

Taken from the Exeter Flying Post dated Wednesday 4 May 1870

(The fire took place on 27th April 1870):

### CONFLAGRATION AT BROADCLYST

*"We have an aversion to the use of this phrase of the penny-a-liner. And yet in this case it is the only word that adequately represents the catastrophe by which, on Wednesday afternoon, the village of Broadclyst was laid in ruins. Estimated from a mere £.s.d\*\* point of view, £12,000, it is said, will not cover the losses occasioned by the fire, but this is the last point of view that suggests itself to one standing in the midst of the heap of charred and blackened ruins which yesterday were the homes of peace, prosperity and happiness.*

*"Yesterday morning", said a young man, contemplating the wreck of his cottage, with tears in his eyes, "Yesterday morning, I was a prosperous little tradesman; and now –" His heart was too full for him to finish the sentence. His ruined cottage spoke for itself. The bare walls were all that was left. But there was nothing singular about his case. It was the case of sixty or seventy families in this village, for in the village itself hardly a dozen houses have been left with their roofs on, and the surprise is that a single cottage is left standing, for, with two or three exceptions, all the houses were thatched, the wind was high, and the fire engines were, for all practical purposes, as useless as squirts.*

*Of the origin of the fire, as of most fires, of course nothing is known. It broke out shortly after one o'clock in the Red Lion stables. Men had been at work in the morning, new-thatching a portion of the stables, and the contents of a loft were left partly open to the sky. In this loft, among the hay, the flames first made their appearance; and the most plausible conjecture that we have heard is that a spark of burning soot from the chimney of the inn fell through the aperture and set the hay on fire.*

*Favoured by a stiff wind, the flames soon enveloped the stables, and in ten minutes, a spectator assured us, half the village was in a blaze. Flakes of burning thatch were carried about by the wind and dropped here and there, and before people knew where they were, or where to run, or what to do, their houses were burning over their heads. The configuration of the village facilitated the progress of the fire. It was built to burn. The Red lion and its stables formed the centre of a semicircle of cottages and within five minutes of the discovery of the fire in the stables, all these were in a flame.*

*Place Barton, the residence of Mr. Barton, the well-known stock breeder, formed a second centre for the fire. This stands in the heart of the village, and to the right and left extended a long row of thatched cottages, half overgrown with ivy and clematis. Place Barton was one of the first houses to take fire, and from this point the flames spread with startling rapidity. The Broadclyst fire engine was soon upon the scene and at work, and among those which followed were the Killerton, the West of England and the Sun. The work of destruction, however, was almost too rapid to be arrested by ordinary teams. Besides, the supply of water was very inadequate, and the leaden pipes that were laid from the reservoir to the conduit were melted by the intense heat.*

*To this cause too, is to be attributed the comparative slightness of the exertions that it was possible to make to save the furniture in the cottages. You could hardly stand in the street without risk of suffocation, for the flames and smoke and burning thatch filled the air. Of course, what could be done was done, everyone was anxious to assist the other; and men were helping to extinguish the flames at their neighbours' cottages, not knowing that their own homes, not many yards away, were burning.*

*A notable instance of this was the case of a man named Ball, who was exceedingly active in saving the stock of Mrs. Jennings, a widow, carrying on the business of a saddler in the village. He succeeded by his energy in saving a quantity of leather, but the poor fellow, whilst doing his utmost to serve his widowed mistress, was little*

*aware that his own cottage and its contents were being consumed. Piles of household goods were heaped in the adjoining fields, and the articles were afterwards conveyed to the village schoolhouse and to other places of safety.*

*Colonel Acland was on the scene of the disaster almost immediately after the alerts were given, and was untiring in his exertions. Miss Acland, of Sprydon, kindly exerted herself in aid of the poor people who were burnt out of their houses. This lady got a stall erected in the village at which the homeless villagers were supplied with food and refreshments, while Colonel Acland sought to provide shelter for them for the night.*

*At first it was thought it would be necessary to get tents from Exeter, but the farmers all round sent in their carts with offers to find shelter for the homeless, and before nightfall there was not a single person who was unprovided with shelter. Lord and Lady Poltimore, accompanied by a party of friends were early in the village, and did all that could be done, by activity and kindness to alleviate the sufferings of the villagers. Mrs. Acland and her daughter also rendered services which will not soon be forgotten.*

*Mr. Somer, the surgeon, too, did his utmost, providing coffee for all who chose to take, and Mr. Stevens, the estate bailiff to Sir Thomas Acland, was energetic in lending his help to all. The Rector is at present in France; but in Mr. Hart Davis, the Prebendary had an excellent substitute. Sir Thomas Acland too, was one of the first to present himself on the scene, and his presence was welcomed most heartily. Though in anything but good health, he remained in the village till the worse was over, throwing out words of kindness and encouragement which will not soon be forgotten.*

*Among those who opened their houses for the reception of the sufferers were Lord Poltimore, Colonel Acland, the Rev. R. Hart Davis, Mr. J. Were, Mrs. W. Walter sen., Mr. T. Birmingham, Mrs. Bending, Mr. Lowter?, Mr. T. Wish, Mr. J. Chamberlain (builder) Messrs Pye, J. Channon, J. Perkins, Harris (Whimple) Mardon, Harris (Lower Newland) Mortimer (New Inn), R. Edwards, Gribble, E. Squires, Martin, Coles, Walters (Pinhoe) Paramore (Exeter), Lockyer, G. Symes, Quant, T. Belworthy, M. Corner (Prior Court) W. Baker. J. Burrows, R. Greenway, Mogridges, J. Staddon, M. Tucker, J. England, Mrs. Ashford and Mrs. Mitchell.*

*the following list will give some idea of the number of persons who are rendered homeless by this sad calamity.*

*The block of houses, seven in all, on the left hand side of the square by the conduit, were occupied by Mr. Austin, Relieving officer, and his wife and family of five; Mr. Austin is a severe loser, having not only lost all his goods, but several cottages that were destroyed also belonged to him and he is uninsured.; Joshua Sims and wife; James Parsons and family; Mr. Thomas Sanders, grocer and baker, his family and assistants who numbered nine; Mr. Southcott, the village postmaster and his family of five; Miss Beazley, schoolmistress, and an old woman named Betty Bussell and her daughter.*

*On the opposite side of the square at the same time were burning a block of four houses occupied by Mrs. Jennings, her father and mother-in-law, several children and an old woman named Betty Rew; John Troot and his wife and two children, and Miss Brice.*

*From Mr. Burton's premises, the fire spread right and left down the Exeter and Whimple roads. The houses in the Exeter road were for the most part occupied by small tradesmen and mechanics. Their names are Thomas Melhuish, with his wife and family of four or five; Mr. Aviss, builder, whose timber-yards and workshops were totally destroyed; Mary Ann Maddock, a widow with four children and also a lodger named Mogridge; Police Sergeant Phillips and his wife and child.*

*Five other blocks of houses destroyed in the same road were occupied by Samuel Tar, a carpenter, his wife and four children; John Northcombe and wife; Thomas Wilkins and family; Robert Southcott, cooper and wife; Wm Ascott and wife; Mr. John Chamberlain, builder and family, whose workshop and stock were also destroyed. Mr.*

*Chamberlain had a valuable stock of timber upon his premises. He is engaged in building a parsonage house at Brampford Speke and had a quantity of materials in his workshop to be used there. A new staircase that had been prepared was alone worth £40 and his loss of stock and tools that are uninsured is not less than £200.*

*William England and family; Hannah Symes, a widow; Mr. William Loosemore, baker, who also lost twenty sacks of flour which were uninsured; Thomas Southcott and family; Mr. Cole, the foreman of a saddler's business carried on there by Mr. Passmore of this city; Mrs. Chamberlain, a widow; Mr. Scott and wife and Mr. Loveing all residing in the same house; George Berry, wife and lodgers; Thomas Simms, mason and family; John Martin, gardener and wife; John Hart and family; Mr. Lawrence (foreman to Mr. Aviss) and family; Richard Bradford, wife and six children; Richard Smith and family; Mr. John Trickey and wife; Miss Ratcliffe; John Gitsham, wife and three children; Daniel Wilson, wife and two children; **Emmanuel Gitsham, wife and four children**; John Oliver, wife and daughter; ; Joseph Thorne, market gardener with wife and family; Charles Bowden and family.*

*The houses on the Whimple road were occupied by John Hockaday, his wife and son; John Bishop and family who were burnt out about 12 months ago; Robert Symes and family; Mr. Tremlett, boot and shoe maker, with his wife and four children; Mr. Southard, plumber and glazier and family; Mr. William Symes, master mason and family; Robert Ware and wife; Thomas England and wife; Ann Sanders, a widow with a family; Mr. A. Chamberlain, butcher had his back premises burnt but owing to the exertions of Mr. Wish and the men of the West of England brigade, his house was saved although the houses all round were a mass of flames.*

*The houses occupied by Miss Salter, Mr. Vinnicombe and family, and Thomas Brown and family were totally destroyed. A house occupied by Mr. T. Ascott, adjoining another block of houses, was set on fire but the efforts of those present prevented the flames spreading in that direction. There was also one unoccupied house burnt.*

*The total amount of the damage to house property is estimated at not less than £10,000. Most of this belongs to Sir Thomas Acland, and this loss will fall upon him for he is not in the habit of insuring this class of property.*

*The loss to the small tradesmen and the poorer classes cannot amount to much less than £2000 and very few of these are insured. The largest single loss is that of Mr. Burton; his homestead simultaneously ignited in about twenty places, and it burnt with a fury which defied all efforts to extinguish it. The large farm buildings adjoining were quickly in one mass of flames – so quick in fact, that these was no time to get out a cart horse valued at £40, a bullock, two or three calves, several pigs and a large quantity of poultry which were in the cowhouses and stables of the yard.*

*Consequently, all these poor animals and birds were burnt to death; their charred remains presenting a most pitiful as well as sickening spectacle. Besides this, Mr. Burton lost the whole of his furniture in the upper part of his house, a lot of machinery and 150 bushels of barley. When the fire broke out, he had nearly a dozen valuable bullocks – some of which were being fed for the principal cattle shows of the country – but fortunately, they were all got out without any material injury. Mr. Burton's loss, however, is quite £1,500 – though this will to some extent covered by insurance; whilst the buildings which he rented from Sir Thomas Acland cannot be replaced in their former condition for less than £1000.*

*Mr. Sanders lost a very large stock of groceries and other things to the value of £400; his loss will be partially covered by insurance. The most unfortunate one here, however, is Mr. Austin who is the relieving officer for the district. None of this furniture – which was all destroyed – was insured, nor were several cottages in the new Buildings which he owned, and which were also destroyed. He had kept up the insurance until last Christmas when he neglected to pay the premium and consequently he has now lost everything he possessed.*

*The number of houses in the village previous to the fire of Wednesday, was about eighty, and of these sixty three – all inhabited except one – were destroyed by this sad calamity. Seventy families are rendered homeless and*

*about 240 individuals. One of the strangest incidents of the whole affair was that though the fire originated from the Red lion Inn, and though its stables – and a valuable horse in them belonging to Messrs Pinder & Co., Brewers of Exeter, were destroyed by this fire yet the inn itself escaped, the fire not once igniting it. The horse was almost burnt to a cinder.*

*The Deputy Chief Constable (Mr. Maxwell) was present, having heard of the fire as he was about to take train at the Queen Street station to return home, and he and the police under his direction rendered efficient aid. They remained in the village all night. One rascal was caught filching, while pretending to assist in saving articles from Mr. Avis's house and he was taken into custody.*

*We are glad to say there was but one accident. The son of Mr. Newcombe, the captain of the West of England Fire Brigade, unfortunately received a rather severe cut in the thigh, caused by a man carrying a scythe in a stupidly careless manner.*

*The insurance Office that will have to bear most of the loss is the West of England but we understand that there are insurances in the Westminster for £1,100, Norwich Union £350; Northern £100. The insurance in the West of England amounts to £4,500.*

*Even after deducting the amount of these policies from the loss, however, there is ample scope and verge enough for the exercise of all the kindly charity that is suggested by sympathy with the sufferers from a calamity like this. Acting upon the generous impulse of the moment, Sir Thomas Acland offered to take upon himself the whole of the loss, but this is pre-eminently one of those cases in which we ought all of us to take a share of the burthen, and we are glad to be able to announce that a committee has been appointed for the purpose of acknowledging most gratefully the spontaneous offers of assistance to the sufferers who have been affected by the fire, and that it is authorised to receive such contributions in money or in kind as may be given for the same object.*

*Mr. Joseph Were is the Chairman of this committee; Colonel Chichester has been appointed Treasurer; the Rev. R. Hart Davis, the honorary secretary and Mr. Mardon the assistant secretary; and we need hardly add that we shall have great pleasure in complying with the request contained in the following note, although we may venture to suggest that, except in the case of small sums, it may be desirable to send their subscriptions direct to the committee through their secretary at the vicarage, Broadclyst.*

*Broadclyst, Saturday April 30th, Vicarage*

*“Sir, - I am requested by the Broad Clyst Fire Committee to ask you to be kind enough to receive subscriptions for the late fire.*

*Your obedient servant, R. Hart Davis, Secretary.”*

*The village has been visited by thousands of people in the course of the week. On Sunday, the ruins looked like a vast hive of human beings. Opportunities have been given to these visitors each day of subscribing to the relief fund and the following is the result:*

*Thursday £13*

*Friday £4*

*Saturday £6*

*Mr. Hart Davis preached a sermon upon the event on Sunday afternoon in the venerable parish church to a large congregation and the collection at the conclusion of the service realised £23 17s 2½d.”*