



the most awful conflagration ever beheld by human eyes

Some notes on the Great Fire of Barton Stacey, 8th May 1792

Just over two hundred years ago, at about mid-day, a spark flew out of Mr. Moody's blacksmiths shop at the north end of the village, somewhere near Wheat Cottage and started a train of events that shapes Barton Stacey today.

Luckily for posterity and amateur historians, twenty years earlier the Hampshire Chronicle had started in Winchester and its vivid report (overleaf) gives a story of the event which would be hard to improve on. In five brief paragraphs, the unknown author not only chronicles the horror of the fire, but also gives a fascinating glimpse of the village life at the time and adds a touch of (unintentional) humour with the moral story of Farmer Friend. Unfortunately, the village does not seem to have stood a chance. By the time a rider could have reached the fire services at Winchester or Whitchurch and the engines returned to Barton Stacey, it would have been all over.

The Aftermath

Whilst the homeless sheltered in the church, John Courtney, who had lost the most the day before, appealed to the public through the columns of the Chronicle not to respond to any requests for charity until the total loss had been calculated and certified by the minister and officers of the parish. A week later a formal committee, under the Chairmanship of William Powlett Powlett, M.P., was formed at the first of many meetings at the "Coach and Horses" in Sutton Scotney. They resolved to forward thanks to those who had provided immediate help to the sufferers and to send five hundred circular letters to gentlemen in Winchester and other towns in the county "to beg them to apply for and promote the contributions desired on behalf of the sufferers".

At a meeting two days later it was resolved that the total loss was in the region of £2000, and recommended "the wretched state of the sufferers to the humanity and charitable aid of the public". They also decided to print the names of all subscribers in the county papers. All bankers in the county were asked to receive donations and forward a weekly statement to the committee chairman, furthermore Hampshire gentlemen resident in London were also to be solicited for contributions.

FIRE AT BARTON STACEY.

On Tuesday last, about the middle of the day, the most awful conflagration ever beheld by human eyes, desolated this village. Some people being at work in Mr. Moody's shop, smith and edge-tool maker, a large flake of red hot iron flew out of the shop window, and, falling on some dry litter near a cucumber-bed, set it instantly on fire. This communicating to an adjoining mill-house, covered with thatch, where a horse was at work, the whole, in a few minutes, was in flames. Every exertion was used to extricate the horse, but in vain. The poor animal, irritated by flakes of fire falling continually upon him, and frightened by the flames, was in so dreadful a state of agitation, that he flew round with such impetuosity, that it was impossible to release him; and he was burnt to ashes.

These premises being situate at the northern extremity of the parish, the wind high, and blowing in a direct line with the street, carried the thatch like a storm of fire, swifter than a man could run, from one house to another, till the whole village was in flames! The sight, from the adjoining hills, presented to the imagination an awful emblem of the last and final day! Volumes of liquid fire occupied the atmosphere, which, taking different directions, was whirled by the wind to a prodigious height; till the flame and combustible matter roaring and bursting with a most tremendous noise, fell again in showers of fiery hail, until every thing covered with thatch was entirely consumed! At one instant twenty-seven houses, thirteen barns, ten stables, several granaries, and four ricks of capital wheat, were in flames. The thatch upon several extensive garden-walls was completely burnt up; every privy, though detached, and at the upper end of the gardens, was reduced to ashes; with a great number of waggons, carts, thrashed and unthrashed corn, twenty-eight pigs, a great quantity of poultry, and all the furniture and entire property of great numbers of poor people, who are reduced to the most deplorable circumstances, and to the utmost penury.

Happening in the middle of the day, only one life was lost; and that through obstinacy. Farmer Friend, at the advanced age of sixty, perished in going up stairs after his money. He was supposed to have about four hundred guineas in a coffer, which he said he was determined to save, or perish in the attempt, which was unhappily his fate; for he had no sooner reached the top of the stairs than the roof fell in upon him, and so completely was he burned to ashes, that no traces whatever can be found of his body, except one small piece of the back bone.

Two engines, one from this city, and another from Whitechurch, came to the assistance of the sufferers; but not in time to prevent the ravages of the fire, which completed its devastations in little more than an hour. About eight or ten houses remain uninjured, among which are the parsonage-house, the farm-house occupied by Mr. Courtney, and some cottages which stood out of the line of the wind. The principal loss is sustained by Mr. Courtney, and we are sorry to hear that a very small part of the property destroyed was insured.

The Dean and Chapter of Winchester have generously sent 20*l.* and a quantity of bread, for the present relief of the unfortunate sufferers, who were obliged to take shelter in the church. Joshua Fremonger, Esq. of Wherwell, and several other gentlemen, have also humanely extended their assistance towards their immediate necessities.

By the end of the month a full account of the damage was printed thus :-

Aggregate loss		£ 6874 - 0 - 0
Insurance	£ 2640	
Loss of those not requiring public relief	£ 2810	£ 5270 - 0 - 0
Loss of those requiring public aid		£ 1604 - 0 - 0

The response was dramatic and from all of the county ! In the first week a Mrs. Wright of Fulham sent £100 (probably the same Mrs. Elizabeth Wright who had contributed £1400 to two separate Barton Stacey charities in 1784 and 1791), the gentry of Wherwell six guineas and the rest £4 - 9 - 0, Mr. Smith and Mr. Roe, 1 guinea each. And so on for column after column of the Chronicle. For comparison, in 1792 a single fare to London by stage-coach from Winchester was half a guinea (52½p) inside, seven shillings (35p) outside ! Each week a new list of subscribers was published between columns describing the horse race meetings on Worthy Down and at Danebury, Stockbridge as well as long and horrifying advertisements for patent medicines for the most gruesome diseases and skin conditions !

Throughout June, July and August, the contributions kept coming, each individually acknowledged in print when it was possible to do so by the committee, now firmly based at the Coach & Horses. By August 22nd a total of £2098 - 6 - 6 had been collected of which £603 - 8 - 2½(!) had been distributed. The committee in what seems to have been a winding-up meeting recommended the farmers, tradesmen and others insure their buildings in future. The Treasurer, Mr. Twyman, was also thanks for his punctuality and the accuracy of his accounts. This seems to have marked the end of the major fund-raising exercise, although further meetings of the committee were recorded on September 3rd and 17th and October 8th.

Rebuilding

The rebuilding of the village would have taken place over several years, however as all the guidebooks point out, it has resulted in a collection of very attractive Georgian houses built to a similar pattern with a central staircase rising from the front door, originally two up-two down with a rear kitchen / dairy covered by a "catslide" / "linhay". Naturally thatch was not a favoured roofing material! I imagine most would have a well near the back door given the level of the water-table and easy chalk digging. Whether the famous detached privies, mentioned in the news report, were rebuilt at the ends of the gardens I will leave to others to research. We certainly seem to have lost most of the walls that were covered in thatch (though not all, I'm happy so say).

Yew Tree cottage we know was built soon after the fire as all its documents survive intact. It was built on the site of two "tenement buildings" destroyed in the fire.

Survivors

Eight to ten houses survived the fire and it would be interesting to know how many are still standing in some form or other. According to the account the parsonage house was spared as was Mr. Courtney's farm house. One of these would be today's Church farm. A Mr. John Courtney owned Barton Cottage in 1819 when he willed it to his wife May, however whether this is the house mentioned is guess-work.

Two interesting old maps of Barton Stacey exist, however one is 50 years before the fire and was produced as a land record rather than a catalogue of homes. The other from 1841 shows the village in great detail and depicts many of the houses in the village today. As a result clues to survivors are few: "The Swan", despite being in the fireline, certainly seems older than 200 years. Ash Farm House would also be away from the fire line. The map at the head of these

notes was published closest to the time of the fire, although the scale leaves something to be desired.

Looking at the 1741 map, it is interesting to see what has survived. The field pattern is virtually unchanged. Gravel Lane seems to have been straighter than it is in real life but most of the plots line the main street as they do today. I wonder when the village pond disappeared or when the Church cross-roads were realigned?

If anyone is interested in filling in more detail or correcting facts in these notes, the author would be pleased to hear from them.

John Steedman
Barton Cottage

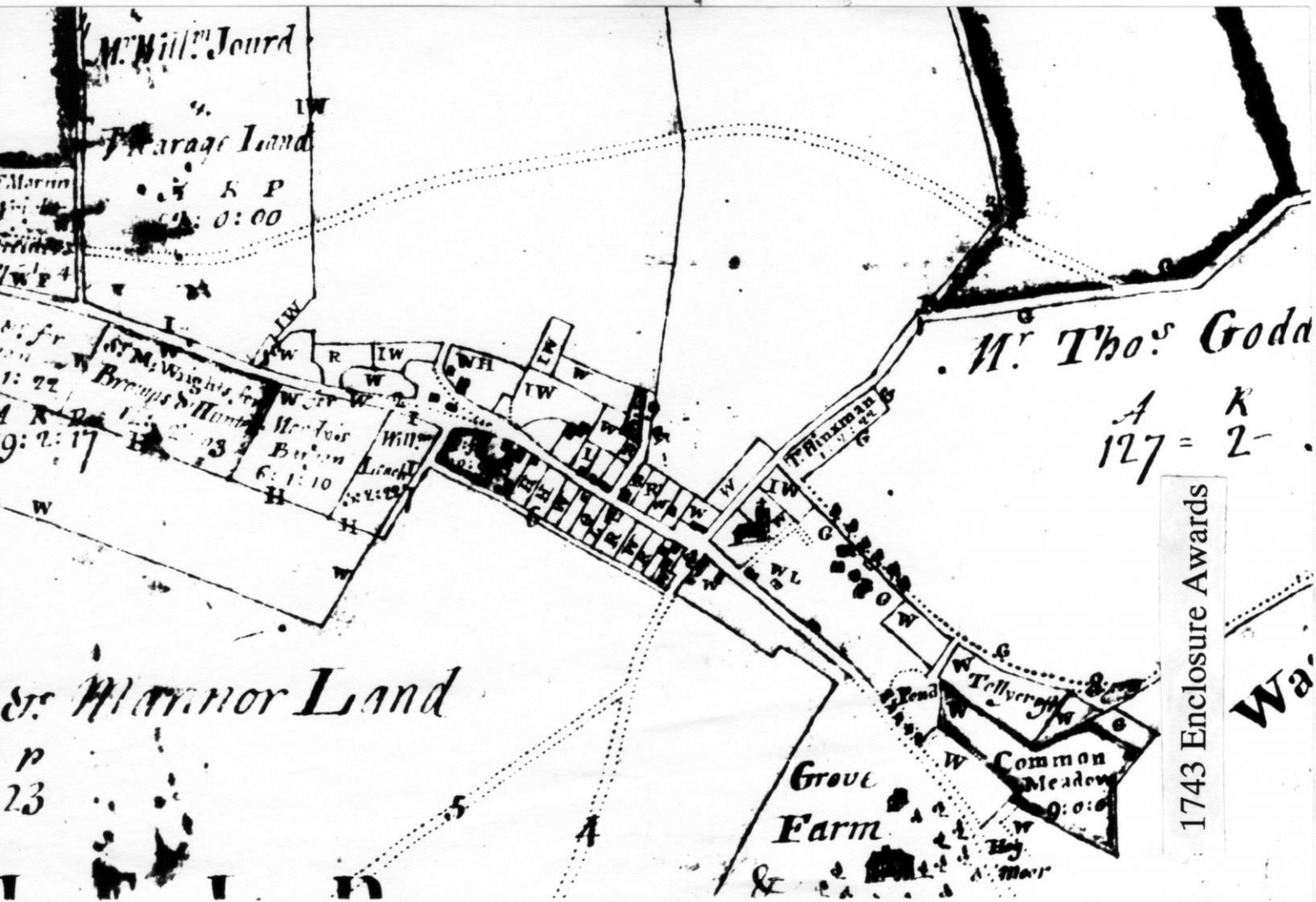
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1841 Tythe Awards



1743 Enclosure Awards