

Village Echoes

Fire at the Vicarage

When Canon Walter Raikes was inducted as vicar of St Mary's in October 1911, he and his wife were living in temporary accommodation while the vicarage in Church Road (now the site of Queen Anne's) was refurbished to their requirements. The alterations were still in progress in 1912 when disaster struck on the night of 17th March and a serious fire broke out, causing approximately £1,000 worth of damage.

The event was reported in the local press, and also (though with less detail) in The Times and in regional newspapers from Bexhill-on-Sea to Driffield in Yorkshire. The parish magazine for April 1912 contained a lengthy explanation of what had occurred.

The cause of the fire was unknown, but speculation was rife. Theories ranged from a tramp using the site for shelter, careless workmen, or a deliberate act of "incendiarism". The fire was believed to have started in the former vicar's study, where it smouldered for some hours before eventually burning through the closed door. Once this happened, the fire took hold rapidly, not least because of the west wind blowing at the time which helped fan the flames still further. In the space of a few hours the whole building was almost wrecked.

It was only the incessant barking of his dog that eventually alerted Albert Chenery, who lived nearby at Tattlebury, to spot the conflagration. He then quickly notified the verger who rang the fire bell to summon the local fire brigade; they were able to douse the flames, but not before the entire centre of the building had been consumed.

Fortunately, both the builder, G. & F. Penn, and the vicarage were insured. The blaze meant, however, that it was many more months before Canon Raikes and his wife were finally able to take possession of their new home.

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