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# Ramsey Fires

A history of fires and accidents involving fires in Ramsey,  
Cambridgeshire

Created from Archives held at Ramsey Rural Museum

# Timeline: The Fires of Ramsey

**1636**

**Little  
Whyte**

**1731**

**High  
Street**

**1818**

**Dreadful  
Accident**

**Death  
of Child**

**1827**

**Blacksmiths**

**Chimney  
Fire**

**1854**

**Houses  
Destroyed**

**1859**

**Little  
Whyte**

**1864**

**Farmyard  
Fire**

**1911**

**Great  
Whyte**

# 1636

A fire in Little Whyte in 1636 destroyed 15 tenements

# 1731

## *Ramsey Abbey, Its Rise and Fall*

On the 21<sup>st</sup> day of May 1731, a sudden and terrible fire began about 2 of the clock in the afternoon on the house of Wm Pain of Ramsey, tailor, by the carelessness and neglect of 2 of the daughters of the said Wm Pain, which in the space of 5 or 6 hours burnt down and wholly consumed above four score houses, besides granaries full of wheat, malt and oats, barns, stables, and outhouses, household goods, beds. Bedding, brass, pewter and all manner of wearing apparel &c, to the utter ruin of an innumerable number of poor miserable people. Note, not one house standing in the High Street from the school house to the High Bridge on the north side of the said street, nor from Richard Badson's house on the south side to the Widow Priest's house at the George, except a part of John Beard's house and Samuel Philip's, and which were very much shattered; all the west side of the Great Whyte, from the turning of the corner in the High Street down to a house of Mr Overton's, which, tho not consumed, was in part pulled down. God be praised! No one person burnt, killed, hurt or bruised.

# 1818

*25 April 1818*

## *Huntingdon, Bedford and Peterborough Gazette,*

**Dreadful Accident:-** On Saturday last as Mrs Bletsoe, wife of Mr. John Bletsoe, farmer near Ramsey, was standing near the fire, engaged in her domestic concerns, the flames caught her clothes and burnt her in a most shocking manner. Unluckily there was no person near at the time, to render immediate assistance, but her screams were heard by Mr. Bletsoe, who hastened to the spot, and was obliged to immerse the sufferer in cold water ere the flames could be subdued. We are sorry to add, her wearing apparel was entirely consumed, and herself so dreadfully burnt, as to render her recovery very doubtful.

(An inquest into the death of Mrs John Bletsoe, occasioned by her clothes accidentally catching fire while she was whitewashing the corner of the fireplace gave accidental death as the verdict.)

# 1818

12 December 1818

## Huntingdon, Bedford and Peterborough Gazette

On the 1<sup>st</sup>, inst. an inquest was taken before Mr G A Wilkinson, coroner for the liberty of Ramsey, on view of the body of Martha Rose, a child two years old, whose death was occasioned by a boiler of boiling hot broth falling upon her.

Verdict:- accidental death

# 1827

*3 February 1827*

*Huntingdon, Bedford and Peterborough Gazette,*

On Saturday morning the inhabitants of High Street, in Ramsey, were thrown into a state of alarm by the sudden appearance of columns of smoke issuing from a blacksmith's shop; occasioned by some persons, engaged in heating pitch for the purpose of branding sheep, suffering a kettle too remain too long upon the fire, causing the flammable liquid to boil over. The flames were happily extinguished without any material damage accruing.

# 1827

*24 February 1827*

## *Huntingdon, Bedford and Peterborough Gazette,*

On Sunday the inhabitants of Ramsey were somewhat alarmed by the cry of “Fire,” which was occasioned by the chimney of a cottage sending forth columns of smoke and flames; but by the timely exertions of a Mr Samson, and the engine being quickly upon the spot, the danger soon subsided, without any other damage than depriving the poor sweep of his fee.

# 1827

**(Kelly's 1898)**

**“The Police Station, is a building in the Italian style,  
erected in 1854 after a fire which consumed 13 houses”**

# 1859

19 March 1859

## Cambridge Independent Press,

1859 Incendiary Fire (Little Whyte): We are sorry to have to record another incendiary fire at this place, which occurred on Sunday night last a little before ten. Smoke was seen rising through the thatch at the back part of the house occupied by Mr. William Abbott, and on examination it was found that the inside of the roof was in flames. The building, together with three other adjoining cottages, were consumed, and but for the good fortune of a change of wind just at the time, there must have been a fearful conflagration, as the neighbourhood is so thickly studded with thatched buildings. An attempt was made a few weeks ago to fire the same premises; and there being some other suspicious circumstances, Sergeant Hamilton apprehended Mr Abbot, who was brought before the Rev. G. Johnstone at our Petty Session on Wednesday, and remanded to St Ives on Monday.

**Note:** A William Abbott was a boot and shoemaker in Little Whyte in 1855 (also listed 1839, 1847, 1848, 1851, 1854)

# 1864

**26 February 1864**

## **Stamford Mercury**

On Tuesday last, about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, a fire broke out in the farm-yard of Mrs Ann Parker, situate in the Great Whyte. The flames spread rapidly, burning the stable and hovels, and before the cattle could be removed a valuable mare and cow perished in the flames. The fire afterwards extended to a thatched cottage occupied by Thomas Beeton, which was consumed. The fire originated in children playing with lucifer matches.

# 1911

## **June 1911 (Newspaper report)**

A disastrous fire at Ramsey destroyed half-a-dozen houses in the main street. It started in the chimney of a thatched house and the interior walls being of old-fashioned reed and plaster, the property was almost instantly ablaze. A lodger got out safely, though singed, as did the owner of the house, a small farmer. But his wife hurried upstairs to recover some trinkets and was not seen again. Her charred body was found at the foot of the stairs. By her side was a box containing a watch, rings and money. The town of Ramsey is largely composed of thatched cottages.

## **23 June 1911 (Newspaper report)**

Six cottages and the Boat Inn all under a continuous roof of thatch on the left hand or easterly side of Main Street (Great Whyte) were reduced to ashes. All were very old. One person, Mrs Matilda Collett, was killed. The fire started at 10 am and the fire brigade arrived within 5-6 minutes. By 11 am the first house had collapsed but it took until 3 am to get the fire under control and until 5 pm to put the fire out. The damage was estimated at £700-£800

# 1911

## **As reported by witness Nellie Aldred**

On June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1911, six thatched cottages were burned down and one woman burned to death. I remember the pall of smoke which lay over our school playground, and was running down Great Whyte as far as we were allowed to go. There were six thatched cottages opposite, all housing large families. They were lovely old houses with timbers in the walls and the bedrooms overhanging the pavement by about a foot. Of course there was no piped water in those days so I expect the fireman had to rely on the river for their supply. There were two pumps over the river, one near the Boat Inn and one against the Black Horse for the use of the Council to water the roads to lay the dust. The Council men used to bring some steps with a platform to get up to the pump – it wasn't often left in place overnight - what fun we had if it was.

# Peterborough Advertiser

## Disastrous and fatal Fen fire.

### Six homes burned and a life lost at Ramsey

A most disastrous fire involving loss of a life occurred in Ramsey on Tuesday, when six cottages in the Great Whyte were reduced to ashes and Mrs Matilda Collett, wife of Mr John Collett, one of the occupiers, was burned to death. The cottages were situated on the left or eastern side of the Main Street, or Great Whyte, at Ramsey (left hand side from the station) and were mostly thatched and very old, and adjoined the Boat Inn, which was also badly damaged. The six cottages were all under a continuous roof of thatch and ranging in order from the Boat northwards were occupied by Messrs. J. Jolly, T. Garton, J. Collett, Cox, Hicks and Skinner. Those tenanted by Messrs. Jolly and Garton were the property of Mr. W. Butler. Mr. J. Collett owned the house in which he lived. Mrs. Denham of Blenheim Road was the owner of the houses occupied by Messrs. Hicks and Cox, and the last house, in which Mr. Skinner resided, belonged to Mr. Barratt. The six cottages were two-storey buildings with thatch roofs. The Boat Inn, the property of Messrs. Phipps and Co. Northampton, is tenanted by William Butler.

The fire broke out within a minute or two of ten o'clock in the morning in the house occupied by Mr. Collett. It was first noticed by some of the neighbours and Mrs. Skinner. In describing the first stages of the outbreak, said she noticed the thatch heave and then saw flames and smoke issuing. Mr. Collett came out at the back of the house at that time and his attention was at once called to the fire. He darted back into the house and called to his wife, "We are on fire." He then went and summoned the assistance of neighbours.

At the back of the house was one of the large old-fashioned chimneys with a beam in, and there is little doubt that the conflagration originated there. A fire had been alight in the kitchen grate since early that morning but it is probable that the beam had been smoldering for some days.

Amongst the neighbours Mr. Collett called to render help was Mr. Fred K. Fox, who lived nearby. Mr. Fox came along directly and must have been at the house within two minutes of the discovery, but in this short time the greater part of the roof was on fire and the house was filled with smoke. Being of a very old construction and of course, very dry after the period of hot weather, the buildings were of a highly inflammable nature, and the fire spread with alarming rapidity.

On reaching the house with Mr. Fox, Mr. Collett found his wife was missing. He called and received no answer and then enquired of the neighbours, who had by this time gathered, but they had seen nothing of her. The lodger in the house, Mr. Jesse Saunders, also had not arrived downstairs and his and Mrs. Collett's absence gave rise to much alarm. Mr. Fox entered the house and leaped upstairs in the smoke. At the top of the stairs he saw Mr. Saunders coming out of his room, scantily dressed. It is very fortunate that Mr. Fox saw him at this moment, for he was in a dazed condition and was walking in the wrong direction. He helped him downstairs. But for this timely rescue it is probable that Mr. Saunders would not have got out safely. Some idea of the rapidity of the flames can be gathered from the fact that in leaving his rooms within three minutes of the outbreak, Mr. Saunders' hair was singed, his face scorched and he was nearly suffocated with the smoke.

Having brought Mr. Saunders out safely, Mr. Fox again darted upstairs and shouted, "Are you there, Mrs. Collett?" As he stood on the landing, he heard the reply, "Here I am" from one of the rooms. He tried to get towards the room, but the dense smoke of the flames completely barred his way. Knowing that to go further would be little less than suicidal, Mr. Fox procured a ladder with all haste, took it around to the front of the house and smashed a window of the room in which he knew Mrs. Collett would be. Pulling and pushing - scurrying along the street with the heavy engine. Within five or six minutes of receiving the call, the Brigade was on the scene. That magnificent veteran, Captain Mutton, and Lieut. Palmer were in charge and other firemen present were Messrs A. proud, C. Topper, D. Gibson, T. Marriott, W. Gilding, J. Dawson, H. Smalley and A. N. Swearer and G. Holmes. A good supply of water was obtained from the Arch (the covered over waterway) and three deliveries were fixed. Pumping was commenced about quarter past ten, when the Brigade saw themselves faced with a fire with which it would be very difficult to cope. Mr. R. F. Serjeant (Clerk ??) and Mr. P. S. Bennett (Surveyor) suggested that another fire brigade should be sent for, but the Brigade favoured the idea of waiting a little while to see if they could manage the fire. This course was decided upon and as a result of the fine work of the engine and men there was no need for the attendance of a second Brigade.

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Before the Brigade arrived, a large crowd of people had gathered, and a number assisted the occupants of the houses on either side of Mr. Collett's in removing furnishings and goods. Mr. Garton's house, which adjoined Mr. Collett's on the southern side, was locked up, Mr. Garton being away haymaking. This was not broken into for some few minutes, it then being too late to save much of the furniture. Fanned by a north-north-west wind, the fire had rapidly spread on to this house.

Obtained from the words of one of the engineers, who said that when he was standing within a foot of the engine he could not see the engine at all. Many of the firemen and helpers suffered with their eyes in consequence. Soon after eleven o'clock the house where the fire commenced began to fall in and before 12 o'clock that and the adjoining one were a complete wreckage. At this time the engine stopped for a few minutes so that a search could be made for the body of Mrs. Collett. P.C.s Chandler and Hufford at once entered the building with some of the firemen and found their way amongst the still flaming embers. The sad discovery was made by Fireman Topper, who first saw the charred remains lying amongst the debris near the bottom steps of the destroyed staircase. On the left-hand side of the body were found a box containing four gold rings, a gold brooch, a gold watch chain, and some documents. It was very evident from these that the deceased went upstairs to fetch these things and having procured them was cut off from retreat by flames. Burns or suffocation brought about the untimely end and the body fell to the place where it was found when the building collapsed. The remains were removed by Police into premises at the back of the Boat to await the inquest. The finding of the body was marked with sad solemnity by the throng of people gathered in the street, who watched the removal with sorrowful and reverent silence.

Up to the time of this stopping the cottages on either side of the destroyed buildings did not appear to have caught hold much. The flames had apparently crept along inside unnoticed, for within a minute or two of this delay, the flames broke out anew on both sides. In but a moment of time there was again a great blaze and with livid fury the flames voraciously pursued their path of destruction. The engine was brought into play again, but it was fully two hours before the flames were mastered and in that time the whole row of six cottages were reduced to mere wreckage and the roof and upper storey of the Boat Inn sustained serious damage. The last cottage joined the Boat and running along the thatch of the cottages the flames attacked the dividing wall, quickly penetrating

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this the tongues of fire hurtled along underneath the tile roof of the inn and came out at the other end of the building over a chimney. Here was another great danger to face, and the attention of the fireman was turned to this. They were successful in extinguishing this before the flames had got beyond control, so that the damage was confined to the roof and upstairs front rooms.

The fire had been got well under hand by three o'clock, and about five o'clock the fire was completely out. The firemen then went home for tea and returned later.

On Wednesday, a large number of people visited the town to see the debris, which presented a weird and unhappy spectacle.

Just after the arrival of the Brigade, Inspector Storey, P.C. Chandler and P.C. Hufford arrived, P.C. Jackin (St. Mary's) and P.C. Afford (Warboys) coming later. The work of salvage from the five cottages other than Mr. Collett's was undertaken in earnest. P.C. Chandler, whilst assisting, had a peculiar experience. He was in one of the upstairs rooms in Mr. Garton's house when the floor of the next room collapsed. The constable had to make a hasty exit over flaming beams and through dense smoke.

In the meantime, the crowd had been listening with awe to the reports concerning Mrs. Collett. That she had been heard to call from an upstairs window after the fire had got hold was not generally known, and though all feared that she had been locked in the flames and smoke and thus cut off with an awful death, there was a feeling of hope amongst them that she was not really in the building at all. Numerous reports were set about from time to time, all of which had no foundation. One minute the people who stood around conversing in whispers upon the predictability of the terrible calamity were thrilled with joy at the report which quickly spread that Mrs. Collett was safe, having been found in a neighbour's. The next minute the crowd was grieved to hear that this was not the case and that they might only look for the worst. Other various reports gave rise to a little hope which was soon completely dispelled when it was generally known that Mr. Fox had heard the unfortunate woman call from the upstairs room and had been unable to reach her. It was indeed pathetic to see the distressed husband pacing up and down and watching the flames which had or were about the death of one so dear to him. The shock he had suffered and the effect of the smoke seemed to have the merciful effect of depriving him of a full realisation of the terrible happening, but the inexpressible sorrow and bitterness of heart were imprinted on his features and the crowd was moved to pity on his behalf.

A row of matches is shown against a dark red background. The match on the far left is lit, with a bright yellow and orange flame rising from its tip. The other matches are unlit, showing their red heads and wooden stems. The overall mood is dramatic and focused on the theme of fire.

# Ramsey Fires

A brief history

Created from Archives held at Ramsey Rural Museum

# Notes for adults

The information in these slides is available in the maintained archive at Ramsey Rural Museum.

References where possible are provided with each instance.

It is hoped that the information could support various aspects of the school curriculum:

- **History** ( KS1 comparison with the Great Fire of London)
- **Local history/studies** - engaging children in their immediate local area and how events in the past have shaped the geography and people of Ramsey.
- **English** – analysing texts such as newspaper articles for their language and story.
- **Art** – recording and exploring ideas through the creation of artwork.

For further information contact [info@ramseyruralmuseum.co.uk](mailto:info@ramseyruralmuseum.co.uk)