



Shrewton: plaque on cottages rebuilt after the floods at Shrewton, with funds from the public collection after the disaster

Dreadful Inundation. Three lives lost at Shrewton.

The quantity of snow which fell during the afternoon and evening of Thursday last, caused a great impediment to travelling in this neighbourhood; but the chief obstruction was between Devizes and Marlborough. The whole of the night up-coaches, with the exception of the mail, proceeded but a few miles on the London road, and returned to Devizes; -the mail, it will be seen by our Kennett letter, reached that village. On the Friday, the down coaches were 7 or 8 hours behind time; and it is said that some of the coaches were six times dug out of the snow between Calne and Marlborough.

In the afternoon of Saturday, a rapid thaw took place; and between four and five o'clock, the waters from the surrounding hills rushed like a torrent into the village of Shrewton, destroying in its course twenty eight cottages, rendering upwards of 130 persons houseless. Such a scene of devastation, by water, within so short a space of time, and over so small a compass, has perhaps never been witnessed in England. Some of the cottages were swept entirely to the ground; portions of the walls of a few, and of the roofs of others, remain standing – but all is a wreck. Three lives, we regret to say, were also lost during the evening; and had the flood

taken place an hour or two later, ten times that number, would, probably have been sacrificed. In the adjoining village of Maddington, seven cottages were destroyed. The water in some parts of the villages was 7 or 8 feet high; in others 4 and 5 feet. In its progress it burst the doors of the wheel Inn, and washed the beer from the cellar into the yard. In every room on the ground floor it was from 2 to 3 feet in depth. The neat little cottage of Mr Maton is demolished, together with all the front walls. In short, the whole place presents a picture of devastation.

In one part of a cottage on the road leading to Salisbury, a man named Fulford, and his daughter resided. In another was an old woman, upwards of 90 years of age, and her great grand-child – aged about 7 years of age. The old woman and the child went to bed soon after six. Between 6 and 7, the girl Fulford came to the front window and exclaimed “Joseph Grant! Joseph Grant! Do ye come tour help, for the house is falling.” Joseph Grant lived on the opposite side of the road, not more, we should think, than about 12 or 15 feet across. The water at this time was about 4 or 5 feet deep, and rushing with so much violence that no one could stand against it. Grant told her, he could render her no assistance; and urged her to throw herself, if possible, from the window. The chimney now fell: and the girl, after retiring for a minute or two, again made her appearance, exclaiming – “do ye come – do ye come, Joseph! For my father is killed!” – Efforts were made, but without effect. Soon afterwards the walls gave way, and the inmates fell with the ruins. The girl Fulford having recovered herself, advanced to the rails by the side of the road, and implored in the most piteous and agonising terms that they would come to her relief. She shortly lost her footing, and Grant says he saw her “purl” over in the water; she, however, regained her feet, and renewed her entreaties for help. She stretched her hands as far as she was able and supplicate “Joseph” to put his out and meet her. “Do ye come, do ye come, Joseph,” was her constant cry. Grant says he made a desperate effort, but failed: the girl again fell, and “rolled over and over with the torrent” until she was drowned. She was dug out of some ruins about 200 yards from the spot, on the Sunday forenoon, *literally naked*. What this poor girl, who was about 13 years of age, suffered for an hour and a half, no pen can describe. Grant’s attention was now directed to the cries of the child. “Take my Granny out – take my Granny out, or she will be dead,” was her cry. The father and mother of the child were within a very few yards of the spot: -they could distinctly hear her cries, but had no means of rendering help. At length a horse was procured, when Langtrey, a policeman, with another person, went across, up to their middle in water, holding by the horse, to prevent their being carried off by the torrent, and after a great deal of difficulty, rescued the old woman and the child. Was unable to move her hands from the position in which she fell, the child employed herself in removing the rubbish from her grandmother’s face. The poor man Fulford was heard for a quarter of an hour after the chimney fell, imploring the Lord to have mercy upon him! His body was also dug out on the Sunday forenoon; and the remains of father and daughter were laid side by side in an adjacent barn.

Langtrey, the policeman, had, just before he came to Fulford’s, rescued a man named Borough, his wife, and 3 children from the ruins of a cottage, at the upper part of the village. As he was about to leave, he heard some feeble cry proceeding from the spot. It was then recollected that an aged man named Stone, was in the cottage; Langtrey went back, and with assistance, got the old man out, also alive.

A man name Windsor, a blacksmith, who resided near the Wheel Inn, had but just time to take out his children and place them on an elevated spot, before his cottage fell in. His cries brought assistance from the house of Mr Smallbones; and at the risk of their own lives, 2 or 3 persons brought the children safely into the Wheel.

Whilst this was going on at the upper part of the village, a most appalling scene presented itself at the lower part:

In a cottage, recently built, and which had a solid foundation, resided a labourer named Blewden, with his wife and 5 small children – the oldest about 7 years of age, and the youngest an infant. No one suspected that this cottage was in danger here, indeed, any of the neighbours, it was thought, might have gone for security. If danger had even been anticipated, the family could have safely walked out, between 5 and 6 o'clock, after most of the other cottages had fallen in. Blewden had not, up to this time, returned from his work at Orcheston; and the waters continuing to increase in height and violence, the west end of the cottage fell at about seven o'clock. At this time it was impossible for any of the inmates to make their rescue. The mother with the infant in her arms, and drawing a cradle, into which she had placed a little boy about two years of age, after her – her other children clinging around her, rushed to a casement at the east end of the house, and here her heart-rending cries for help attracted a great number of persons near the spot: but tall attempts to get to the cottage were fruitless. The night was dark and dismal – the rain at times fell heavily, the wind was remarkably high, and the rushing of the waters resembled the roaring of the sea. By means of a light at the casement, the mother and her children were distinctly seen; and whilst she earnestly supplicated for relief, the shrieks of the children rent the air. A more harrowing scene can scarcely be imagined. – Blewden was now returned from his work, and hearing the cries of his little ones – being on the Orcheston end of the cottage, he could not see them – rushed into the water, and but for a person more powerful than himself, would have been drowned. Among those in front, (not more than 100 yards distant) and who could witness the struggles of the family, were the father and brother of Mrs Blewden: their efforts to come to her rescue, as may be conceived were untiring; but for upwards of an hour, the family were in the situation described at the casement. In a moment a loud crash was heard – the light was extinguished, and for a short time all was hushed – It was thought that the mother and her five children were all buried in the ruins. A part of the side wall, it appears, had fallen down, and killed the little boy in the cradle. The mother, for a minute or two, was overpowered by the shock: on recovering herself she gave a loud and piercing shriek, and the cries of the children were renewed. Two or three more hours passed away; another crash took place – the whole of the east end of the cottage fell, and the mother and her children, were all thrown upon the ruins. During all this time, every possible effort was made to rescue them, but in vain. Several times, at the imminent risk of his life, Mr. S. Mills of Elston, endeavoured on horseback, to brave the torrent, and if possible to save some of the children. Some idea of the rapidity of the waters may be formed from the fact, that a wagon with one of Mr Mills's largest farmhorses attached to it, was carried over the ruins of the cottage into an adjoining orchard. The young man who rode the horse, kept his seat; and, nothing daunted, repeatedly tried to bring the wagon to one part of the cottage – then to another: and at length he succeeded. The brother of Mrs Blewden was among the first to her rescue: - he found her under a large heap of earth, and took the infant from her arms, uninjured' - how it was preserved, it is impossible to say. A little girl, three years and a half old, was next extricated: whilst taking this child out, it appears that Mr Pearce, for that was the brother's name, stepped upon the elder boy, about 7 years of age, who immediately cried out "Uncle, Uncle! Here I am." This poor boy's thigh is broken, and he is otherwise severely injured by the rubbish which fell upon him. By the light of the lantern, the head of the other boy was seen just above the ruins: -he, too, was extricated; and last of all, the mother, who was immediately put to bed, at an adjoining public house, from which, it is probable, she will never rise. The cradle, with the dead child, was dug out of the ruins on the following day.

Mr Pearce, father of Mrs Blewden, kept an ale-house: - his cottage was washed down between 5 and six o'clock, as was the one adjoining, belonging to his son. The cottage in which Blewden resided was built by the savings of his industry – it was "his own." The loss this family sustained amounts to between 2 and £300 – nearly their all. Pearce, the son, in endeavouring to get to the relief of his sister, would inevitably have been drowned, but for Mr Mills. He was nearly overpowered, when seeing Mr Mills on horseback, he begged to be allowed to catch hold of the stirrups. Mr Mills immediately rode to his assistance; but, like a drowning man, Pearce first caught the reins, then the mane of the horse, and for a time the whole three were in danger of falling together. He was at length extricated:- but he did not

cease his efforts for his sister , until she too was saved – between 12 and one o'clock in the night.

A very short distance from the Blewdens, an old woman, named Sarah Munday, between 60 and 70 years of age, resided. The water came into her cottage between five and six in the evening, and soon afterwards some of the walls gave way. She sought shelter up-stairs; and, being wet, took off her clothes, and wrapped herself in a blanket. Other parts of the cottage soon fell, until at length nothing stood but the chimney, to which she clung – exposed, almost naked, to the weather, and in momentary danger of death – for nearly seven hours, without any one being enabled to come to her rescue. "I did not (the old woman told us) forget to pray to god. I prayed until I was exhausted. I revived and I prayed again!" At midnight she was extricated from her perilous situation without receiving the slightest personal injury. At the same end f the village, but further on towards Orcheston, were 4 or 5 adjoining tenements; the inmates of which, with the exception of an old widow named Vallis, seeing the approaching danger, made their escape between 6 an7 o'clock. Poor widow Vallis was obliged to remain: her cottage fell around her, and she could not be taken from the ruins until four hours afterwards; but she too was preserved.

The number of cottages destroyed at Shrewton, Maddington, and the Orchestons, adjoining villages, is 47; and the number of persons rendered houseless, 195; viz. – at Shrewton, 28 cottages destroyed, and 130 persons houseless. At Maddington, 7 cottages destroyed, 25 persons houseless; at Orcheston St George, 6 cottages destroyed, 22 persons houseless; and at Orcheston St Mary, 6 cottages destroyed and 18 persons houseless.

The Rev. Mr Atkinson, the clergyman of Maddington, and his wife, sat up during the whole of Saturday night, administering to the wants of their unfortunate poor parishioners; and at a meeting on Monday they contributed £7 towards a fund for relieving their immediate wants. A large fire was made in the spacious school room erected through the munificence of Mr Maton, where a number of poor families were not only comfortably lodged, but supplied with food by Mr and Mrs Maton. The old Manor house adjoining the residence of Mr Maton has been appropriated to the same benevolent purpose. Mr and Mrs Smallbones, at the Wheel Inn, also exerted themselves to the utmost to relieve the destitute.

Indeed the whole of the respectable inhabitants appear to vie with each other in acts of benevolence. The same may be said of Mr and Mrs Mills and the other families of property at Orcheston; but it is impossible that individual or local charity can repair the calamity. An appeal must be made to public sympathy. More than ten thousand pounds worth of property has been destroyed. At Shrewton and Maddington, alone, the loss is estimated at £8000; and when it is borne in mind, that the sufferers are chiefly labourers – persons who have laid out the hard earned savings of their lives – some in the building of a little cottage, - others in the purchase of furniture, - that cottage and furniture – "all" have been swept away; and that the poor creatures themselves, after going through sufferings which might be thought to have been beyond human endurance, are now rendered homeless, and penniless – in a state of suttee destitution, we are assure that an appeal to the public will not be made in vain. The cases of suffering we have particularized are but few, and those but faintly described. It would, in fact, be impossible to describe correctly the scene at the Blewdens. In acts of mercy and kindness, we can all agree. Let us all, then, according to our respective means, assist in alleviating the miseries of these poor creatures: - recollecting, that it is as blessed to give as it is to receive.

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