

Scanned 1/3/21

When the vicar's three daughters saved the day

ON the afternoon of Thursday, July 28, 1859, two children, "the elder not above six years of age," were playing in the yard of Mr Hill's farm at Crowell, the little Oxfordshire village nestling at the foot of the Chiltern hills.

Somehow they managed to get hold of some "lucifer matches" with which they started a bonfire with straw pulled from one of the ricks.

Within minutes the flames had spread to an adjoining barn and then, fanned by a strong wind, to the village inn, the Catherine Wheel nearby.

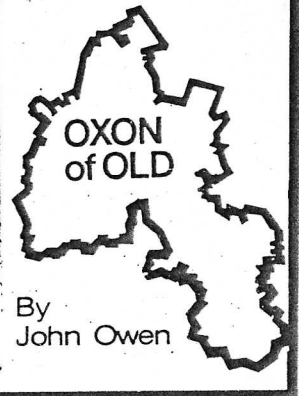
Shops

The landlord and other occupants were away, but there were the three daughters of the Rector, Frances, Mary and Margaret Beauchamp at

hand to go into action.

Led by 23-year-old Frances the sisters went into the burning building and succeeded in saving most of the contents which, a contemporary report adds, were not insured.

The flames continued to spread as "flakes of fire" were blown across the road; a newly-built house and two cottages adjoining were set on fire, as well as a wheel-



wright's and blacksmith's shop.

The blaze raged on to engulf a farmyard behind and the buildings in it — labourers' cottages, cart sheds, piggeries and a cow-house.

In one of the cottages was the worker's wife and her newly born baby, but fortunately both were rescued in the nick of time.

A stable and two hayricks were the next to go up in flames, but a barn belonging to the Rev. W. Burrows was saved by the efforts of several men stationed on the roof to whom buckets of water were passed.

Four times the building caught fire and each time it was extinguished by the stalwarts on the roof who though "nearly roasted, maintained their posts."

Homeless

Two fire engines, one belonging to the Earl of Macclesfield at Shirburn Castle, and the other from Thame rendered great service but when the outbreak was finally quelled two houses and cottages had been destroyed together with barns, stables, ricks and "two pigs etc."

Eight families were homeless and had lost all their possessions, and the neighbourhood all round was a scene of desolation with its trees and hedgerows "scorched to a cinder."

Such was the most momentous event in the long history of Crowell and from which it was slow to recover.

Not for two centuries had anything happened there to attract the attention of the world outside — not since the day when a posse of horsemen arrived to carry off Thomas Ellwood, the son of the leading resident.

This was towards the end of the year 1660. Thomas Ellwood, newly converted to the Quaker faith, had written to a friend in Oxford inviting him to attend a meeting at his home.

Friction

Somehow the letter got into the hands of Lord Falkland, the Lord Lieutenant; the young man was carried off to Oxford, questioned and imprisoned in the house of the City Marshal in High Street.

However his father managed to get his release and he went back home, but his Quakerism led to ever mounting friction with his father.

Eventually Walter Ellwood, member of a "well descended but declining family" went off to live in London with his two daughters leaving Thomas alone.

Not long afterwards the little estate was sold, as a result of which he acquired a little money and left the village for good.