

The Great Fire of Warwick: The Commissioners' Order Book ([CR1618/WA4/1](#))

On the 5th September 1694,

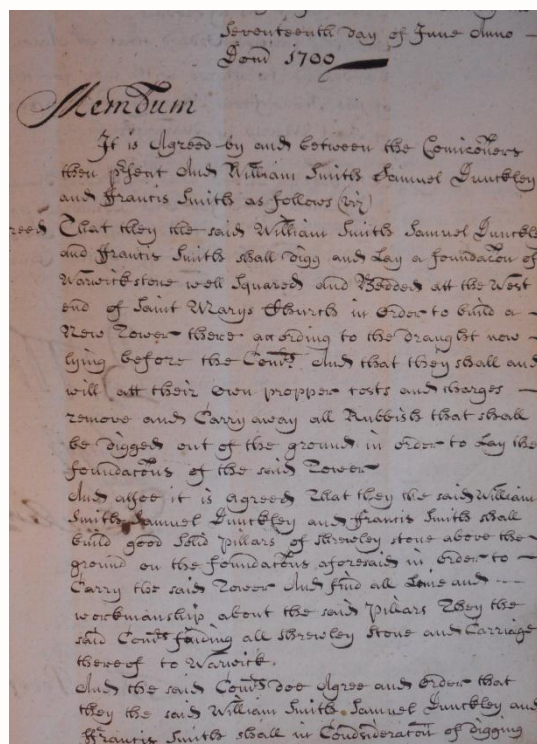
*'..a sudden fire, which broake out about two of the clock in the afternoon on the fifth of this instant September, in the western part of the towne of Warwick, which by the violence of the wind was soe swiftly carried through the principall parts of the same that noe opposition could be made to hinder the fierceness of its progress, till it had in few hours consumed almost all of the Highstreet, the Church Street and the Sheepstreet intirely, part of the Jury Street, Newstreet, and many buildings about the Market House, together with the great and antient church of St Maryes and severall other buildings on other parts of the towne...'*¹

The Commissioners Order Book, from which this description of the Great Fire of Warwick comes in the opening entry, spans the next ten years, documenting the relief given to those affected by the fire and the rebuilding of Warwick itself. It is one part of an extensive collection Warwickshire County Record Office hold relating to the Great Fire, catalogued as [CR1618/WA4](#).

The fire radically altered the appearance of Warwick town, including the church of St Mary's. As a result of the fire, the tower nave and transepts of St Mary's Church were destroyed. By 1698, builders had been employed to rebuild the church according to the design by Sir William Wilson, which included rebuilding the tower '98 feet high from the ground to the top of the battlements'² The tower was designed to rest on 2 pillars within the nave and 2 pillars within the west wall, with a portico opening into the new square.

All did not go as smoothly as hoped however. By January 1700, when the tower still had 24 feet to go before it reached its full height, vertical

cracks appeared in the nave pillars (these are still visible today) and work had to stop whilst the design was altered. Even though it was the design that appeared to be at fault, it was not Sir William Wilson that bore the costs of the changes. Unfortunately the contract specified that the builders were required to replace 'defective work' and as the entry on display shows, they were expected to cover the costs associated.



Warwickshire County Record Office, Reference: [CR1618/WA4/1](#)

Which reads

'It is agreed by and between the Commicioners then present and William Smith, Samuel Dunckley and Francis Smith as follows (viz.) it is agreed ... that they shall at their own proper costs and charges remove and carry away all rubbish that shall be digged out of the ground in order to lay the foundation of the said tower.'

And alsoe it is agreed that they the said William Smith, Samuel Dunckley and Francis Smith shall build good solid pillars of Shrewley stone above the ground on the foundations aforesaid in order to carry the said tower, and find all lime and workmanship about the said pillars...'³

Today, the tower stands on four piers, two in the west wall and two in the square, made from harder sandstone from Shrewley. Edward Strong, who was a master mason with Sir Christopher Wren, when he surveyed the crack had come to the conclusion that Warwick stone could not be relied on to carry the weight.

Sources:

¹ Commissioners' Order Book, 6th September 1694.

² Page xxv, The Great Fire of Warwick 1694, Dugdale Society Publication.
(Reference F.DUG)

³ Commissioners' Order Book, 17th June 1700.