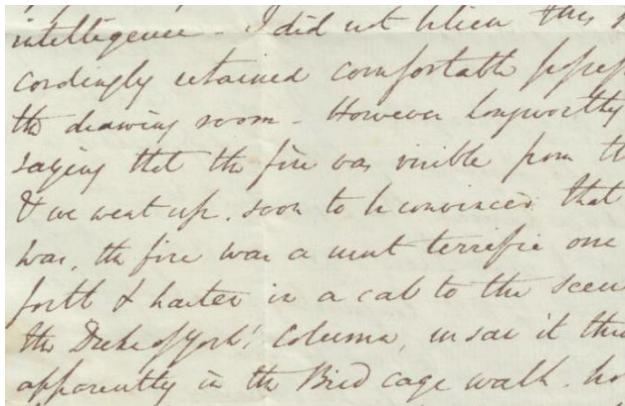


Manuscript of the Month
October 2012

Letter from Henry Hoare to his sister Louisa, 17 Oct 1834



Dear Louisa... Writing on this day I suppose you will expect me to have last night's fire uppermost in my thoughts: at any rate I must tell you what I saw of it, for my account must fall far short of what you will see in the papers.

On 16 October 1834, Henry Hoare (Staplehurst) invited a friend to dine with him at the family banking house on Fleet Street. Not long after they had finished a servant came in and announced that the House of Lords was on fire.

At first Henry was unmoved: *I did not believe this story, & Mr B and I accordingly retained comfortable possession of our chairs in the drawing room.* But when the servant returned and repeated his claim, this time with more urgency, Henry felt obliged to climb to the top of the stairs and look for himself. One glance was enough: *whatever the edifice was, the fire was a most terrific one. We agreed to sally forth & hasten in a cab to the scene of action.*

From their vantage point beside St Margaret's Church, Henry and his companion watched as the blaze, the worst London had witnessed since the Great Fire of 1666, destroyed much of the Palace of Westminster: *the fury of it may be conceived, Henry wrote, when I tell you there were several immense timbers, half dislodged from their ancient resting places, which appeared thro the windows, blazing from end to end, and as completely on fire as a little stick in a common hearth.* Its effect on Westminster Abbey mesmerized him: *you can imagine the lurid glare, arising from the reflection of the opposite flames, which were so vivid that even the stones could not help reflecting it. When the clock struck, the effect of the sound was remarkable, its solemn tone seemed to join in harmony with the awful sight, and the eye and ear to be taught the vanity of earthly greatness.*

At first the cause of the fire was unclear. Exploding gas pipes, careless workmen, newly-installed flues, even the kitchen of a nearby café were all put forward as potential culprits, although those with a suspicious turn of mind were quick to suggest arson. Blame soon settled, however, on the Exchequer's tally sticks, large numbers of which had languished in the basement since the tally system's demise in the mid 1820s. On being told to dispose of them, the Clerk of Works had at first planned to light a bonfire in the Palace yard but, fearing this might inconvenience the neighbours, had opted instead to use the basement stoves that heated the House of Lords' chamber. Two men therefore duly spent the day shovelling tallies into the stoves. At 5pm they packed up and departed for the night. Soon afterwards the smouldering remains re-ignited, travelled up the flues and burst out into the chamber above. By the time the alarm was raised, shortly before 7pm, it was too late.

News of the fire spread almost as quickly as the blaze itself and before long large crowds had gathered to watch. Sightseers crammed onto nearby bridges, wharves and rooftops, and large sums were spent procuring views from houses along Bridge Street. Thames watermen too set about cashing in on this unexpected windfall, charging high fees to take people onto the river, among them Henry Hoare and his friend. Henry wrote: *At 11 we moved to Westminster Bridge, and took a boat which rested for nearly an hour against a gravel island in the middle of the river, left bare*

owing to the low tide. As luck would have it, the Thames that night was unusually low, hampering the fire fighters' efforts considerably.

Henry was surprised to find the crowd in subdued mood: *The opportunity was so good for a tirade against the Lords, that I wondered not to hear in all directions some savage wish expressed that they had the fate of their building, instead of that I did not hear one such exclamation, and on the whole, the mob was very orderly.* His account, though, contrasted sharply with that of the *Morning Post*, which reported: *many appeared to consider it [the fire] as a well-merited visitation, and actually openly expressed their regret that the Lords and Commons were not sitting at the time. We frequently heard such remarks as 'There's a bonfire for the Poor Law Bill'.* Afraid the fire would spark serious unrest, the government ordered troops out onto the streets, although as things turned out they encountered nothing more threatening than a man later convicted of *being in liquor and assaulting the Under-Secretary of State*. Petty crime, however, was rife. *There were vast gangs of the light-fingered gentry in attendance, who doubtless reaped a rich harvest, and did not fail to commit several desperate outrages (Morning Post, 17 Oct 1834).* Unsurprisingly, magistrates' courts soon found themselves dealing with a stream of new cases: pickpockets laden with snuff boxes and pocketbooks, thieves weighed down with brass fittings purloined from the House of Lords and members of the public charged with stealing official papers, although most of the latter claimed merely to have picked them up off the streets as mementoes.

The fire raged all night. Next day, members of the Royal Family could be seen picking their way through the smouldering embers alongside the Prime Minister, the Speaker and an assortment of Cabinet ministers. Hordes of curious onlookers also descended on the scene, some of them armed with sketchbooks and pencils. Prints depicting the fire and its aftermath went on sale within days, although the most memorable images appeared the following year when JMW Turner, who had witnessed the fire at first hand, produced several paintings that captured its full majesty and horror.

Most visitors expressed relief firstly that just one life (that of a fireman) had been lost and secondly that Westminster Abbey had somehow managed to escape the conflagration. But for Henry, the fate of Westminster Hall was just as important: *as I went down Gt George St my breathlessness was considerable for fear lest on turning the corner I might see the mighty mass no more. I was soon relieved.* Little else remained though. Both Houses of Parliament had been destroyed, along with the Speaker's House and several other buildings. And while soldiers were able to salvage some of the Lords' centuries-old records and transport them to Downing Street in a succession of hired waggons and coaches, the House of Commons' records were irredeemably lost.

Once the initial shock had faded, some began to hail the fire as a blessing in disguise. For it presented Britain with a unique opportunity to replace her old Parliament and all its inconveniences with an entirely new one, one *on a scale commensurate with the wants and dignity of the Empire (Derby Mercury, 22 Oct 1834).* A competition to design the new Palace of Westminster attracted nearly a hundred entries. The winning one, by Charles Barry, should have taken six years to build and cost £725K (£51M today), but it was seven years before the House of Commons' chamber was ready for use and a further five before the Lords could take possession of theirs. The cost, meanwhile, spiralled ever upwards. By the time the project finally ended in 1870, some thirty years after it had begun, total expenditure had topped £2M (£149M today). But Barry and his young colleague Augustus Pugin (briefly a bank customer), who was largely responsible for the Palace's distinctive Gothic revival interior, between them created a landmark building that still dominates British political life today.