

Warwickshire Local History Society: 'Great Fire of Warwick' guided walk, 7 June 2021

In 1694 Warwick experienced a catastrophic fire that destroyed hundreds of houses, but which also ushered in a transformation in local urban space. This was the theme of our first outing since September 2019; members heard about the day's events on a walk around the town centre with Sue Rigby and her colleague Paula Fletcher. On 5 September 1694, the fire started at 2 o'clock when sparks from a lighted faggot caught a thatched roof near Lord Leicester's Hospital. A brisk wind blew for hours along the High Street, encouraging the fire to spread from building to building. The wind then changed, the blaze moving towards St Mary's Church and the Market Place. Many townspeople were sheltering in the church with their possessions, some already smouldering, so St Mary's also suffered extensive damage. After six hours the wind dropped and the fire subsided, but many citizens were now homeless.

Stephen Wallsgrove explained the relief and reconstruction efforts, showing us facsimiles of surveys, claims for compensation, and other documents held by the County Record Office. The response of the local elite seemed impressively swift. The very day after the fire, Lord Brooke of Warwick Castle and other wealthy people started a subscription fund to cover people's losses. Commissioners were appointed to scrutinise the claims of inhabitants with a view to compensation. To reduce the risks of further fires, a local Act of Parliament established strict building regulations, on the pattern of London in 1666 and Northampton in 1670, following their own disastrous fires. Thatch and timbered construction were banned in favour of plain frontages in brick and stone. The process of rebuilding took years but enabled Warwick to establish wide straight streets and a co-ordinated classical style.

Members of Warwickshire LHS enjoyed a sunny afternoon and a successful outing. The current pandemic and the required precautions had forced the cancellation of various projected visits, including all planned for last year. Our forthcoming outings will be largely open-air (with other COVID-related measures) starting with Napton-on-the-Hill on 17 July. Full details are available on our website, www.warwickshirehistory.org.uk/events.