

THE FIRES OF LONDON

Part 2. The Jewin Street Fire

Jeremy Brooker

Another London fire which attracted the lurid attentions of the slide artist's brush played out in the narrow thoroughfares around St Giles' Church, Cripplegate, in November 1897.¹ This was an area of the city densely populated with small factories and retail outlets largely associated with the clothing industry, and with such a rich source of inflammable material on hand it is little wonder that a small localised blaze quickly spread out of hand. By evening, some 500 firemen and police officers were at work fighting the blaze and managing the crowds, but despite their best efforts a large area of the city was destroyed. This was widely described as the worst fire to hit London since the Great Fire of 1666.

An inquiry to determine the cause of the fire was established almost immediately. The entire jury narrowly escaping death when a wall collapsed during their visit to the site on 8 December.² A majority verdict was not reached until mid-January, with the shocking conclusion that the fire had very probably been started deliberately on the first floor of a factory premises in Well Street "by some person or persons unknown".³

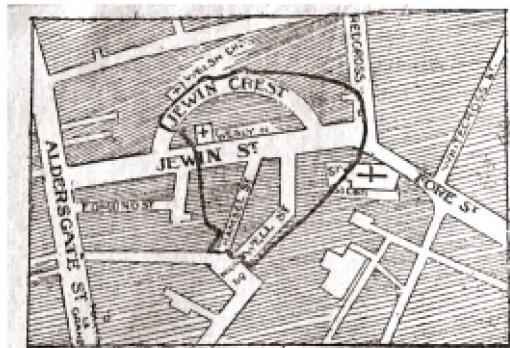
What was clear to everyone was that the rapid spread of the fire and its disastrous consequences lay in the narrowness of the streets and the style and construction of the buildings, which were quite unsuited to the purposes to which they had been adapted. Adjacent buildings had been knocked through to create larger premises, and floors removed to facilitate the movement of goods within buildings. Coupled with the inflammable nature of many of the goods being manufactured, this was a catastrophe waiting to happen.

Special concern was raised for the plight of the many workers left destitute by the fire. *The Times* commented that "the most grievous feature of the calamity will depend upon the numbers of industrious people who will be deprived of work at the commencement of the winter season, and many of whom, as being skilled in a special industry which for a time will be almost entirely suspended, will find it difficult or impossible to find work elsewhere".⁴

Many of these workers were women. A report in the *London Daily Chronicle* claimed that 3,000 to 4,000 women and girls, many of them primary breadwinners, had been thrown out of work and were then subsisting on half-pay through the auspices of a fund administered through Mansion House, the Lord Mayor's residence.⁵

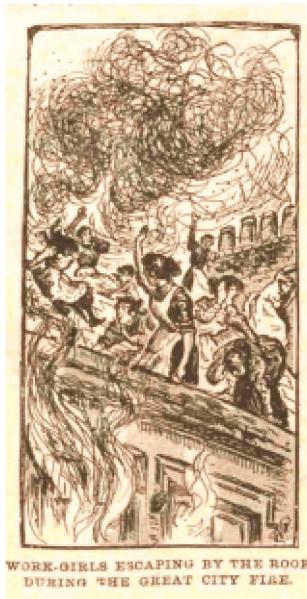
After the fire there were calls for better methods of construction of warehouses using non-combustible materials, wholesale changes to the road layout, changes to the practices of fire crews and demands that the fire brigade should be allowed to visit premises to assess safety. In the event none of these precautions were adopted. It was only following the wholesale destruction of this part of London during the Second World War that the area was finally cleared, making way for the dubious charms of the present Barbican Centre. None of the streets affected by the Jewin Street fire survive today.

The fire naturally sparked widespread press commentary and public outrage, generating many photographs and engravings which attempted to capture the sheer extent of the devastation. It also gave rise to an exceptional sequence of dissolving view slides, purporting to give an authentic representation of the fire and its aftermath. Like the sequence depicting the Cheapside fire (discussed in Part 1 of this article, *TML* 42), this dissolving view set comprises four slides.

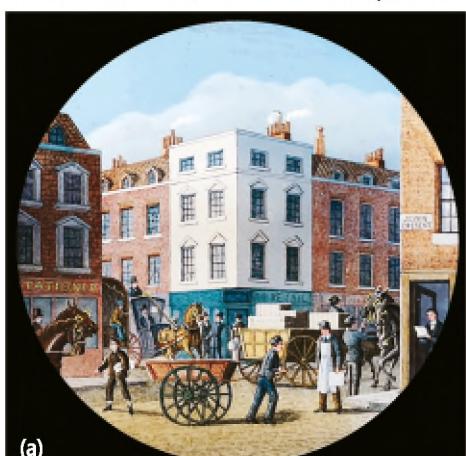


1. (top) Map of the Jewin Street fire. From *The Star*, 20 November 1897.

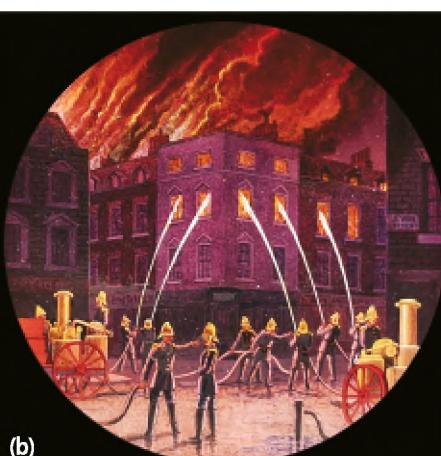
2. (above) The Great Fire in Cripplegate. Cover of City Press 'Record of the Great Fire in Cripplegate' Both are reproduced at www.alondoninheritance.com/london-history/the-great-fire-in-cripplegate/



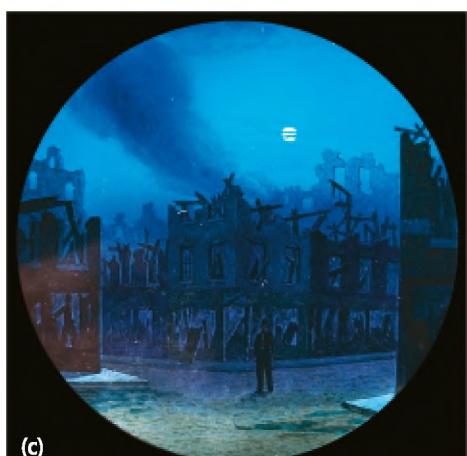
3. Work-girls escaping by the roof. Penny Illustrated Paper, 27 November 1897, p. 9



(a)



(b)



(c)

4. Jewin Street Fire: (a) Day; (b) Fire; (c) Aftermath. Edmund Wilkie, 1898 (Martin Gilbert Collection)

There is a bustling daytime street scene before the fire, a night scene showing some blazing buildings and an aftermath in which a policeman stands solitary vigil over the smouldering ruins.

What sets this wonderful sequence apart is the fourth slide, an elaborate and sophisticated effect which plays out during the second and third slides using all three lenses of a triunial lantern. A sliding glass gradually pulls aside to reveal the flame effect, creating the impression of the fire progressively taking hold of the building in a more naturalistic and dramatic way than the simpler fire effect which accompanied the Cheapside fire slides. Even more impressively, there is a third moving glass which pivots to allow the upper storey of the burning building to collapse inwards in connection with the final slide as the building falls into ruin (Fig. 5).

Though no manufacturer is indicated, 'The Great Fire in Jewin-street, entirely new effects, the building burns down' was included in a list of new effect slides by Edmund Wilkie published in November 1898.⁶ Although the effect is an impressive one, it also appears to have been something of a rarity. In contrast to the widespread plagiarism seen in relation to the Cheapside fire slides, I am not aware of any alternative versions of these slides.

As I suggested in Part 1, the designer of the Cheapside slides benefitted from the existence of a remarkable source image and a series of serendipitous circumstances. The construction of that building left a skeletal iron frame in place even after the fire had completed its work, so it was possible to reconstruct convincingly the scene before, during and after the fire. The contained nature of the earlier fire meant its key events could be represented in their entirety from this single vantage point. Perhaps most significantly it took place in Cheapside, one of London's most famous thoroughfares, in close physical proximity to St Paul's Cathedral, one of London's most universally recognised landmarks. Even the most geographically distant viewer could locate this event in the very centre of the metropolis, which must surely have added to its effectiveness.

From the perspective of the magic lantern slide manufacturer, the fire in the area around Jewin Street had none of these advantages. It played out in the kinds of unglamorous back streets rarely frequented by tourists, and the very nature of the fire made it difficult to encapsulate in a single, telling image. There was wholesale destruction on an epic scale and much of the area was left a featureless wilderness. Reconstructing the 'before' and 'after' from such a scene would certainly have been a challenge! (Figs 6 and 7)

The creator of the dissolving view sequence clearly wanted this to be seen as a true representation of an historic event. The location is referred to by name in the advertisement by Edmund Wilkie, and the passageway on the right of the picture is clearly identified as 'Jewin Crescent', one of the streets most badly affected by the fire. However, the scene represented in Fig. 4(a) appears more like the high street of some provincial market town than the densely packed urban manufacturing district we know it to have been. We see an orderly parade of shops populated with purposeful delivery boys and respectfully dressed gentlemen in hansom cabs. Looking more closely at the map (Fig. 1), the only possible crossroads encompassing Jewin Crescent would have been at the junction of Jewin Street and Well Street. And yet it is known that the property on that corner was 23 Jewin Street, occupied by the London Hanover Stationers' Company and the Bespoke Tailoring Company. Beyond the presence of a few policemen, surviving photographs of this building in its ruined state bear little or no resemblance to these magic lantern slides.

It seems possible that the ruins depicted in Fig. 4(c) are derived from a photograph (or photographs) taken at the scene. However, the location opposite Jewin Crescent and the reconstructed buildings found in Figs 4(a) and (b) are probably invented. What the slide artist has caught very effectively in Fig. 4(c) is the emotional impact of the disaster, the sombre palette and the solitary policeman standing alone in the darkness underlining the sense of utter devastation.

Before leaving the Jewin Street fire, we might look at two further representations of that event as seen through the magic lantern. The first is a familiar one, taken from the well-known transfer set *Our Firemen* by W. Butcher & Son (Fig. 8). Slide 4 in this series dedicated to the juvenile incendiary is 'The Fire in Jewin Street', described in the accompanying reading as "The most serious fire during recent years." The image derives from a contemporary print representing the premises of the London Hanover Stationers' Company and the Bespoke Tailoring Company mentioned above – albeit rather freely. A photographic lantern slide of the same scene (Fig. 9) shows the distinctive building shape but



(a)



(b)



(c)

5. (a) Before the fire effects have been uncovered (note pivoting glass on right-hand side); (b) and (c) With fire effects and showing the collapsing building (compare the two) (Martin Gilbert Collection)



6. Lantern slide, looking towards St Giles' Church (photograph c.1897)



7. Lantern slide of devastated area between Well and Harnell Streets (photograph c.1897)



8. 'Our Firemen', slide 4 (W. Butcher & Sons, 8 slides, 1901) (Lucerna, item 5053679)



9. Lantern slide of London Hanover Stationers' Company (photograph c.1897)



10. The 'Great Fire in the City, Bird's Eye View of the Ruins', The Graphic 'Great Fire in the City', 27 November 1897



11. Slide 50 of the lecture series All about a London daily (York & Son, 52 slides, 1898)

In the shortest possible time, fire-engines came from every direction, and by eleven o'clock a hundred firemen were at work.¹⁷

As we have seen in earlier fires, the representation of the fire followed a familiar path. Photographs of the aftermath were quickly adapted for print publication, creating vivid depictions of the fire as it raged, and these were subsequently applied to the magic lantern.

We can see this process at work in Figs 12-14. The photograph (or one very like it) (Fig. 12) was re-worked by Gennaro d'Amato, a regular contributor to the *Illustrated London News*. To create a greater sense of drama he has changed the point of view, bringing the observer to street level with the burning buildings rising on all sides. Although colour undoubtedly adds to the effect, the ensuing lantern slide (Fig. 14) is essentially a straightforward reproduction of this same illustration, by permission of the *ILN* proprietors.

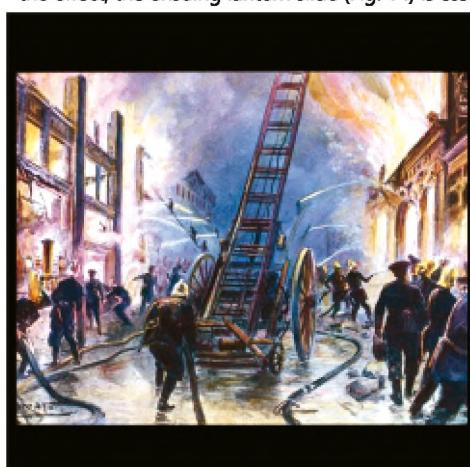
What should we make of these various depictions of the fires which raged in the streets of the capital within a few minutes' walk of each other in the years 1881, 1897 and 1902? Clearly, they demonstrate the continuing fascination for scenes of mass destruction, which have long been a staple of both



12. Scene of the Great Barbican Fire. The same photograph appears in The Graphic, 26 April 1902



13. 'Great Fire in the City', Illustrated London News, 26 April 1902, p. 600b (left)



14. Lantern slide after painting by Gennaro d'Amato (right)

journalism and popular visual culture. They also demonstrate the importance of topicality in the impact of such depictions. Although these slides were probably never intended as news reportage, it was the impression of 'authenticity' (the sense that these scenes represent true and, better still, recent events), that was central to their success.

Somewhat unusually, because depictions of fires represent real-life events, they can be dated with some accuracy. The time between each event and its appearance on the lantern screen may not generally be known, but it is reasonable to suppose that the delay was not long. After all, new fires came along with alarming regularity. We can therefore speculate that the appearance of the slides was within a year or two of the events they describe, as was the case with Edmund Wilkie's Jewin Street slides.

Taken together, the chronology of these depictions appears to mirror broader trends in the slide industry in late Victorian London, as described by David Robinson in 'The Rise and Fall of the Triple Lantern'.⁸ We know that the elaborate effects seen in the Cheapside and Jewin Street fires were specifically designed for use in a triunial lantern, with the effect slide staying on the screen while the lanternist dissolved between successive stages of the fire. In the case of the Cheapside fire this sequence was widely plagiarised by other slide manufacturers, suggesting a strong and competitive market for this kind of effect slide in the 1880s.⁹

By comparison, the Jewin Street slides were not widely copied, and their production appears to have been restricted to a single manufacturer. In part, this might have been due to the costs involved in reproducing the complex effect slide. It is also true that the Cheapside fire benefitted from a particularly striking image which proved an ideal starting point for a dissolving view sequence. However, we might also sense a decline in the market for triunial effect slides. The Jewin Street sequence was available from November 1898, by which time the market for new effect slides for the triunial lantern had already cooled. By the time of the Barbican fire in 1902, this demand had all but disappeared.

If these slides suggest something about the nature of magic lantern spectacle, they also play on a universal fear of fire and its inherent dangers in an age when such fears were particularly well founded. The Metropolitan Fire Brigade (later renamed as the London Fire Brigade) came into being in 1865 as a direct response to these fears, and it is notable that the reassuring figure of the heroic London firefighter was central to all these depictions.



15. Lantern slide view across London

Most shocking to us today were the precarious lives and livelihoods of many Londoners, forced to work in such dangerous conditions. Nor is this merely the wisdom of hindsight. Writing of the Barbican fire in 1902 one commentator observed:

"The district around the Barbican is recognised by every insurance office in London as the fire centre of the Metropolis. If ever there is to be another great fire of London it will first gather strength there, for this quarter seems made for destruction."¹⁰

Even before the Jewin Street fire four years earlier, insurance companies had been unwilling to accept policies in that part of London. Since that time such reticence had only increased, and one of the great tragedies of the 1902 fire was that very few businesses had been able to take out insurance and were left destitute.

It is striking that none of the streets described in these two articles survive today. A few isolated buildings still stand testament to the resilient spirit of a great city. St Giles' Church somehow avoided destruction in the Great Fire of 1666, the Jewin Street Fire, the Blitz and even the excesses of the post-War boom in property speculation. We should perhaps be grateful that so much of the London of crowded tenements and appalling working conditions is a thing of the past. But for all the architectural wonders of modern London, it is difficult not to feel a slight pang of loss for that old city, grimy and dilapidated – its isolated remnants a welcome reminder of an age now gone.

Images are from Jeremy Brooker's collection unless stated otherwise.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The fire started just before 1pm on 27 November 1897. Though early reports suggested the fire started at Waller and Brown at numbers 30 and 31 Hamsell Street, an inquiry later concluded that it probably began in the adjacent Wells Street.
2. *St James's Gazette*, 9 December 1897, p. 13b
3. Inquest findings quoted in www.alondoninheritance.com/london-history/the-great-fire-in-cripplegate/, which includes an excellent account of the fire
4. *The Times*, 20 November 1897
5. *London Daily Chronicle*, 4 December 1897, p. 8a
6. *Optical Magic Lantern Journal*, November 1899, General Advertisements, p. iv
7. Quoted in www.alondoninheritance.com/london-history/the-great-fire-in-cripplegate/
8. David Robinson, 'The Rise and Fall of the Triple Lantern' in Dennis Crompton, Richard Franklin and Stephen Herbert (eds), *Servants of Light: The Book of the Lantern*, Magic Lantern Society, 1997, pp. 34-45
9. Some of these plagiarised sets may have been manufactured without the fire effects and might therefore have been suitable for a biunial lantern.
10. *Hull Daily Mail*, 23 April 1902, p. 4c