

GIANT BLAZE HITS FIRM

FIREFIGHTERS from all over Gloucestershire battled to control a massive £1 million blaze at the world famous Bentley piano factory at Woodchester.

The devastating fire ripped through the main stone building and at the height of the blaze nine appliances and 70 firemen from as far away as Wotton under Edge and Cheltenham were called in to battle the flames.

by Mike Fowler

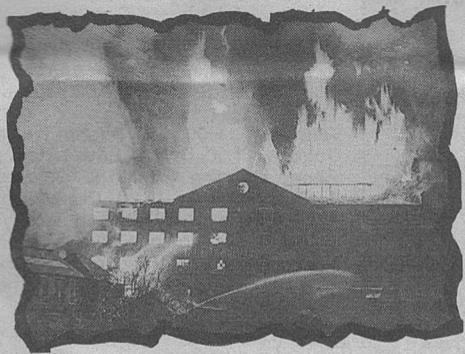
Crews were first alerted shortly after 10pm and arrived to find the 'special risk' factory heavily smoke logged.

Sub officer Brian Rachael, from Stroud, was first on the scene and said: "The building was clearly smoke logged from end to end but there was no sign then of actual fire or flames."

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● Citizen photographer Richard Besent took this picture at the height of the blaze



Fire jinx

THE Stroud Piano Company was founded in London in 1906 and moved to the town in 1911.

In February 1938 the main factory building was completely destroyed by fire (see left) and the Bentley Works at Woodchester were bought.

The company is one of the largest producers of pianos in the UK with consistently big export orders around the world.

The fire jinx which has haunted Bentley's struck again some seven years ago

Factory wrecked

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But within minutes it was clear the crews had a major fire on their hands and calls went out for more appliances.

As flames gripped the main two and three storey building, crews concentrated their efforts on preventing the blaze from spreading and saving surrounding buildings.

Sub officer Rachael added: "It was a major fire, the sort you get very few of in a lifetime."

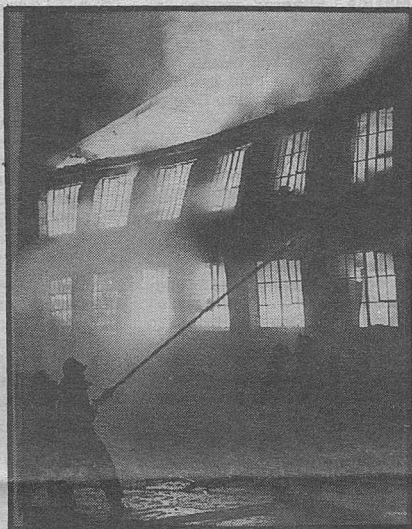
As much as 70 per cent of the main building, containing machinery and pianos in storage, is believed to have been destroyed. A large chimney remained standing but will be examined today by a structural engineer.

And as a clearing up operation was launched this morning, Deputy Chief Fire Officer Malcolm Eastwood praised the efforts of the fire fighters who he said worked extremely hard in freezing conditions.

"I would praise the officers and fire crews for their very good teamwork in preventing the fire spreading," he said.

Forensic experts have also moved onto the site to begin their painstaking search of charred debris in a bid to discover the cause of the blaze. There have been unconfirmed reports of a smell of gas in the area last night.

Eye witness Phil Ryder, who raised the alarm from his home opposite Bentley's, said: "Looking out of the window we could see smoke coming from the building and within five or ten minutes the whole building was ablaze."



Picture by Dick Besent

■ **A nasty moment as firemen fight the blaze at the piano works. Our camera has captured the scene just as the wall of the building starts to collapse inwards**

Factory chiefs were today assessing the scale of the damage, and the implications for the 137-strong workforce.

Company secretary Peter Freke surveyed the damage this morning and said: "There is bound to be loss of service and production, but we are working flat out to minimise this.

"At this stage there is no anticipated loss of jobs — the staff have been sent home. We pay tribute to the fire service in minimising the extent of the fire."

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