

Royal Exchange Fire

Given the size and importance of London, there are remarkably few surviving Mauchline transfers of its sights. One of those which is found, however, is that of the Royal Exchange. This building had been founded in the reign of the first Queen Elizabeth, as a commercial centre for the city. Stock brokers, however, were considered too coarse to operate from there, so that they operated from nearby coffee houses, before the building of their own dedicated stock exchange.

Recently, I acquired a small needle box, made from oak, and bearing the inscription 'OAK From the Royal Exchange DESTROYED BY FIRE on the Night of the 10th JANUARY 1838'.

This prompted me to investigate what had happened on 10th January 1838, and to discover that the Royal Exchange fire was one of the most serious London fires of that century. Indeed, at its height, the flames could be seen from Windsor Castle. A watchman at the Bank of England first raised the alarm about 10.30 in the evening. By then however the fire had gained a strong hold. Within an hour, some 100 firemen and 25 engines were on the scene; but further delays were caused by the gate to the Exchange being locked, and, because of the extreme cold, the hoses and machinery of the engines had to be thawed before they could be used! Much of the fire fighting centred on the clock tower of the exchange, since there was a fear that if it collapsed it would destroy the adjacent residential housing. The Mayor arranged for the residents to be evacuated to the nearby rectory of St. Michael's Church. In the midst of this, the heat caused the bells of the clock tower to begin playing, appropriately enough, *There's nae luck about the house*. It was their swan song; as the fire continued, one by one the bells fell



down the shaft and were melted. Statues which had adorned the walls of the Great Hall were also destroyed, and the great clock face glowed red with ill omen.

Remarkably, early the following morning, the firemen succeeded in rescuing, from the north west corner of the Exchange, a safe from Lloyds Coffee House containing cheques and bank notes. When the safe was open it was found that most of the documents were burnt or charred. Nevertheless it is said that the numbers of the notes etc. were recorded and subsequently replaced.

It was not until midday on the 11th that the fire was declared *under control*. By then it had destroyed the Royal Exchange, the Royal Exchange Assurance Office, the Gresham Committee rooms, Lloyds rooms and the Lord Mayor's offices. In the enquiry which followed, it was suggested that an overheated stove in Lloyds had been the cause of the fire.

Remarkably, only one man was injured, and he had his legs broken by a falling chimney.

This was the second fire to destroy the Royal Exchange. The Elizabethan building was burnt down during the 1666 Great Fire, and rebuilt in 1669. The building which was destroyed in 1838 was said to have been insured for £38,000. A Third Royal Exchange was erected on the site and opened by Queen Victoria in 1844. Trading continued in this Exchange until the outbreak of the Second World War. Now it houses a luxury shopping centre.

Jane Bowen

