

Underground gas fire shuts down central London

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3 April 2015

An underground gas fire spotted midday Wednesday in Kingsway, one of central London's major north-south roads, caused chaos, cutting off power and plunging the area into darkness. Balls of fire and plumes of toxic smoke were still shooting out of manholes and cracks in the road 24 hours later.

Dozens of fire engines, police and utility vehicles, and hundreds of firefighters, police officers, gas and electricity workers remained in Kingsway and neighbouring roads, all of which remain closed to traffic.

Thousands of workers had to be evacuated from the areas around Kingsway, one of London's busiest office and shopping districts. At the top of the road, Holborn Underground rail station was closed. Offices, colleges, theatres and shops were shut down, as were the Royal Courts of Justice, Britain's most important law courts. Telecommunications companies O2 and Vodafone reported little or no network coverage across Central London because the fire had destroyed cabling to a phone mast.

Students at the prestigious London School of Economics (LSE) were forced to find temporary accommodation. The LSE Provost and Deputy Director emailed staff and students to say, "All LSE's central campus buildings have been evacuated and closed off."

London Fire Brigade assistant commissioner, Dany Cotton, said, "This is a technically difficult and unusual incident to tackle as it is underground. Firefighting in tunnels is very hazardous and one of the reasons that the fire is still burning is because of the dangers involved in extinguishing the fire before the gas supply is shut down, which could result in the risk of a subsequent gas explosion.

"Firefighters have, however, been applying water through access points throughout the night, to control

the spread of the fire. The fire is contained in the tunnel and we are making steady progress and working with the utility companies and the police to bring this incident to a close."

The fire brigade said a faulty power cable had triggered the blaze, but that it was unconnected to another underground fire nearby earlier in the day. On Wednesday afternoon, a smaller underground fire broke out a couple of miles away in Stoke Newington.

Matt Rudling, a spokesman for UK Power Networks, owners of London's power cables, tried to deflect criticism from the company, declaring, "The gas is still burning under there and until we can gain access to that particular area we won't understand what's caused it and what we can do." He added, "The Health and Safety Executive have been working closely with us in working to mitigate these issues."

A policeman told this reporter that the area was likely to remain closed for several days, and then the road needed to be inspected and repaired. A power worker said that Kingsway was "notorious" for the number of tunnels and ducts carrying all the utility services—gas, electricity, water and telecommunications.

Besides the utility infrastructure, underneath Kingsway is a complex of tunnels, dug by London Transport during the Second World War, which later became the London terminal of the first-ever transatlantic telephone cable. During the Cold War, the underground became a "city under a city," one of many such secret subterranean complexes designed for the purpose of surviving nuclear warfare. They are now derelict, awaiting redevelopment.

The power worker explained, "It only needs a spark to come in contact with a gas leak and it travels along the ducting, melting everything along the way. There's so much building going on in London and everyone

wants their power ‘now’. It means everyone is under pressure to get the job done.”



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