

The Great Fire of Castlethorpe



4th August 1905

Friday the 4th of August 1905 was just another ordinary warm and peaceful summer day as the people of Castlethorpe woke up and went about their daily business. But it was soon to become the worst day ever in the history of the village leaving misery in its wake as a huge fire tore its way through its streets.

Shortly after 2pm a spark from a passing train set light to cottages and barns in the centre of the village. A village resident spotted flames in a barn opposite Back Street (now South Street). The stone cottages in the centre of the village had thatched roofs and with the prevailing high wind the fire soon took hold.

Although the fire started in Back Street (now South Street) it soon spread through the passage towards Front Street (North Street) destroying a total of 13 houses, Lacks Yard and Varneys Yard, making 36 people homeless who because of the speed and intensity of the fire saved very few of their possessions.

Because of the time of day there were few village men available to fight the fire as most were at work, either in the fields or at Wolverton Works. Stony Stratford fire brigade were the first to arrive on the scene. They could do little to save the 13 cottages that were well ablaze, but with the help of a 1,000ft hose and a local pond further disaster was averted. The estimated cost of the damage caused was £3,000, but it would cost more than £3,000,000 today to rebuild and repair the damaged cottages.

Only two of the village's thatched houses were untouched by the fire and remain with thatched roofs today: Elm Tree Cottage in North Street and The Inglenooks in South Street.

Here in words and pictures from 120 years ago is what happened on that fateful day, the Great Fire of Castlethorpe ...



The Great Fire of 4 August 1905, which destroyed 13 cottages



Mr Masterman's stables and barn before the fire

THE WOLVERTON EXPRESS

11 AUGUST 1905

Villages Burnt Out

TERRIBLE FIRE AT CASTLETHORPE

13 COTTAGES DESTROYED

36 PERSONS HOMELESS

Castlethorpe was the scene of a desolating conflagration on the 4th inst. which bore a striking and significant similarity to the recent outbreak that spread destruction and dismay through a large portion of the village of Eydon in Northamptonshire. Both conflagrations occurred in broad daylight – a Providential happening in each instance.

And as at Eydon so at Castlethorpe it was a somewhat huddled heap of thatched buildings that paid the toll to the fiery visitant. To carry the comparison further – and here is the saddest feature of the unhappy affair – in both cases it was on the poorer portion of the community that the weight of the disaster fell.

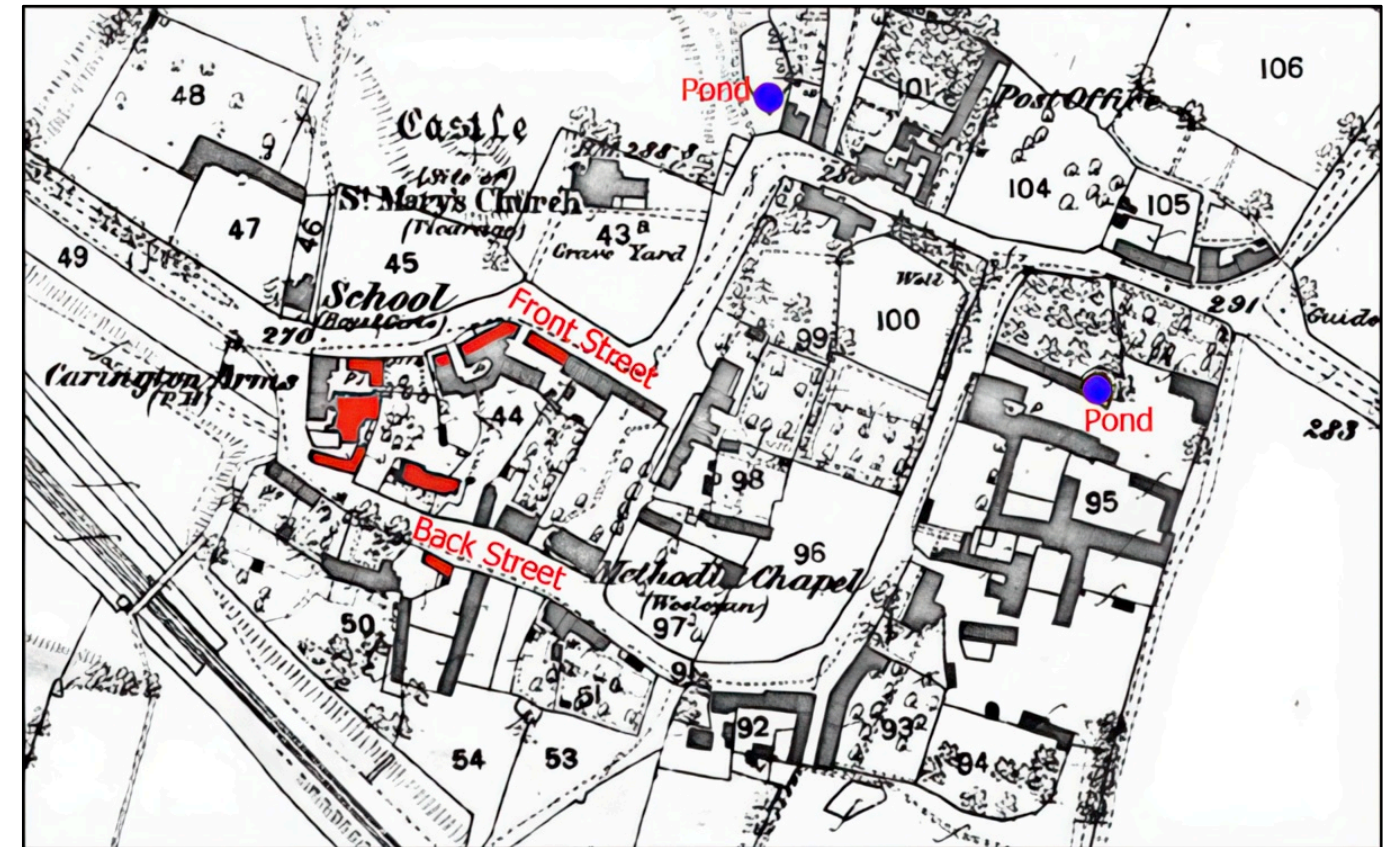
The Castlethorpe fire in this latter respect is an intensely distressing business. No fewer than 13 cottage homes were devastated, two of the families occupying two cottages each, and a total of 36 people were rendered homeless and, practically speaking, helpless and hopeless. So ferociously did the flames envelope the whole of the eleven homesteads that the unfortunate occupants were able to do little more than save themselves.

In one or two instances a portion of the furniture was arrested from the flames, but there are several cases in which the homeless can carry in one hand the whole of their earthly possessions. Such was the terrible tragedy enacted in a few brief moments, and the whole of it is ascribed to a spark from a railway engine.

The cause of the fire is unknown, but it is conjectured that a spark from a passing railway engine was carried on to the roof of Mr. Masterman's stabling.

It was just about half-past two that the outbreak occurred. Miss Tooth, who lives on the north side of Back-street, noticed the thatch of a barn on the opposite side of the thoroughfare blazing. A hurricane wind was blowing more or less from the south-west; and instantly recognising the dangers which threatened her neighbours living in thatched cottages she raised the alarm.

Hardly was the position realised than the danger became a real disaster. In less time than it takes to tell blazing thatch was hurled across the road by the violent wind, and also cast to the right of the original outbreak. An adjoining block of stables was instantly



on fire and practically at the very same instant four cottage roofs-these latter were on the north side of the street-were flaring in a dozen different places.

In Back-street on one side were four utterly ruined cottages. The destruction had deprived eight persons of a home: Mrs. Clarke, a widow, and two sons. Mr. Jesse Lambert, labourer, and wife. Mr. E. Powell, labourer, wife and two children.

It was the Front-street that the greatest share of the disaster fell although here again it is nothing but marvellous that other buildings were not involved in the destruction.

Nine cottages were gutted, rendering 28 people homeless:

Mr. Joseph Smith, labourer, his wife and five children.

Mrs. Brown, widow.

Mr. John Evans, painter, wife, and four children.

Mr. F Wills, labourer, wife and child.

Mr. Jack Clarke, labourer.

Mr. W. Gray, wife and child.

Mrs. Vials, widow.

Mr. W. Worker, platelayer, wife, and four children.

In Front-street the fire did still greater damage, nine cottages being gutted and 28 people made homeless. The property destroyed here belonged four to Mr. Lack, Wolverton, two to Miss Varney, one to Mr. Tooth, Stantonbury, and one to Mr. Whiting.

The families so suddenly rendered homeless are:

Mr. J. Smith, labourer, his wife & five children;

Mrs. Brown, widow;

Mr. John Evans, painter, wife and four children;

Mr. F. Wills, labourer, wife and child;
Mr. Jack Clarke, labourer;
Mr. W. Gray, wife and child;
Mrs. Vials, widow; and
Mr. W. Worker, platelayer, wife and four children.

It will thus be seen that the total number of homeless victims is 36, nearly all of whom are left with nothing with which to commence a new home.

Those who did save any of their furniture, and they were but few, found shelter in the empty cottages in the village, others were accommodated by neighbours whose homes escaped the fire, and the remainder were provided with accommodation for the night in the railway station waiting room.

The cause of the fire is unknown, but it is conjectured that a spark from a passing railway engine was carried on to the roof of Mr. Masterman's stabling. The damage is estimated at between £1,000 and £2,000, and a sad feature of the whole affair is that none of the burnt-out families were insured against fire.

The situation was at once terrifying and disastrous. The previous day's rain had in no way rendered the thatch capable of resisting the fire, especially fanned as it was by a strong gusty wind, and before the affrighted villagers could organise any concerted action to cope with the destroying element the disaster had assumed proportions which threatened the safety of the whole village.

Carried by a veritable gale, flaming thatch was spreading itself in all directions. Fortunately some of the neighbouring property is slate-roofed, and although at least two such



FRONT ST



protected cottages were virtually gutted, the presence of these modern roofs undoubtedly was the cause of restricting the fire.

But over these two modern blocks, known respectively Lack's Yard and Varney's Yard, strands of flame were carried onto more roofs unable to offer any resistance.

These cottages are in what is called Front-street-the main thoroughfare through the village. Very quickly roof after roof ignited and in few minutes after the detection of the original outbreak the villagers were confronted with the appalling fact the thirteen houses were all fiercely blazing to say nothing of other buildings. Fortunately little time had been lost in sending for assistance. Occurring as the fire did in the middle of the afternoon, predictably all the male population was away at work either in the fields or at Wolverton.

Over 60 Castlethorpe men are employed in the Railway Works. The Wolverton Steamer and Brigade were telegraphed for and the Stony Stratford Brigade. But although a mishap detained the cyclist somewhat the Stratford men were the first to come to the aid of the terrified village.

Meanwhile men employed on the farms of Mr. Whiting and Mr. Holt and Mr. Amos had been despatched to the scene by their employers, and when Captain Downing and his men arrived they found every available person of every age engaged in the task of saving what was possible from the devouring flames.

So terrific was the heat and so dangerous the task of going too near the fiercely burning buildings that very little of value was saved from the cottages which had already become involved. Frightened neighbours, whose homesteads were

constantly threatened, however hastily moved to a place of safety all the furniture they could get out.

The firemen found the whole of the 13 cottages then alight completely doomed. Only in the case of one cottage, a slated dwelling in the very centre of the fire zone was any portion of the roof left. There was also the danger of the fire further spreading, although happily the Church and its spacious grounds prevented the wind carrying further disaster to the immediate wake.

But to make the already heavy task of the firemen more alarming was the discovery that water was in no sense plentiful. A thousand feet of hoses was necessary to get a connection with a pond belonging to Mr. Holt and from this the firemen-they were being aided by the Wolverton Brigade, who had brought their manual commenced their onerous task of combating both flame and wind.

Their efforts were mainly directed towards preventing the fire from spreading, and the extent of this task may in some measure be realised by the fact that at least three separate fires were in existence, in each case with more thatched roofs in dangerous contiguity.

By this time all the Castlethorpe men employed at Wolverton Carriage Works were also on the scene, the Authorities having very promptly and generously allowed the double stopping of an express to convey men to the burning village.

The railway fire steamer had also come along by rail, but it, unfortunately was useless, inasmuch as it was built on railway carriage wheels,



Front Street before and after the fire



a fact that prevented it being utilised in any way. Had it been possible even to use it in obtaining water from the river the hard working firemen would have been greatly aided. When the two manuels got to work Mr. Holt's pond was not long in being emptied.

By this time, however the fire was burning itself out. The fire had raged with remarkable ferocity, and had spent itself in a time which, comparatively speaking, was as brief as the original spread of the conflagration. But while the fire was at its height it literally resembled a furnace. The roar and the heat of the flames were terrifying. Vegetation was scorched up some distance around, while burning paper,

etc was carried hundreds of yards by the wind.

But further extension of the fire had been successfully prevented by the time the first pond had been used up. It was still, however, necessary to keep hoses pipes at work, and a connection was made with a pond belonging to Mr. Whiting; and as a fireman succinctly put it "When that's done we're done too."

Happily it more than sufficed to put all further danger for the time being at all events out of the range of possibility. Meanwhile, the unhappy villagers who had been so suddenly and tragically deprived of their homes and the greater proportion of their worldly belongings were in a distraught and pitiable plight.

Helping hand for the homeless

News of Castlethorpe's calamity spread very rapidly- like all bad news - and trains from all directions brought contingents of sightseers, whose sympathy was speedily being tapped by voluntary friends of the homeless who had armed themselves with improvised collecting boxes.

The sight indeed, was pathetic and eloquent enough to tough the heart of a veritable stoic. Walking up from the Station, the visitors soon came across the first instance of the awful suddenness with which the disaster had overcome the village. Within the station gate was found, piled up out of all range of danger, a miscellaneous collection of furniture which had only a few minutes before made some poor villager a happy and contented home, but now sadly mauled and broken as a result of the fierce struggle with the

raging flames for its possession.

A little further on came an more poignant evidence of the disaster. Whichever way one looked -up Back-street or up Front-street were veritable roofless and gutted houses, with mere remnants of what had made comfortable homes so recently, now thrown by the roadside.

In Back-street on one side were four utterly ruined cottages. The destruction had deprived eight persons of a home: Mrs. Clarke, a widow, and two sons. Mr. Jesse Lambert, labourer, and wife Mr. E. Pell [Powell], labourer, wife and two children.

Mrs. Lambert was away at Wolverton when the fire happened, and her hopeless grief on discovering that nothing but the bare and roofless walls of the home were left was only one of



BACK ST



the pathetic incidents of a conflagration which was full of pathos. To make Lambert's case all the more distressing Mr. Lambert is too old and infirm to work. The unfortunate couple had only lived in the cottage a week.

Their neighbours, the Pells [Powell], who occupied two cottages were no better off. Their sole recovery from the flames consisted of a piano and a chest of drawers; this was the second time within six years that they had been burnt out.

Hardly one of the suffers, either here or in Front-street, however large or small his or her loss, seems to have been covered by insurance. The fact is not altogether an evidence of want of thrift. Many insurance offices absolutely refuse to have anything to do with thatched homes, and other inflict a prohibitive premium.

All four of the cottages in Back-street belong to Mr. Rose of Hanslope. The other damage done in the street was the destruction of stables used as outhouses attached to Miss Tooth's house, and, on the opposite side of the street, the unroofing of a barn etc occupied by Mr. Masterman of the Carrington Arms, under Lord Carrington; and stables which are occupied by Countess Bosdari.

But several of the people living in Back-street, owe the present existence of their homes to one of those unaccountable circumstances always to be found in a calamity of this kind. Thatched though they may be, exactly the same as those so speedily doomed, they quite escaped.

It was the Front-street that the greatest share of the disaster fell although here

again it is nothing but marvellous that other buildings were not involved in the destruction. Nine cottages were gutted, rendering quite twenty-eight people homeless:

The total number of the homeless victims of the conflagration is therefore 36, and in a very few instances is there anything left with which to commence a new home.

One or two of those who did save something were successful in obtaining possession of what empty cottages there were in the village. Others were accommodated by their neighbours whose places escaped the flames; and yet others were found accommodation for the night in the waiting-room at the Station.

Another kindness extended to the afflicted people was the use of both the Carrington and the Council Schools for the housing of what furniture, etc was saved from the burned and other buildings.

Of the eight gutted cottages in Front-street only two were slated buildings—those occupied by Mrs. Brown, one of which was used as a bakehouse. Strangely enough, years ago this house was a public-house, with the homely sign of Tom and Jerry. The house was then occupied by Mr. Soden, who subsequently transferred the licence to the premises now known as the Carrington Arms.

Amongst the sad features of the fire in Front-street was the fact that the Wills family only moved in a week or so ago, the sole reminder of their home is a cradle and two chairs. The Front-street property which was devastated, belonged four to Mr. Lack, Wolverton,



two to Miss Varney, one to Mr. Tooth, Stantonbury, and one to Mr. Whiting.

It is impossible yet to properly estimate the amount of damage done. It cannot, however, have amounted to less than £2,000.

The only possible explanation of the origin of the conflagration is that a

spark was carried from a passing train on to the roof of Mr. Masterman's stabling. There was no other fire anywhere in the immediate neighbourhood.

The railway runs quite a hundred yards away, and it is stated that villagers heard a train rush through only a few moments before Miss Tooth gave the alarm.

Castlethorpe, Saturday Morning

By dint of hard work, hampered by many drawbacks, particularly a lack of water. Stony Stratford Brigade kept the burning embers of the fire from causing any further material damage during the night.

The second pond from which they drew water was exhausted long before the night really began. When the need for further water became apparent the firemen had to draw on the village wells, and later on, thanks to the generous action of Mr. and Mrs. Waller, they were able to get another, for the time being, useful supply.

This practically exhausted every serviceable source available. All possible danger of further damage was however, by this time, over. But during the night the fire had several times broken out fiercely, lighting up the sky with lurid glare.

As late as four o'clock this morning big flames were licking round the burned and blackened walls of the devastated homes. But gradually the fire expended itself, and at ten o'clock the firemen were able to declare the further need of water at an end.

Early this morning a telegram,

addressed to the Rector, the Rev. W. J. Harkness, who is away on holiday, reached the village from the Duke of Grafton. It read: "has anything been done on a system to help the burnt-out families?"

The reply sent to His Grace was: "No organised relief yet." But steps were soon being taken to do something tangible, and Mr. Masterman, as Chairman of the Parish Council, and the Rev. F. Davis, curate of the parish, arranged for a meeting this afternoon, at which Lord Carrington's agent, Mr. Marshall Jonas, was to be present.

Lord Carrington is the principal landowner in the village, but none of his lordship's property was involved in the fire.

Some of the sufferers by the fire were this morning digging amongst the ashes of their once happy homesteads in search of money and valuables which had been involved in the wholesale destruction.

One man named Clarke lost over £20 in gold, and he and his friends this morning diligently dug and sifted the rubbish heap his dwelling now is in search of money. Other householders



Wolverton Works Fire Brigade 1905

in the zone of fire, who had been compelled to remove their belongings, yesterday afternoon, must succumb, were this morning engaged in replacing their goods. As late as midnight one cottager found it necessary to protect his belongings by removing them.

RELIEF COMMITTEE FORMED. SUBSCRIPTIONS TOTAL £70.

To establish a relief fund and to appoint a collecting committee for the assistance of the unfortunate villagers of Castlethorpe whose belongings were completely destroyed, by Friday's calamitous fire, a meeting was held in the Council Schools on Saturday afternoon.

A few willing volunteers had during Friday evening and Saturday morning been zealously collecting for their stricken neighbours, and a good sum had been received from numerous visitors who had journeyed to the scene of the fire.

The room was full of interested and sympathetic residents, as well as the hopeless cottagers, and Mr. W. W. Carlile, M.P., was voted to chair. Included among those present were the Rev. F. Davies (Curate of Castlethorpe and Hanslope), Mr. Carter Jonas (Steward to Lord Carrington), Mr. A. Masterman, Mr. G. C. Nichols, Mr. H. Wallach, Mr. C. Whiting, Mr. J. Luing, Mr. T. Osborn, Mr. A. Chandler, Mr. S. Wheldon, Mrs. Carlile, Mrs. Atkinson, Mrs. Wynne, and Mrs. Whiting.

The chairman, in opening the meeting, said he knew how all regretted very much the great calamity which had befallen them in the village, and alluded to the object of the meeting, which interested everybody in the parish and those who resided outside-that of providing due and

adequate help to all who had suffered loss. The Committee whom they were about to appoint would distribute the clothes, of which happily they had received a large number, and which were immediately required.

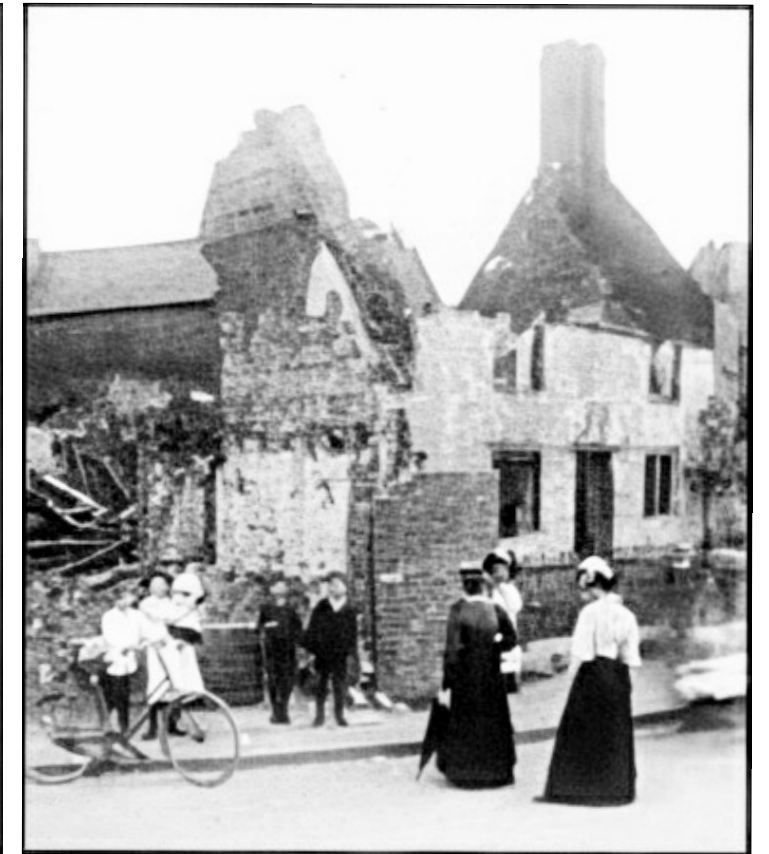
He suggested they should follow the course adopted by Wiltshire recently at a similar occurrence, where they wisely made the Parish Council the responsible Committee, giving them power to co-opt ladies of the district and other who they considered might be useful. He thought that course would be the best to adopt.

His wife he continued who was connected with Bucks and Berks Needlework Guild, had informed him there was a surplus of clothes in connection with the Guild, and had been empowered to give them away. She had brought them for the distressed at Castlethorpe, and he thought they would prove very useful indeed (applause).

Mr. A. Chandler proposed that the Parish Council act as Committee.-This being duly seconded, was carried unanimously.

Mr. S. Wheldon moved that the meeting elect the co-opted members, which should number five. This being put, was also carried.-It was decided, on the proposition of Mr. Chandler, seconded by Mr. Wheldon, that the additional members consist of three ladies and two gentlemen.

The following were elected to serve with the Parish Council: Mrs. Atkinson, Mrs. Whiting, Mrs. Wynne, Mr. D. Cowley, and Mr. A. Chandler. The members of the Parish Council are: Mr. A. Masterman (chairman), Mr. G. C.



Nichols (vice-chairman), Mr. H. Wallach, Mr. J. Luing, and Mr. C. Whiting.

The chairman suggested that as the needs of the people were urgent it would be well for the Committee to meet directly after the meeting to consider the distribution of clothing and other matters which were required immediate attention.

It was announced during the meeting by Mr. Carter Jonas that Earl Carrington

wished to express his sympathy with all who had sustained loss, and he sent £25 to alleviate their suffering. The Duke of Grafton sent £10, while sums of £5 were announced from Mr. W. W. Carlile, the Hon. T. F. Fremantle, Mr. Wallach, Mr. A. Burr and Mrs. Atkinson, Mr. C. Whiting gave £3, Mr. A. Masterman £2, and Mr. J. Feasey £1, while the collecting boxes which were opened contained £4 11s. 8d.

The Bucks Standard

8 NOVEMBER 1905

FIRE RELIEF FUND. – It appears from the balance sheet of the above fund that the efforts of the committee have resulted in a very gratifying financial success. The total amount subscribed is £298 8s 7½d.

This sum, with the exception of management expenses such as printing, advertising, postage and receipt stamps, stationary &c. has been divided between those unfortunate ones who suffered in various ways through the late disastrous fire.

The task has not been a light one, as all would readily admit who have had experience in organising a relief fund. There has been an immense amount of work done and done most efficiently.

After the charitably disposed persons had responded so liberally to the appeal for help, there yet remained the responsibility of administering the fund. A thoroughly representative committee dealt with each case upon its merits, guarding themselves sedulously against imposition. The fullest investigation was made without fear or favour, and in this way they were

enabled to arrive at a fairly accurate estimate of each person's loss.

The fund placed at the disposal of the committee, supplemented by gifts of warm clothing, blankets &c., so appropriately sent from far and near, proved sufficient to alleviate immediate distress the day following the fire, and finally to compensate adequately the sufferers for the loss sustained and for which they are all exceedingly grateful.

The hon. sec. Mr. Thos. Osborne, and Mr. A. Masterman, treasurer, deserve the highest praise for their able and untiring efforts, which must have contributed largely to the success of the undertaking.

Castlethorpe has been conspicuously free from fires considering the number of thatched buildings there are in the village and their contiguity to the main line of the L. & N.W. Railway.

We sincerely hope that cottage accommodation will soon be provided for all those families who were so ruthlessly burnt out, and that the experience of August 4th will never be repeated.





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