

Natural Disasters in Ewelme

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The worldwide media graphically details environmental disasters as they occur. These catastrophes, whether fires, floods or hurricanes are, comfortingly, far from Ewelme, but the village did suffer two calamities in the 18th century that would have had a significant impact upon the residents.

The first was in 1749 when a cloudburst over the Chiltern Hills caused a great flood, (sufficient to float a sizeable boat), to sweep through the village. It is written into the Church Register.

“To all Posterity that on the 27th day of April in the year 1749 between the hours of two and five in the afternoon being Thursday a rain falling, moderately only within the inhabited limits of this parish, there came, raised by degrees A Flood as of a river between 10 and 20 yards wide down along the Cow Common, the partition hedge whereof was in the middle which, flood, flowing along through the enclosure called Elliots upon the yard and garden of Fords Farm being at length pent up by the earth walls of the yard, deluged the farm house and laid all the lower rooms under water to ye depth of 4 feet; at length it forced down some of the north corners then the rest of the walls were dug away to free the house of the water, and a torrent of water sufficient to beare a boat from four to seven, was seen running with great violence down the road from this place to Bensington, the house here and there both being inundated by it some a foot, some more, some less. The source of this water was from the concourse of four streams one of along the Warren bottom another from down Middle Hill, the third from Grindon Lane, a fourth down the Warren Hill which streams were from the upper grounds through a rain excessively thick and fast.

Clouds being suddenly condensed or as it is commonly said, bursting over them, this wonderfully thick rain was perceived by men belonging to teams from Henley Market who were up to ye said leg in water upon those hills, over which they had great difficulty to drive for the waters standing upon it.”

Only six years later another catastrophe occurred in Ewelme, caused this time by a gale whipped fire. The widespread damage caused severe difficulties for many villagers.

“It is humbly represented, that on Friday, May 23rd 1755, about one o’clock in the Day Time, which, within the space of three hours (thro’ the violence of the wind) notwithstanding the Assistance of Four engines, entirely burnt down and utterly consumed, thirteen dwelling houses, a Malt House, Barns, Stables, Ricks, Grainaries and Stores of Corn, Malt and Hay and Fuel, belonging to the poor sufferers, and almost all of their household goods.

It is also represented, that an estimate hath been carefully made by a number of experienced workmen and farmers, who have view’d the premises, and examined into the sufferers circumstances and effects, which, upon a moderate computation, amounts to the sum of £1,103. Ish 9d and upwards (exclusive of Sir Monoux Cope’s loss, and £220 insur’d) so that by this unfortunate accident, the poor sufferers, (who before were helpful and useful members of society) are now reduced to the utmost extremity and must inevitably sink under the weight of their several and respective losses, unless immediately relieved by the charity of well-dispos’d people.

We the Minister, Church Wardens, Overseers of the Poor, and other inhabitants of the said Parish of Ewelme, do attest the truth of the abovementioned loss.”

There followed a list of donors to a fund totalling £479. 6sh 5d. The wealthy Widow King, (who rented out many properties), received £126. 8sh 10d. At the other end of the economic scale, Edward Lane received £4. 10sh 6d.

In modern times, damage caused to residents by uncontrollable events has been minimal. However, in the last War a Wellington bomber was attempting to land when it was shot down by an enemy fighter. The resulting blast blew out all the windows of the Shepherds Hut. Inevitably, the patrons would have been discomfited until a glazier could replace the glass!

Ewelme Village Archive