

## The Great Fire of Brandon.

These two very grainy images show the before and after of a fire that broke out on Brandon High Street in March, 1895. The first image is of the ancient, thatched alms-houses, which were replaced in 1877. This is roughly where the Meatmarket is sited today, looking down toward the bridge. To the right of these alms-houses, you may see the thatched shops of Brandon's old High Street. These shops ceased to exist after the fire ravaged them.

The first flames were noticed in the thatched roof of Mr Fowler, a greengrocer on Brandon's High Street, at about 5pm. Within twenty minutes, the flames had spread through his thatch and wooden rafters to the adjacent shop of Mr Leeder, three small homes and then onto Mr Neep who owned a draper's shop. It didn't help that there were no gable ends to separate the roof spaces, so effectively, the buildings were all under one roof. A crowd gathered, although there was little they could do, other than help the owners remove possessions from the burning buildings and place them on the opposite side of the road. The possessions were stored overnight in the school on Market Hill.

The fire bell had been rung, so volunteers ran off to collect the fire engine. A line of people, all who had grabbed any vessel they could to carry water – buckets, bowls, wash tubs and baths formed a line from the town's water pump leading to the fire engine. Mr Edwards shop was better protected from fire because it had a tiled roof, nonetheless ladders were lent against his shop so men could access his roof, rip off tiles and cut away at the roof timbers. The aim was to create a firebreak at roof level and deny the fire fuel.

By now, the fire engine was up and running, so a water hose was carried up to roof top level to spray over what was left of Mr Edwards roof to beat the flames back. This seemed to work for a fashion, but then the water in the engine ran out. Smoke bellowed from the damp thatch, and sparks became airborne, threatening the thatch of buildings across the road. The timber yard, Messrs George Wood and Sons, by the railway line, put their horses and carts to work, filling up by the river and conveying their precious load to fill up the fire engine. It was not long before the engine was back up and running again. From Brandon's Post Office, a telegram was wired to Thetford to seek the assistance of their Fire Brigade, who arrived at about 7.45pm that night. Both fire crews, constantly worried that fire damaged walls may come down at any time, stayed on the scene until 3am the next morning, with the fire was seemingly put out.

As the sun rose, the remains of the thatched roofs presented a woeful appearance. You may be able to make them out in the second photo, although this is certainly not the best image. Bystanders observed how thriving businesses were there one day and burnt to the ground the next. The only things left standing were the brick chimney stacks, which were soon deemed unsafe and pulled down. Smoke smouldered from the debris all day and into the following morning too. Then, at 9.30am that morning, the alarm was raised yet again. A small fire was showing in the roof of the Post Office building on the opposite side of the road. The Brandon volunteers were immediately on the scene, up their ladders to gain access to the roof and put it out. It seemed a spark had lodged itself under a roof tile and smouldered through the night, before setting light to a wooden roof truss. The surnames of some of those volunteers are familiar with us today – Steggles, Murrell, Gentle, Johnson, Hyam and Edwards.

In conclusion, the fire destroyed two shops – Towler and Leeder; along with the homes of three tenants – Cooper, Thacker and Brown. Mr Edward's shop, and that of Mr Neep, were partially destroyed. A meeting was held in Brandon to raise charity to help those affected, while the contents of the shops belonging to Messrs Towler and Neep, were covered by insurance. In the following

weeks, the owner of the properties, Mr Gates, from Barwell, put the plots up for sale, thus leading to their development.

A suggestion to the cause of the fire was reported by the Thetford & Watton Times, on 20th March 1895, when they interviewed a travelling Japanese organ-grinder who had been playing in the High Street at the time. He was lodging at the Dial Inn, near where Collins restaurant is today, and he was quoted as saying:

"I saw a lighted piece of paper come out of a big chimney and drop onto the thatch roof near the tiled shop (This would have been Neep's)... The fire was where I saw the lighted paper fall."  
I recall in my early days of researching Brandon, Mrs Caban, wife of Teddy the hairdresser, telling me that they had seen blackened debris in the grounds of his hairdresser shop. She referred to a fire that had broken out there once. It was years later that I came across these facts.

(Written by Darren Norton).

