



# *Fire at Parish Church Bishopstone 1891*

## **Alarming Fire at the Parish Church Total Destruction of the Peal of Bells**

The inhabitants of the quiet village of Bishopstone were thrown into a state of excitement on Good Friday evening by the report that the parish church of St. Mary was on fire. The fire was discovered, and the alarm raised about eight o'clock, immediately after the evening service, when flames were discovered issuing from the tower. The villagers turned out in large numbers, and the old village fire engine was brought into requisition, but it proved to be of very little use, not being powerful enough.

A messenger was despatched to Shrivenham (the nearest telegraph office) and the Swindon Fire Brigade telegraphed for. They received the call about 9.30 p.m., and at once turned out under Capt. E. Bowering, arriving at Bishopstone shortly after ten o'clock, when they found the fire raging fiercely. A plentiful supply of water was at hand, and the Brigade at once directed their efforts towards the tower. The willing helpers set to work to strip the church of the pulpit, lectern, American organ, tablets, and other contents of the church, all of which fortunately saved. Every effort was made to subdue the flames, but before this could be effected the splendid peal of bells – one of the finest for miles around and of which the villagers were justly proud – were totally destroyed, the great heat which had accumulated in the tower melting them. The old clock, too, which dates back over 200 years, was destroyed. In fact all the interior work of the tower as well as a portion of the roof, was destroyed. The Fire Brigade worked most assiduously for some hours, but were able to depart on Saturday morning.

Services had been held in the church all day; in fact from twelve to three o'clock a three hours service was held, attended by some 300 persons, and conducted by the Rev. - . Cook, of St. Andrews, Montpelier, Bristol, at whose church the vicar of Bishopstone, the Rev. H. Ault was conducting a similar service at the same time, they having exchanged pulpits for that day. Everybody in the village rendered all the assistance they possibly could, and endeavoured to their utmost to save.

At one time there were grave fears that the thatched cottages in close proximity to the church would be caught on fire by the burning sparks blown from the tower. For the protection of these the fire engine was usefully employed. The thatch was drenched with water, and men climbed on to the roofs and quickly removed the burning material, which, carried by the wind over the tree tops, constantly pitched on them. The flames from the tower shot high up into the air, illuminating all the windows of the church, and in the moonlight formed a grand sight. Within half an hour of the discovery the roof of the tower, the bells, and the belfry had fallen, and the tower was totally stripped in the interior, leaving only the bare walls standing. Of course any estimate of the damage is as yet impossible. It will be difficult, if not impossible, to secure another such a set of bells, although it is intended to replace the full peal of eight. The old ones dated from 1620, and five of them were a gift of one gentleman. The clock was also of great age. One

inscription it bore stated that for 174 years it had its home in the belfrey, and another that in 1823 it was removed to the base where it had since remained. Part of the plate and lock bearing the inscriptions have been recovered. In one of the windows was some beautiful stained glass which was recovered during the restoration in 1823, and a part of this was cut out out, while the fire was at its highest, for protection: a portion also remains in the window uninjured. Most of the memorials were saved, but a number of large wooden tablets in the tower, containing records of the Goddard and Croker Charities, as well as those of other benefactors, together with an account of a remarkable peal rung on the bells, by a famous guild of ringers, perished. A tablet erected near the western end of the Church, and close to where the fire was raging so fiercely, fell away from its setting but luckily without sustaining injury to its face. It is noticeable from the following inscription: "Sacred to the memory of Charles Curtis, son of Henry and Elizabeth Curtis, who departed this life on the 16th day of December, 1838, aged 65 years, and is buried by the side of his parents in the Churchyard of the parish. He crossed the Atlantic six times, and after a residence of 31 years in the island of Antigua, on his passage home in the Victoria (captain Sayer) narrowly escaped shipwreck on the Casket Rocks, on the 21st day of August 1822, for which merciful preservation during the remaining 16 years of his life he duly offered up his humble and heartfelt thanks to his Heavenly Father".

Fortunately the chancel was not damaged beyond the removal of the choir stalls, which were taken away in case the fire might spread to this part of the building. But it remains intact, and on Sunday evening, the altar and some of the areas were temporarily replaced. The altar was embellished with Easter decorations, and all made as fit as could be for service on Easter Sunday when at 7 a.m. a communion service was held, the Vicar, the Rev. Ault, officiating. There were 34 communicants, and the celebration will never be forgotten by them. There was a second celebration after Mattins at which there were ten communicants. An evening service was conducted in the schoolroom.

Next Sunday (tomorrow) there will be morning prayer at 11, and evening service at 5.30 p.m. In the schoolroom. And in future the services will be held in the schoolroom until the church is restored. Morning prayer will be at eleven o'clock and evening service at six o'clock after next Sunday.

The Vicar (the Rev. H. Ault) and the Churchwardens (Messrs. T. Hickman and C. W. C. Edmonds) desire to thank most sincerely all who so kindly assisted in extinguishing the fire or in saving any part of the furniture from its ravages. The Vicar adds that he is overwhelmed at the thought of the church having lost its nine peal of bells which money cannot replace; and his feelings of regret are shared by the whole of the parishioners.

Dear Sir,

Would you kindly inform the public through your columns that a subscription list on behalf of our restoration Fund has been opened at the several Banks in Swindon, through the kindness of their respective managers.

Herbert Ault.  
Vicar of Bishopstone

**Swindon Advertiser and North Wilts Chronicle, 4 April 1891**