

## Great Fire and Explosion of Gateshead 1854

The greatest disaster to strike Gateshead was the Great Fire. There had been plagues and fires before 1854 but this was by far the greatest conflagration Tyneside had ever seen. It began in the early morning of Friday 6 October, in a worsted factory in Hillgate. The alarm was raised by a policeman in Newcastle at about 12.30 a.m., and such fire fighting equipment as was available was brought into use.

Despite this the fire raged virtually unchecked.

There was a large, seven-storey warehouse very close to the fire used for storing sulphur, nitrate of soda and other combustible chemicals. The sulphur began to melt and although this warehouse had been designed to withstand fires, this conflagration proved too great and soon the warehouse and nearby buildings were blazing. Soldiers and volunteers from the gathering crowds were now helping the firemen.

There were two small explosions but people were preoccupied with the fire. Then at 3.10 a.m. a terrific explosion blew up the warehouse, sending flaming sulphur and timber over the river to Newcastle. It is recorded that some wood and stones had been blown over half a mile away. The noise was heard from as far away as Hartlepool, Hexham and Alnwick, gas lamps were blown out at Jarrow and the flames could be seen from Northallerton.

The High Level and Tyne Bridges shook, no doubt to the great alarm of the crowds which had chosen them as a vantage point from which to view the fire.

The fire had now spread to Newcastle and help was sent for from Berwick, Sunderland and even Carlisle. Horse drawn fire engines were brought from all over the North East. The fire continued to spread in Gateshead, threatening the badly damaged St Mary's Church. It was only brought under control by army sappers and miners blowing up buildings in its path.

Spectators came to look at the damage, special trains ran on the following Sunday bringing 20,000 people into Newcastle and Gateshead.

Some time later in the year, Queen Victoria asked that her train be stopped on the High Level so that she and her family could look for themselves. More than fifty people were killed and 200 families were made homeless, many of them from the poorer classes who lived in the slums near the river. There were several stories concerning narrow escapes during the disaster. People were said to have sat up in bed at the sound of the explosion and seconds later a stone came through the roof landing amongst the pillows.

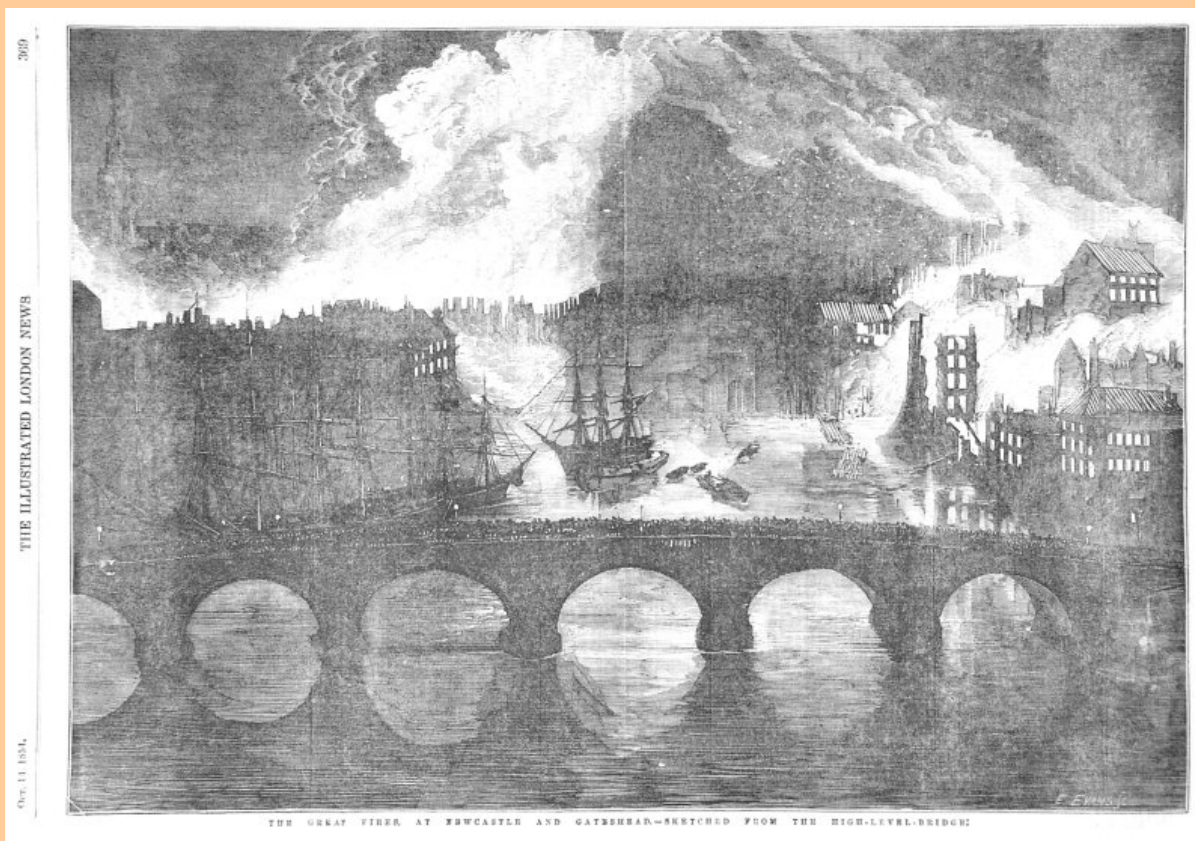
A fireman and his son were standing together at the scene of the disaster. The fireman was killed during the explosion but the son survived. The estimated damage was put at more than £500,000 but only one quarter of this was paid out in insurance cover. As well as the large crater in Gateshead and fire damaged buildings, many windows were blown out.

A Presbyterian Minister from South Shields wrote a sermon, which said that this calamity was a divine judgement for the ungodliness of the people! Copies went on sale and profits were given to the relief fund. This raised more than £10,000 thanks to special collections, a charity theatre performance and large donations, including £100 from the Queen.

Compensation was paid at a rate of £50 per family, probably making some poor families much better off than they were before the fire.

Official inquests were carried out in Gateshead and Newcastle and rumours that gunpowder had been stored in the warehouse were discounted. Experiments were carried out to find the cause of the explosion and experts were called in, but both juries decided that there was insufficient evidence to point to any particular cause.

If any good can be said to have resulted from the fire, it was that the shocking slums of Hillgate were largely destroyed and were never rebuilt. The area destroyed by the fire may be seen to this day.



From [www.picturesofgateshead.co.uk](http://www.picturesofgateshead.co.uk)