

An Account of the Fire in St Mary Bourne on 29th January 2007, which destroyed three thatched cottages and damaged a fourth house.

A thin whiff of bonfire in the mild winter afternoon.

Not unusual ...

Then the unnerving klaxon sounds emergency up the valley road –
always bad news where it stops ... The High Street.

In the gentle breeze, small plumes of smoke rise,
now here, now further along the thatch ridge, almost playfully.

Down below shaking heads, time slows, each second counts:
we must do ... what?

More fire engines, hard yellow hats of firemen and women.

Hoses unrolling in slow motion, a trickle of water,
the ladders raised against the roofs: everything a preparation, it seems.

Do something! We will them on ... douse down the fire, save the memories and pictures,
the irreplaceable family treasures accumulated over years. Make us secure again.

Hydrant, stream, jets of water now: hoses running along the road like brown spaghetti.

Trained purposeful activity, cutting, the pulling off of wire and thatch.

Below small groups of friends stand by the cottagers as they watch their painful loss.

People come and go: the children of the uneventful village excited, home from school.

Neighbours, others from ever wider. Hugs, words, so hard to speak,

the "I'm so sorry," such thin comfort in the thickening smoke;

all feel the pain of this unique, unhappy, helpless moment.

But the rescue has begun, the brisk carrying out of a household, things small and great,
what must be saved given time. The grieving begins over what must be left.

Watching, hoping, praying: subdued ironic humour.

Then the fire itself breaks through.

A flame lazily licks down from the ceiling of an upstairs room;
a ribbon of paint peels, and falls burning.

In minutes, the window glows orange, glass shatters,
fire leaps high above the roofs in the dusk air.

The yellow hats now shining with the flame, the incident board filling,
from all angles, jetting water, the flood rising across the road;

suddenly, for a moment, from behind the cottages the watchers feel a cold spray.

The instant offers of help, "You can stay with me tonight", "You can keep your stuff in my garage".

The thoughtfulness: water bottles to drink, tea, coffee.

Fighters gently answer questions, courteous and kind.

Wheelbarrows, wheeling to safety in the darkness, bumping over hoses ...

The power is cut, and people cluster uneasily but grateful in the warm George,
the damp smell of scorched thatch in their nostrils.

The Red Cross men talking quietly, reassuring, filling in their forms:

how comforting that our disaster is enough to warrant the Red Cross.

Fire engines name Overton, Fareham, Redbridge, Horton Heath;

distant Hampshire takes us in their arms.

Shock and slow words, hard to form in the mouth of such an evening.

"If I can help in any way ..."

... ..

A grey morning dawns, dark smoke still above the playing water jets,
the jagged shape of the loss now clear,

the roof-scape, like teeth knocked out of the jaw of the High Street:

chimneys leaning, beams exposed

Fire has done its destructive worst: inside and outside, a black pile of soaking thatch;

in the road an evil black water lies blocked from the drains,

reflecting the beams, and fire darkened walls.

People wander, more shocked, less sure, group, talk, part.

The professional cameras, reporters striding, making their contacts,

shaping in their practised minds the story, the interviews,
the sights and sounds to be played into regional homes.
The cars stopping, cameras hurried pointed: they feel a shame,
yet they are (in a way) taking our sadness into their lives.
Local people, local conversations; more offers, more, more ...
Salvage begins, scraps of lives which seemed irretrievable last night,
are now with great care brought out of the mess;
a handbag, credit cards, pictures to be dried out, passport,
a cardboard box of personal treasure neither wet nor smoke-blackened,
from a scorched drinks cabinet, bottles intact, wet-stained furniture,
papers, books, CDs, a dripping computer ...
But, we are thinking dark thoughts: how can such a bad thing happen to such good people?
We console ourselves that neither human nor dog kind have been hurt;
that the wind was light, and not the recent gales, the fire confined.
And for a moment we feel fully that immeasurable togetherness of disaster,
an enriched and deepened community spirit,
people talking who had hardly talked before –
but now they must, it helps to talk it through, and talk.
The great wave of care gathers all the losses up in its embrace,
to hold the victims there and say, "It's not alright, but it is safe now with us.
The settling into new homes, the shaping of the future we share in this village,
in its heart, in its good heart."
We go now to turn our helplessness and concern into gifts.