,000 yards and destroyed property in five parishes. One of Sir Samuel Luke's scouts who left Oxford two days later reported that the improbably large number of at least 800 houses had been burnt down. His statement that a parish church – presumably St. Martin's – and Pembroke College had been destroyed was, as we have seen, certainly incorrect.³⁹ Letters sent from Abingdon by Major General Browne and others in the week following the fire give a number of other estimates of the damage, varying between 'about 300' houses burnt and a more definite figure of 330 houses. The proportion of the town destroyed was put at one third or one quarter.⁴⁰ These figures can only have been approximations based on hasty assessments of the damage. There is some support for them, however, in the statement in the same letters that seven brewhouses, twelve bakehouses and nine malthouses had been destroyed. The petition of the Oxford Common Council presented to the royalist commissioners a fortnight after the fire referred to eight brewhouses, ten bakehouses and 'many malt houses',⁴¹ indicating that the parliamentary accounts supplied fairly accurate information of those particular losses. Their figures for the number of houses burnt may have been equally correct.

There are two other sources which provide evidence of the scale of the loss. One is the statement that in St. Ebbe's rather more than eighty houses were burnt and that the parish received a little over a half of the money collected in Oxford for the relief of the victims; which implies a total figure of less than 200 houses.⁴² The rector had only been instituted to the living in the previous year, however, and some of the households in the parish may have escaped his attention, especially those of householders who were too poor to pay the parish dues.⁴³ He may, moreover, have been more active in securing help for his parishioners than were the incumbents of the other four parishes affected by the fire and there is no reason to suppose that payments from the relief fund were made solely in proportion to the number of houses burnt, so that a direct correlation between houses destroyed and the amount paid in relief cannot be assumed. The information for St. Ebbe's may, therefore, be rather misleading in estimating the total loss. The other source is the charitable brief, circulated in 1661, which refers to 175 'sufferers by Fyre'.⁴⁴ If we can equate 'sufferers' with householders then this provides a minimum figure for the extent of the damage. It is not clear whether the information in the brief was based on an assessment of the damage made soon after the fire, or retrospectively, sixteen years later. Some householders would have died and others have left the town between 1644 and 1661 and so would not have been included in the list drawn up for the brief. It may be, too, that known parliamentary supporters were excluded because of their political sympathies. There had been no general collection for the town during the years of parliamentary ascendancy and it is significant that one was

³⁹ *The Letter Books . . . of Sir Samuel Luke*, 672.

⁴⁰ B.L., T.T. E12(11) *Mercurius Civicus* . . ., 677; E12(23) *The Kingdoms Weekly Intelligencer* . . ., 609, E12(16) *The Scottish Dove* . . ., 399; E256(18) *A Diary* . . ., 502–3.

⁴¹ B.L., T.T. E256(23) *Perfect Occurrences of Parliament*, 11–18 October 1644, unpagged. *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, 1644–5*, 46. *Council Acts 1623–1665*, 126.

⁴² Bodl. Lib., MS Oxf. Dioc., b.126, f.7.

⁴³ *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 379.

⁴⁴ The brief is noted in: *The Register of Baptisms, Marriages & Burials of the Parish of Ottery St. Mary, Devon. 1610–1837*, II, ed. H. Tapley-Soper (Devon and Cornwall Rec. Soc., 1908–29), 828, and Essex Record Office, T/R 5/1/4 Chelmsford St. Mary Briefs, 1615–1753, unfoliated.

approved almost immediately after the Restoration. The original number of victims was probably far higher than 175. The losses were valued in the brief at £43,600 and comparison of this figure with valuations taken after other contemporary fires on a similar scale – such as those at Dorchester, Wymondham, Beaminster and Marlborough – supports a figure of between 200 and 300 houses for the Oxford fire.⁴⁵ The initial estimates of the parliamentarians in Abingdon of 300 houses may not have been far from the truth. This was probably less than one sixth of the housing in the town, but nevertheless was a substantial loss.⁴⁶

A number of reasons can be suggested for the extent of the damage. The strong wind, blowing from the north or slightly to the east of north, was one, for it fanned the flames and carried them across features – such as the town wall, Butcher Row and the Trill Mill Stream – that might otherwise have acted as fire-breaks. A second reason was the nature of many of the buildings and the presence of much inflammable material in the area destroyed, which made it difficult to halt the flames. Seventeenth-century Oxford had a wealthy central area around Carfax, with comparatively prosperous districts to the east and poorer areas to the west. The fire affected some of the poorest parts of the town – both St. Peter's-in-the-Bailey and St. Ebbe's were ranked among the lowest parishes in the tax assessments of the period – and they contained a considerable proportion of insubstantial timber and thatch buildings.⁴⁷ The stacks of wood, furze, corn, hay and other provisions also provided fuel for the flames. The case of the brewer Edward Carpenter, who lived in Brewer Street in St. Aldate's, was typical. He claimed that 'Many thousands' of furze faggots stacked near his brewhouse were consumed in the fire, which spread to the brewhouse, destroying it, his brewing vessels and other goods and provisions.⁴⁸ One of the parliamentary newspapers asserted with some satisfaction that many of the goods looted from Cirencester, Marlborough and elsewhere earlier in the war were stored in the area destroyed in the fire.⁴⁹ Thirdly, the task of fighting the fire was hindered by the fear that the parliamentarian forces in Abingdon would take advantage of the situation to launch an attack on the town. Abingdon had been lost by the royalists the previous summer and thereafter posed a threat to the Oxford garrison. The fire could clearly be seen in Abingdon and, after watching its progress, the governor stationed a force of cavalry across the Thames from Oxford. To counter the threat the soldiers in Oxford were ordered to man the defences and they, according to one account, insisted that the townsmen did the same, leaving 'few besides women and children' to fight the flames.⁵⁰ The main Oxford army was still in the West Country with the king and the permanent garrison of the town was not large, its defence being partly entrusted to the regiments made up of townsmen and members of the university.⁵¹ In such circumstances the soldiers may have thought themselves too few to repel an assault without the assistance of the citizens. It seems unlikely, however, that so many of the available men were diverted from fire fighting that it was more or less abandoned, although it could have been somewhat impaired because of the enemy's threat.

⁴⁵ E.L. Jones, S. Porter and M. Turner, *A Gazetteer of English Urban Fire Disasters, 1500–1900* (Historical Geography Research Series xiii, 1984), 16–17.

⁴⁶ Based on a peacetime population of 8,000, excluding members of the university; *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 76.

⁴⁷ *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 98–9. O.U.A., W.P. R/10/16; W.P. Q/8 and 9.

⁴⁸ O.U.A., Chancellor's Court Papers, 26, 1645, Hilary Term 1645/6.

⁴⁹ B.L., T.T. E13(6) *Mercurius Civicus* . . . , 684.

⁵⁰ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1644–5*, 16. B.L., T.T. E13(6) *Mercurius Civicus* . . . , 684; E256(23) *Perfect Occurrences* . . . , unpagged; E13(4) *The London Post* . . . , 5.

⁵¹ For an account of the strength of the Oxford garrison in the summer of 1644 see: B.L., T.T. E254(1) *A Diary, or an Exact Journall*, 4–12 July 1644, 50–1.

There is little evidence of the reaction of the citizens or royalists to the disaster. On 21 October a petition outlining many of the citizens' current grievances was presented by the Common Council to the royalist authorities. It included two references to the fire.³² The reception given to the petition was decidedly hostile; those presenting it were imprisoned and there is no mention in the corporation records of any other attempts to draw attention to the consequences of the fire. The royalist newspaper *Mercurius Aulicus* played down the extent of the damage, claiming that reports of the number of houses burnt down were exaggerated.³³ Leonard Lichfield, the major printer producing material for the royalists, had his printing office in Butcher Row destroyed in the flames and some stocks of books and pamphlets in it were lost. He resumed printing a month after the fire. The publication of *Aulicus* was not interrupted as it was printed by Henry Hall, another Oxford printer.³⁴ The fire seems to have had little other effect on the royalist war effort.

Speculation among the parliamentarians that the king and the army then on campaign with him would be unable to winter in Oxford proved to be unfounded, although the return of the army to the town certainly exacerbated the problem of accommodation and there may have been some immediate shortages of bread and beer because of the number of bakehouses and brewhouses which had been destroyed.³⁵ The area chiefly occupied by members of the court and senior officials had not been affected, but the blaze had damaged some of the districts where the common soldiers were quartered.³⁶ The corporation's complaint that the billeting of troops and their dependants meant that those who had been burnt out could not be housed may have been justified. Population growth in Oxford in the years before the Civil War had coincided with the expansion of the university and by the early 1640s there was considerable pressure on living space within the town.³⁷ A decrease in the number of students during the war years was probably more than compensated for by the presence of the court, the royalist administration and the army. The loss of so many houses in the fire must, therefore, have seriously worsened an already chronic problem. It was a further misfortune that the fire had occurred near to the end of the annual building season. The following winter was a moderately severe one³⁸ and the beginning of rebuilding on any scale must have been delayed until at least the spring of 1645. Some of those made homeless may have left Oxford to seek lodgings in towns and villages nearby, while others found space in the already overcrowded buildings not affected by the fire, or contrived some alternative shelter of their own. Many must have passed a very difficult winter. There was little financial help for those affected by the fire and the £100 or so collected in Oxford itself may have been the only money raised until the charitable brief was circulated during 1661.³⁹ After more than two years of civil war the amounts which people were able or willing to contribute to a collection to help the homeless were probably small.

On the parliamentary side there was a mixed reaction to the fire. The underlying feeling of the London newspapers was that the disaster might prove to be of some advantage, weakening the royalist headquarters militarily and perhaps even making Oxford untenable as a base. Many of the newspapers did not miss the opportunity of drawing their readers' attentions to the fact that the disaster had occurred on a Sunday and

³² *Council Acts 1623-1665*, 124-6.

³³ *Mercurius Aulicus*, 1191-2.

³⁴ F. Madan, *Oxford Books*, 2, 1450-1650 (Oxford, 1912), 362-3, 366-7.

³⁵ *The Letter Books . . . of Sir Samuel Luke*, 26, 272.

³⁶ *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 82.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 75-6, 89-91.

³⁸ H.H. Lamb, *Climate, Present, Past and Future*, ii (1977), 568.

³⁹ Bodl. Lib. MS Oxf. Dioc. Pap. b.126, f.7. Contrast the £3,300 raised after the Nantwich fire of 1583, which was rather less destructive; Kitching, 171-5. Essex R.O., T/R 5/1/4.

to attribute it to a judgement on 'that seat of wickednesse' for sabbath-breaking.⁶⁰ There was also a certain amount of satisfaction that, as one account put it, 'the head quarters of those who had fired so many Townes' should now experience such a disastrous conflagration itself.⁶¹ A more sympathetic note, however, was sounded in Henry Walley's *The true Informer*, where it was pointed out that the fire was an unfortunate accident which was unlikely to be of any advantage to the parliamentary cause and that some of the victims were probably more sympathetic to Parliament than to the royalists. The author also thoughtfully remarked that some of the houses burnt had contained people who were suspected of suffering from the plague and that their enforced breaking of quarantine and mixing with others was likely to spread the disease.⁶² John Dillingham in *The Parliament Scout* took a similar line, stressing that there was no military advantage to be gained as the magazines of food and ammunition had not been destroyed, and this view was echoed elsewhere.⁶³ This opinion was surely correct, for although Browne's troops from Abingdon were able to burn Botley Mill on the day after the fire, they did not have the strength or means to capture Oxford and the town's ability to withstand a siege was not seriously impaired by the conflagration.⁶⁴ Those who suffered because of the fire were the homeless townsmen, not the royalist authorities.

Reconstruction of the destroyed area was a considerable task. Some properties were rebuilt fairly quickly – within two or three years of the fire⁶⁵ – but other plots were still vacant in the late 1640s and it is clear that rebuilding continued well into the 1650s.⁶⁶ Indeed, the issue of a brief in 1661 may indicate that the town had not fully recovered from the fire even then and so was able to justify a claim for relief. An example of a fairly long delay in rebuilding is provided by a site on the north side of the Butcher Row Street on which a number of buildings had stood until they were destroyed in the fire. The ground was still standing empty at the beginning of 1655, as was an adjoining plot of land. Within the next two years six tenements were built on the site.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, a substantial piece of land in one of the main streets, close to the centre of the town at Carfax, had stood vacant for at least eleven years. The nearby Butcher Row was rebuilt in 1655–6.⁶⁸ Recovery from the fire was spread over more than a dozen years. The dislocation caused by the Civil War must have contributed to this delay. The war certainly restricted the financial aid which the victims of the fire received and its impact on the town's economy may also have caused some problems with rebuilding. Although the presence of the court and the royalist headquarters compensated for the temporary suspension of the university, tradesmen apparently found it difficult to obtain payment for the goods and services provided, and this became an almost impossible task after the surrender of 1646.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the

⁶⁰ B.L., T.T. E12(11) *Mercurius Civicus* . . . , 677; E12(16) *The Scottish Dove* . . . , 399; E256(18) *A Diary* . . . , 502–3; E12(23) *The Kingdomes Weekly Intelligencer* . . . , 609.

⁶¹ B.L., T.T. E13(6) *Mercurius Civicus* . . . , 684.

⁶² B.L., T.T. E12(17) *The true Informer* . . . , 362–3.

⁶³ B.L., T.T. E12(12) *The Parliament Scout*, 3–10 October 1644, 547; E13(15) *The Court Mercurie*, 9–16 October 1644, 89–90.

⁶⁴ *Mercurius Aulicus*, 1191–2.

⁶⁵ O.C.R., D.5.6, ff.65v–6, 75v–7. Merton College Archives, College Register, 1567–1731, p. 368. Magdalen College Archives, Ledger N, ff.73v–4.

⁶⁶ O.C.R., D.5.6, pp. 212–5, 217–9; A.5.4. Enrolments of deeds, 1588–1689, ff.44v–5v, 50v–1v. Balliol College Archives, College Leases, 1588–1665, pp. 40–1, 166–7, 180–2; Lease Log Book, 1588–1850, pp. 57, 62–3. I am very grateful to the governing bodies of Merton and Balliol Colleges for kindly granting me access to their archives.

⁶⁷ Balliol College, Lease Log Book, p. 57; Lease Register, pp. 40–1, 166–7.

⁶⁸ *Council Acts 1623–1665*, 212–3.

⁶⁹ For instance, Walter Cave and William Banting, brewers, sought to recover payment from Jesus and Pembroke Colleges for beer supplied between 1641 and 1643, but the debts were repudiated, partly on the grounds that the colleges had been temporarily suspended and occupied by 'strangers' and soldiers when the beer was

population was subjected to considerably increased levels of taxation and after the end of the war many of the urban elite were fined by the parliamentary authorities for their alleged support for the royalist cause.⁷⁰ In such circumstances the community may not have generated enough spare capital in the years immediately following the fire to finance the rebuilding of the area destroyed in 1644 and those properties in St. Clement's which had been demolished by the military.⁷¹ During the war itself, moreover, building materials, such as timber, were not easily obtainable. These difficulties, together with the problems usually encountered after a major disaster of this kind, probably account for the relatively long time which elapsed before the gutted districts were completely rebuilt. Similar delays can be identified at other towns which suffered property losses in the Civil Wars, contrasting with the speed of reconstruction after the majority of peacetime fires during the period.⁷²

Leases which the corporation subsequently granted of its properties destroyed in the fire included covenants stipulating that the new buildings should be roofed in stone slates.⁷³ In March 1645 the earlier general prohibition on thatched roofs in the town was repeated.⁷⁴ The timing of this order, which was made as the new building season began, suggests that it was issued specifically to control the roofing of those properties that were to be erected in the gutted area. These attempts to suppress thatched roofs were not completely successful, however, for they could still be found in the town thirty years later.⁷⁵ The corporation's fire buckets were repaired in the aftermath of the blaze and further steps to improve the town's fire-fighting equipment were taken after the end of the Civil War. Four months after the surrender of the royalist garrison in 1646 the council ordered that ladders and fire-hooks should be obtained and an investigation made into the number of leather buckets available. Further orders concerning the town's buckets were made in 1648.⁷⁶ During the late 1640s and early 1650s a number of towns, including Bristol, Gloucester and Marlborough, acquired fire engines.⁷⁷ In 1654 the mayor of Oxford, Thomas Williams, reported to the council that there was 'a greate necessity . . . for the buyeing of An Engine for the Quenching of ffire' and the town bought its first such appliance soon afterwards.⁷⁸ Some of these fire precautions may have been prompted by the blaze in 1644. That disaster did not, however, provoke the kind of response which followed a much less destructive fire in 1671, when comprehensive sets of regulations were issued by both the civic and university authorities.⁷⁹

The 1644 fire was by far the most destructive one in early-modern Oxford. It was also the worst accidental fire of the Civil War; those at Beaminster and Wrexham had each destroyed only a half of the number of houses burnt down at Oxford. The scale of the

consumed. O.U.A., Chancellors' Court Papers, 27, 1646-51, Cave and Banting v. Jesus College; 31, 1656, Cave v. Pembroke College.

⁷⁰ *Calendar of the Proceedings of the Committee for Compounding*, 1550, 1564-5, 1568, 1584-5, 1595, 1610, 2119, 2566, 2781, 3068.

⁷¹ See above p. 291 and note 15.

⁷² This is discussed more fully in: S. Porter, 'The Destruction of Urban Property in the English Civil Wars, 1642-1651', unpublished Univ. of London Ph.D. thesis (1983) 202-13.

⁷³ O.C.R., A.5.7, Council Book, 1629-63, ff.136, 166; D.5.6. ff.65v-6, 252-v.

⁷⁴ *Council Acts 1623-1665*, 128.

⁷⁵ *Oxford Council Acts 1666-1701*, ed. M.G. Hobson (1939), 53, 138. O.C.R., 0.5.11 Sessions Rolls, 1657-78, ff.136v-7; 0.5.12, Sessions Rolls, 1679-1712, ff.2v, 4. *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood . . .*, II, ed. A. Clark (Oxfordshire Hist. Soc. xxi, 1892), 221-2.

⁷⁶ *Council Acts 1623-1665*, 140, 153. O.C.R., P.5.2, ff.259, 262v, 263v, 268, 271v, 278.

⁷⁷ J. Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century* (Bristol, 1900), 216. Gloucestershire Record Office, Gloucester Borough Records, B3/2 Corporation Minute Book, 1632-56, 447. Wiltshire Record Office, G22/1/205/2 Marlborough General Account Book, 1572-1771, ff.95v-7.

⁷⁸ O.C.R., A.5.7, f.221; P.4.2, Keykeepers' Accounts, 1644-85, f.55v.

⁷⁹ Bodl. Lib. MS Wood 276A, numbers 315-6.

damage was greater than that experienced in any fire in a provincial town since the blaze at Wymondham in 1615 and there were, indeed, few more destructive town fires in the 17th century. Yet the Oxford fire attracted less attention and sympathy than did other disasters on a similar scale. This was partly because of the disruptive effects of the war and – once the general petition to the royalist authorities had been unfavourably received – the lack of a body to which the town could appeal for assistance. The blaze did not go unnoticed in the parliamentary press, but it was only one of many items of bad news which were regularly being given coverage and so its impact may not have been very great. There was, in any case, little which the readers of the parliamentary newsbooks could do to provide assistance for the victims, and the royalist press, as we have seen, played down the impact of the fire. After the end of the war the clamour for aid from communities and individuals who had sustained losses of various kinds in the conflict was so great that nothing could be done for those who had suffered from a disaster which did not have a direct military cause in a town that had been the royalist headquarters for almost four years. The fire was overshadowed by events elsewhere and the destruction of property on an unprecedented scale because of the war. For the same reasons, the occurrence of six major fires within the space of less than two years also passed largely unremarked upon, yet it was the worst concentration of town fires for more than forty years.⁸⁰ In normal, peacetime, conditions these disasters would surely have received greater attention and a more sympathetic response.

⁸⁰ Between 1598 and 1601 700 houses were lost in six fires in Marlborough, Tiverton, Gamlingay, North Walsham, Basingstoke and Great Torrington; E.L. Jones et al., forthcoming.