

Farnhill Mill Fires – 20/12/1905 and 31/03/1906

In the run-up to Christmas 1905, Farnhill was a relatively prosperous industrial village, with mills providing ample work for the community. By Easter 1906 all this had changed. Two large mills had been destroyed by fire and local people were either unemployed or forced to travel a significant distance, in some cases on foot, for work.

This article aims to tell the story of the two devastating fires and the impact that they had on Farnhill.

Farnhill Mill – 20/12/1905

Farnhill Mill stood in Main Street, on the canal bank, by Redman Bridge. It was built around 1895.

Forty yards long by 18 yards wide, and four storeys high, the building was owned by a Mr. Kay of Cottingley and was rented out to two separate businesses. The upper two floors were occupied by Mr. Hollings' wool spinners, and employed 30 hands; the lower two floors and an adjacent shed were occupied by W. Sunderland and Sons, wool manufacturers, who employed around 60 people.



Fig 1: Farnhill Mill before the fire. Newby Road in the foreground.

The fire seems to have started a little before midnight on Wednesday 20th December 1905 and was first spotted by two policemen on duty in Cross Hills.

By seven minutes past midnight both the Skipton and Keighley Fire Brigades had been notified by telephone. However, although the Skipton brigade responded immediately, the Keighley brigade refused to turn out. The reason given was that Farnhill was outside the area normally patrolled by the Keighley force and, as no payment had been made by the owners of the mill towards the upkeep of the Keighley service, they were not required to attend.

The Skipton brigade were at the scene within 35 minutes and four water jets, supplied by water from the canal, were brought to bear. The interior of the mill was already past saving, with flames rising into the air that could be seen for many miles around. However, they did manage to save some of the stock, the weaving shed and adjacent boiler, and the books and papers of Sunderland and Sons.

A strong south-westerly wind prevented the brigade from getting the fire under control until around 3am and, for some time at least, there was concern for the houses opposite. When the fire was at its height, some of the householders began to remove their furniture to places of safety. In the event the houses were undamaged, although some of the woodwork was charred.

The fire was finally put out at around 3pm on the Thursday. By this time the interior of the mill had been gutted and two of the walls had fallen in.



Fig 2: The ruins of Farnhill Mill. This photograph taken from the canal bridge.

The cause of the fire was never discovered, although newspaper reports put it down to “overheating” (of what precisely is not made clear). Mr. Hooley, the engineer, who was on duty until 10pm on Wednesday night, said he saw nothing unusual.

By the time news of the fire was reported in the local newspapers, the reporters were able to add that many of the people working at the mill had been taken on elsewhere – including at the nearby Airedale Mill.

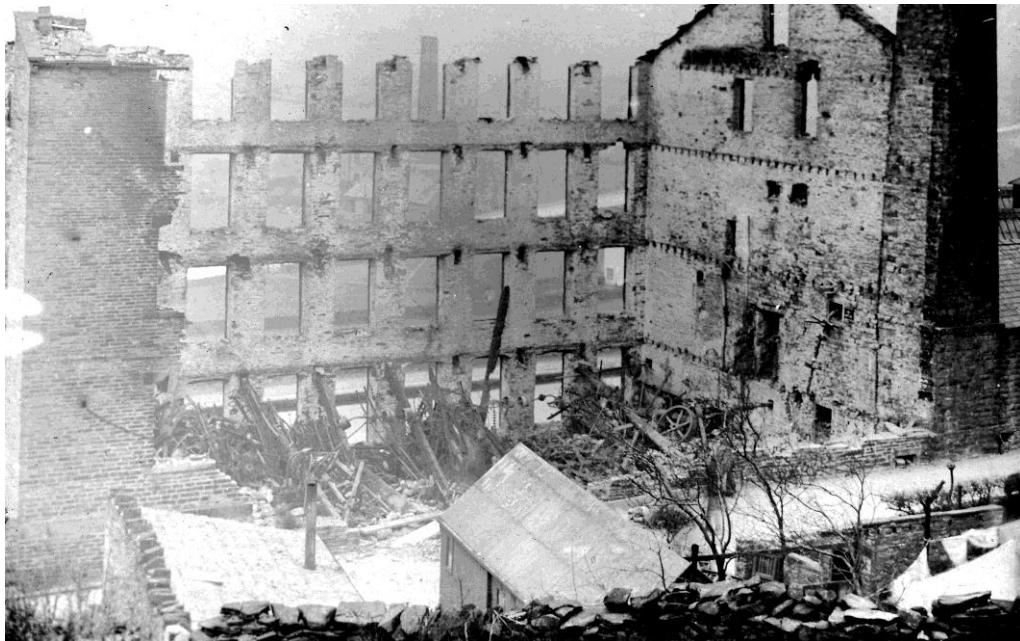


Fig 3: Another view of the ruins of Farnhill Mill. The chimney of Airedale Mill can be seen through the debris.

Mr. Sunderland was confident that he would resume business within a few weeks, in the weaving shed. But even before this building was made safe, a further devastating fire struck the village.



Fig 4: Rebuilding and making safe Farnhill Mill. Ivy Cottages, shown in the foreground, were later demolished; the site is now a car park.

Airedale Mill – 31/03/1906

Airedale Mill was situated almost directly opposite Farnhill Mill, on the other side of the canal and main Keighley to Skipton road.



Fig 5: The canal and culvert, photographed around 1900 from the top of Kildwick Church. Airedale Mill can be seen at the top centre.

Airedale was about the same size as Farnhill Mill and provided employment for around 100 people. It was owned by Mrs. Ellen Watson and occupied by Aked and Sons, who used the first two floors, and S. D. Watson, who had the third floor and garret. Mr. and Mrs. Watson lived in the house attached to the back of the mill building (clearly visible in Fig 4).

The fire was first seen from Farnhill a little after 10pm and already, by this time, it appeared to be well established. Local news reports commented on the rather odd point of origin of the fire: they are quite clear that it started at the east end of the second floor of the building, and quickly spread up through the building and into the roof.

Both the Skipton and Keighley fire brigades attended, but the central section of the roof had collapsed before either of them arrived; and before they could get to work the whole of the building was fully alight and beyond saving.



Fig 6: A quite remarkable photograph of the Airedale mill fire.

People gathered to watch and some helped move yarn from the mill yard and to remove furniture from the Watson's house. The fire brigades poured water on the house, rather than the doomed mill, and succeeded in saving it. However, as the Keighley News reported, a good deal of damage was caused – not all of it resulting from the fire:

When the alarm of fire was given the door of the residence was burst open, Mr. and Mrs. Watson being out, and a number of people promptly set to work to remove various articles of furniture into the open, first appearances pointing to the complete destruction of the whole of the buildings. In their excitement and over-eagerness to ensure the safety of the contents of the house no doubt the well-intentioned helpers did irreparable damage to many valuable pieces of furniture: but it was obvious, from the extent and the character of a good deal of the damage, that wanton mischief had been done by somebody.

The curtains and blinds had been torn down, a piano had been pitched over a hedge and badly damaged, a marble slab from a piece of bedroom furniture had been thrown from a window and smashed to atoms ... a door had been wrenched off a very valuable wardrobe, the back had been pulled off a sideboard which had then been jammed into a doorway, and even a heating appliance in the lobby had been dragged from its position. Then, as if this were not enough, some thief or thieves made off with a silk dress belonging to Mrs. Watson, several blouses, a large quantity of linen and a number of silver articles. The house has been devastated: indeed had half a dozen wantons deliberately set themselves to wreck the contents they could not have done their work more effectually. And this was a new home: Mr. and Mrs. Watson having been married only a short time. Many valuable wedding presents were either smashed or destroyed.

By the following day, the site was left a smouldering ruin.



Fig 7: The ruin of Airedale Mill.

It attracted sight-seers for some time afterwards.



Fig 8: This photograph, taken by the Farnhill photographer George Whiteoak, shows the crowd gathered on the Keighley Road to view the ruins of Airedale Mill.

Aftermath

Both mill fires resulted in considerable losses. At Farnhill Mill, the cost of the damage was estimated at £7000. At Airedale, Aked & Sons lost material worth around £5000; Mr. and Mrs. Watson lost buildings, machinery and stock worth £12000. Fortunately, in both cases, at least some of the loss was offset by insurance.

But the biggest impact must have been on the working population of the village.



Fig 9: The two devastated mills. Between them they had provided employment for over 200 local people.

One villager affected by both mill fires was Farnhiller Mrs Margaret Baugh (nee Walmsley). Having been left a widow in 1889, with a one-year old son to support, she went to work as a weaver at Farnhill Mill. When that mill burned down she was fortunate to find work at Airedale Mill and when that burned down she had to take work wherever she could find it. She ended up going to Bradley Mill which would not have been the easiest of walks on cold dark winter days: especially when you consider she would not have been wearing the type of footwear and waterproof clothing we take for granted today. Margaret continued to work in Bradley until she married Wilfred Crossley, the brother of her sister's husband, in 1908.

The newspaper reports of the time expressed the hope that both mills would be rebuilt. The following, from the Keighley Gazette, appeared just a week after the Airedale Mill fire:

While the disaster is unfortunate for the employers, it is greatly to be regretted from the stand point of the workpeople. Following so soon upon the Farnhill fire, the local factory operatives have been hit very hard indeed. Work at the mill had not been plentiful for some time past, but a spell of full work had recently been entered upon, Mr. Watson having on hand orders which would have lasted for at least six months.

A good many of the workpeople have found employment at neighbouring factories, but there are yet a considerable number out of work. In any case it will mean a certain number of people leaving the district but, for the welfare of the village, it is to be hoped that the mill will be rebuilt as soon as the insurance claims have been settled.

But Airedale Mill never was rebuilt – the site is now a substantial private house.

At Farnhill Mill, Sunderland and Son continued to employ about 30 people, working in the weaving shed that had survived the fire.



Fig 10: The aftermath of the Farnhill Mill fire. The weaving shed (to the right) appears largely unscathed.

In February 1915 the Keighley News announced the creation of a new company, “Sunderland and Sons”, worsted manufacturers.

This may have coincided with the rebuilding of that part of the mill that had been destroyed as a two-storey weaving shed.

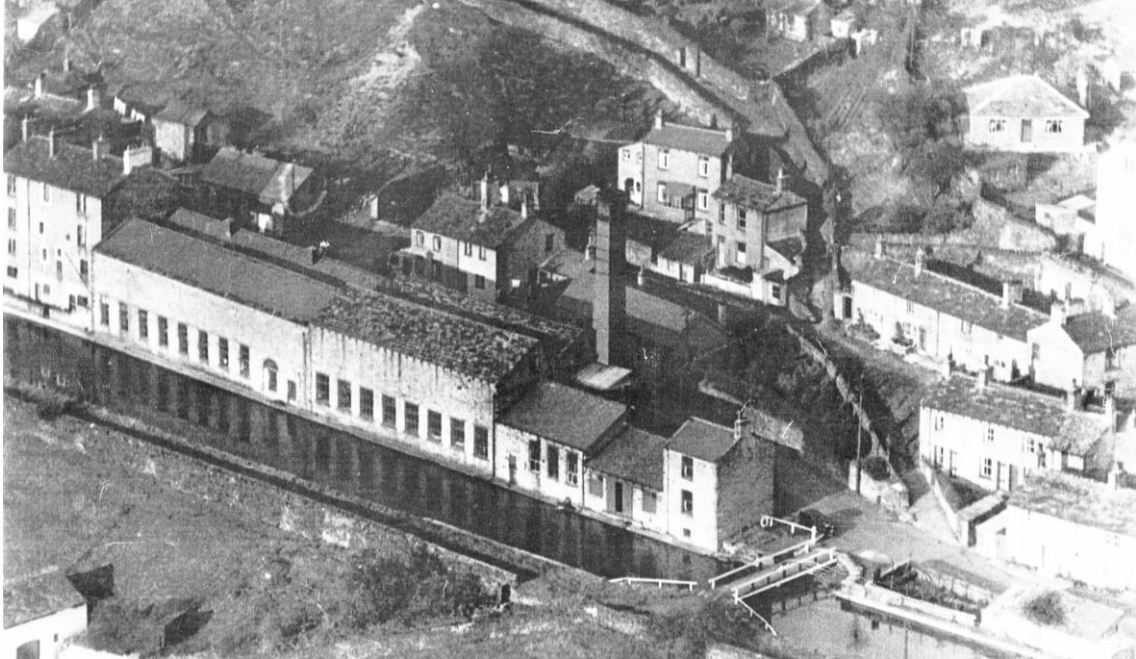


Fig 11: The “restored” Farnhill Mill. Date unknown.

The building continued to provide employment, for various purposes and under various owners – latterly Cossentine’s – until the early 1990s.





Fig 12: Two views of Cossentine's, Farnhill.

In 1991/2 the mill building was demolished and the site redeveloped as the Bainbridge Wharf properties.

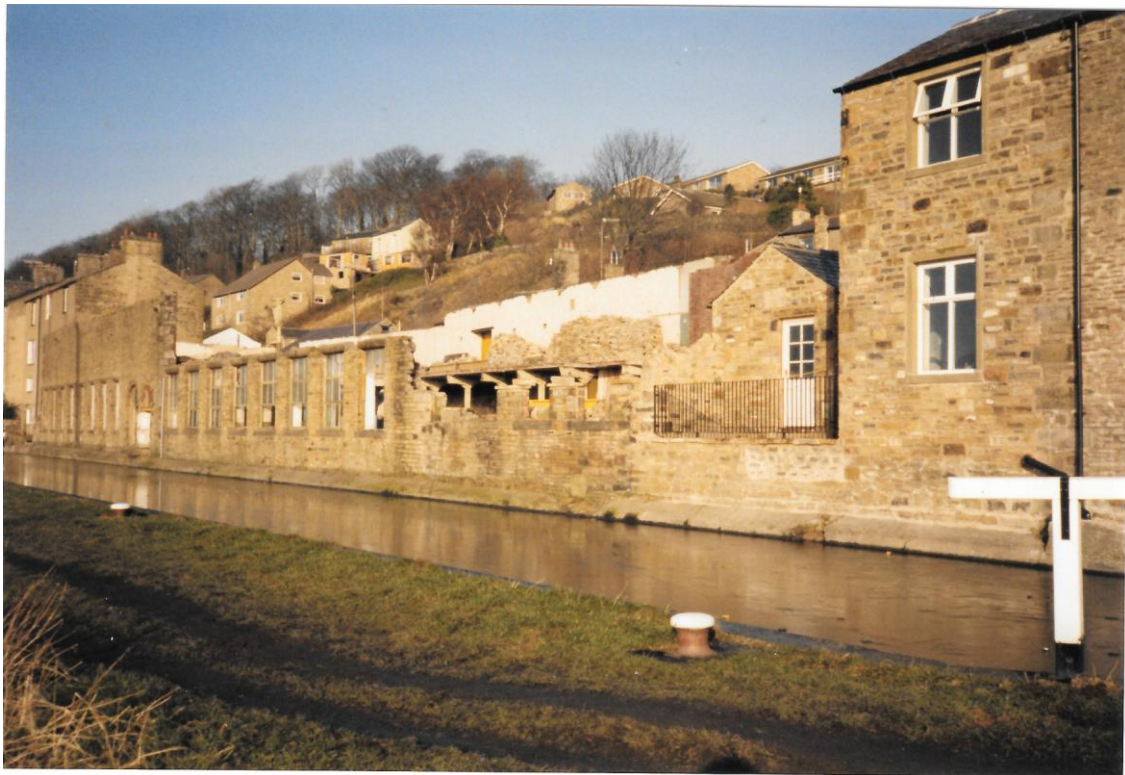




Fig 13: Demolition of Cossentine's, January 1992.

References and acknowledgements

Source material for this article has come from the Craven Herald (December 22nd 1905) and the Keighley News (December 23rd 1905, April 7th 1906, and February 13th 1915). For some reason, the Craven Herald did not report the Airedale Mill fire.

The quotation from the Keighley Gazette (dated April 7th 1906) was taken from the magazine "1900 – 1981 In Craven", produced by students of South Craven school in 1981.

Helen Moran provided information about her grandmother, Margaret Crossley.

Photographs were provided by members of the Local History Group, and by Barry Durham and Jean Waring.