

Shannons Mill

When a blaze took hold in an historic leather mill at the heart of Walsall town centre on the 3rd August 2007, West Midlands Fire Service was faced with the largest fire it has had to fight for 25 years.

More than 150 firefighters tackled the fire at Shannons Mill in Lower Hall Lane, which saw the landmark building destroyed and threatened to devastate neighbouring shops and homes.

Shannons Mill was built when Walsall's famous leather industry was at its height and was used for nearly 100 years as a tannery, with machinery on every floor spilling grease and oils onto the wooden flooring.

Firefighters from Walsall and Bloxwich were the first to arrive on the evening of Friday, August 3, having been alerted just before 10.40pm. After a rapid reconnaissance of the situation, they straight away called for four more fire engines and a hydraulic platform.

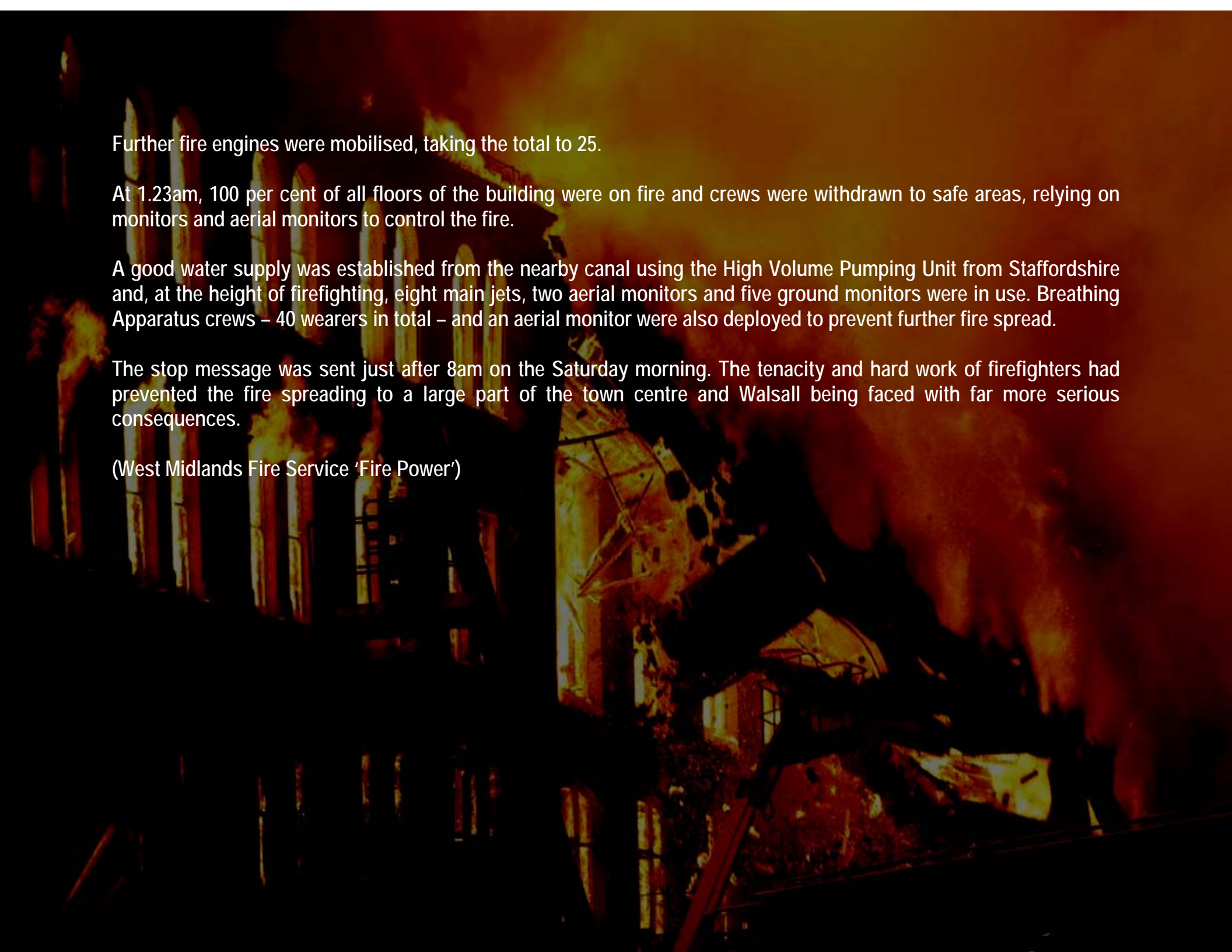
While the fire then appeared to be confined to one part of the building, heat was releasing vapours from the flooring, fuelling a dramatic escalation of the incident and within minutes, the four floors of the Lower Hall Lane portion of the building began to flash over and flames broke through the windows.

Firefighters were making a sustained attack on the fire when Lower Hall Lane part of the building started to collapse and crews had to be withdrawn because of the serious risk to their safety. Just after 11.30, as the blaze continued to spread, a total of 20 fire engines had been mobilised to the scene.

Embers the size of tennis balls were now falling on flat roofs several hundred yards down wind and a team of firefighters were tasked with controlling any resulting outbreaks of fire. They dealt with five separate fires.

Complicating factors included the 800 metre perimeter which complicated command and control and inadequate water supplies.

By midnight, the fire had started to penetrate into the George Street section of the building, which soon collapsed into the street. This side of the fireground was critical, as there was a risk the blaze could spread to neighbouring properties including a new Asda supermarket.

A large fire at night, with firefighters on a ladder. The scene is illuminated by the fire's glow, showing a multi-story building with a fire on the upper floors. Firefighters are visible on a ladder, working to contain the fire. The background is dark, with the fire providing the primary light source.

Further fire engines were mobilised, taking the total to 25.

At 1.23am, 100 per cent of all floors of the building were on fire and crews were withdrawn to safe areas, relying on monitors and aerial monitors to control the fire.

A good water supply was established from the nearby canal using the High Volume Pumping Unit from Staffordshire and, at the height of firefighting, eight main jets, two aerial monitors and five ground monitors were in use. Breathing Apparatus crews – 40 wearers in total – and an aerial monitor were also deployed to prevent further fire spread.

The stop message was sent just after 8am on the Saturday morning. The tenacity and hard work of firefighters had prevented the fire spreading to a large part of the town centre and Walsall being faced with far more serious consequences.

(West Midlands Fire Service 'Fire Power')