



The Great Fire of Helpston, 1995

Thursday, 3rd August 1995 is a date which shall be remembered with grief by some and relief by many in Helpston. On this day at the height of the most intense heat wave in living memory, Helpston caught fire.

Dr Alan Montague of the Old Chantry was clearing long grass on his family's land behind the Blue Bell with a strimmer. Somehow, the tinder-dry grass was ignited and the breeze did the rest.

The speed and agility with which the fire spread was astonishing. Halted briefly by the low wall with the stone stile, it nevertheless leapt right over the paddock in which a horse was grazing, but not before it scorched the horse's byre.

Fortunately, thanks to the quick actions of Lesley South and Stephen Jackson, the horse was led to safety. By this time, however, the large hay meadow beyond the paddock had been set alight by airborne embers.

What happened next will never be forgotten by Arthur Petty of Woodland Lea. 'I heard a noise like a train rushing towards us, looked out and saw the fire charging towards the house at an incredible speed.' The hedge which separates the meadow from the footpath is, or was, quite thick behind Arthur and Anne's house and the fire found plenty of material to feed its hunger, before it lunged swiftly into their back garden.

Only the fickleness of the wind saved their house. Although four Fire Appliances were quickly on the scene, they could not save Arthur's birds. His extensive aviaries and prize-winning flock of budgerigars were destroyed. The ferocity of the fire and the abruptness with which its course was changed by the wind was evidenced by the rustic bird table which stood near the garden gate: one side was burnt to charcoal, the other untouched.

Anne and Arthur were not the only victims of the fire. Their neighbour, Peter Stratton, came home to find that the model railway he had built around his garden had been destroyed, and in the furthest corner of the field, the fire had managed to destroy much of Walter Crowson's large shed before it leapt right over Broadwheel Road to field by Pear Tree Lane. Few back gardens escaped damage of some sort. The fire in the hedge was so intense that some tree roots were still glowing late that night, until they were quenched with a pail of water.

Water sprayed in abundance by the firemen has since produced a profusion of new green growth in the meadow, and even in the eerie stillness of the morning immediately after the fire, the determination of Nature to restore itself was revealed at the very source of the fire where, near a melted green watering can, and surrounded by burned grass, the inhabitants of an underground wasp's nest were busily going about their repairs and searching for new supplies of food.

The fire could have been a great deal worse. Most people seem to be agreed on that. But it is small comfort for Arthur Petty as he contemplates the destruction of so many years of work and care in his aviaries.

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