

## **ELDERLY INVALID RESCUED BY FORMER EXETER CONSTABLE**

### **Fire Destroys Four Cottages in an Hour**

#### **13 PEOPLE RENDERED HOMELESS AT MORCHARD BISHOP**

**Blazing like tinder on a hill-top swept by a north-easterly gale, four cottages were destroyed in less than an hour by a disastrous fire which rendered 13 people homeless at Morchard Bishop today.**

With the temperature below freezing point, occupiers of the cottages, some of them elderly people hurriedly left their homes in the teeth of the biting wind, while burning thatch dropped around them and choking black smoke stung their eyes.

One of the heroes of the fire, which brought helpers and sightseers from a wide area, was a former Exeter constable, Mr Walter Gribble, who retired from the City Police Force in June of last year and now lives within 50 yards of the scene of the fire.

The homeless are:

Mr and Mrs Nicholas Pitts, their son and daughter and a blind elderly woman, Miss Willmet who lived with them; Mr and Mrs John Rice, the former aged 84 and his wife 77; Mr George Squires and his son and daughter-in-law, Mr and Mrs Ernest Squires; and Messrs Fred and Walter Edwards with their sister Miss Annie Edwards.

The cottages, known as Redhill Cottages, flanked the Chulmleigh Road about half a mile from Morchard Bishop. They were built of stone and cob, with roofs of thatch and slate.

A thrilling story of the dramatic moments following the discovery of the fire was told to an "Express and Echo" reporter by Mr. Gribble and others who rushed to the assistance of the occupiers.

"The fire broke out about 8.45," said Mr Gribble, "and was first noticed by Mr Albert Veale, a Devon County Council employee. He saw flames coming from the thatch near the chimney of Mr and Mrs Pitts's cottage at the eastern end of the row.

#### **ROOF A MASS OF FLAMES**

"At once he called Mrs Pitts and in a few minutes the alarm was given to the residents nearby. I was called to the scene and even by that time, a few minutes after the discovery of the fire, the roof was becoming a mass of flames.

"Mr Pitts was at work at Middlecot Farm but Mrs Pitts and her daughter Sadie, and Miss Willmet were at home in the end cottage. Mrs Pitts got Miss Willmet outside without much difficulty.

"Noticing that the next cottage, occupied by Mr and Mrs Rice, was quickly becoming involved, I went in to help them, and groped my way upstairs through blinding smoke. I had tied a towel round my mouth, and it was fortunate for me I took this precaution.

"I found that Mrs Rice had dressed, but her husband, who is an invalid, was sitting on the edge of the bed in his night attire. At first I could not see him for the dense smoke. There was the glare of

the flames, and slates were dropping all the time. I shouted to Mrs Rice 'Go downstairs' and she obeyed. Then I caught hold of Mr Rice and got him down the stairs as fast as I could. My hair was singed and my lungs seemed to be full of smoke when I got outside with Mr Rice. "

#### WENT BACK TO GET MONEY

Mr. Gribble went on to say that with the assistance of neighbours, Mrs Squires and Mrs Risdon, he managed to get Mr Rice to Mrs Risdon's house a few yards away. On his return to the blazing cottages he saw that Mrs Rice had re-entered her house to get a box containing money.

"I went in to get her out," he said, "and Mr Sidney Rice, butcher, of Morchard Bishop, tied a handkerchief over his mouth and entered by the back door. He could hear Mrs Rice shouting, and he succeeded in pulling her out by way of the kitchen.

"Mrs Rice wanted to return to the house, but this was impossible. The place was by now a furnace"

Mr Gribble mentioned that he managed to rescue Mrs Rice's purse and her pension books. No other effects were saved from this cottage or from those occupied by Mr and Mrs Pitts and Mr Squires and his son and daughter-in-law.

**In the Squires' cottage Mrs Beatrice Squires was in bed suffering from bronchitis. She had no time to dress before the house was engulfed in flames. In frantic haste she left the bedroom, finding refuge in Mrs Risdon's house with only a blanket thrown around her.**

In the cottage occupied by the Squires was a goldfinch which formerly belonged to Mr Gribble's mother-in-law. Mr Gribble said that the thought flashed across his mind that there would be just time to rescue this bird, which was 12 years old and a valued pet, and he managed to rush into the cottage and bring out the cage with the bird.

Last of the cottages to be involved in the fire was that occupied by the Edwards. Miss Edwards had gone to work but her two brothers were at home.

They were successful in making their escape, and a few articles of furniture were rescued from this cottage.

#### A BLAZING TORCH

By this time helpers had reached the scene from all parts. The blazing cottages stood like a torch on the summit of the hill, and the flames were visible miles away.

Mr. Archie Tucker and others hurried to summon the Crediton Fire Brigade by telephone, and the brigade, under Mr Cherry, made a swift turn out, arriving by 9.30.

But nothing could be done to save the cottages. By the time the firemen reached the blaze the roof had fallen in and the rooms were glowing infernos.

In any case, water was scarce. The well near the cottage would not have furnished a big enough supply to extinguish the fire, and the nearest substantial supply was at Calves Bridge, about a mile away.

In all probability the fire would have resulted in loss of life had the outbreak occurred at night, so rapidly did the flames sweep through the cottages.

It was fortunate, too, that the wind was from the north-east. A breeze from the west would have fanned the fire dangerously near two or three other cottages.

Police officers who quickly reached the outbreak were P.C.Lamble (Morchard Bishop) and P.C.Kiff (Lapford). Inspector Annett (Okehampton) and Sergt. Squires (North Tawton) also arrived early.

### BEDSTEADS TWISTED LIKE WIRE

Four hours after the fire started, flames were still licking the blackened beams which had collapsed into the debris of thatch, floors and furniture. Bedsteads were twisted like wire, and had evidently glowed white hot.

A pathetic sight was the remains of the Edwards' furniture stacked under a roadside hedge a few yards above the smoking ruins. Miss Edwards, in tears, told of the shock with which she learned that her cottage was on fire.

"I was at work at Mr Slade's at Rudge Rew," she said. "Someone told me that my cottage was blazing and I rushed home as fast as I could. By the time I got there the place was a mass of flame. I have lost all the furniture that was upstairs. "

Concern is felt for Mr and Mrs Rice, both of whom are suffering from shock. Mrs Rice also received burns on the hands. On Monday they remained in Mr and Mrs Risdon's cottage while contact was made with relatives at Musbury near Axminster. Both were medically attended.

**The tragedy of the Rices' homelessness is increased by the fact that a large part of their life savings was lost in the fire. Charred remains of Treasury notes, and silver coins betraying the heat to which they were subjected in the blaze, have been recovered from the debris.**

It is believed that the contents of all the cottages, except that occupied by Mr and Mrs Rice were insured.

The cottages were owned by Mrs E.Richards, of Tatepath, Morchard Bishop. Mr. Richards stated that the fire would involve considerable loss.

Temporary arrangements have been made to accommodate the homeless in the district.

### FUND OPENED FOR VICTIMS

#### **Displaced Families Accommodated**

The village is being canvassed for subscriptions on behalf of the fire victims.

Arrangements were made on Monday to open a fund for the homeless, and it is expected there will be a liberal response. The fund is being organised by Messrs D. Tipper, T.Oatway and F. Yendell.

The fire was the worst experienced in the parish since that which destroyed the Fountain Inn about 32 years ago.

Already one of the displaced families – that comprising Messrs Fred and Walter Edwards and their sister Miss Annie Edwards – has been accommodated in a vacant house on the Chulmleigh road, and empty council house, it is understood, has been made available for Mr George Squires and his

son and daughter-in-law. None of the Squires' furniture however was rescued from the blaze, and the effects belonging to Mr and Mrs N. Pitts and Mr and Mrs John rice the other homeless villagers were also lost.

Mr and Mrs Rice, who are elderly people and who suffered considerably from shock are staying with Mrs F. Drew and Mr and Mrs Pitts with their son and daughter and Miss Willmet, a blind woman who lived with them are being accommodated by Nurse Webber, Chulmleigh road.