72: The great fire of Bourne 400 years ago

Bourne has had its share of fires that have brought their toll of distress to the community, the most serious being two outbreaks that caused widespread damage during the early 17th century. The first of them was 400 years ago and has become known as the Great Fire of Bourne. On 23rd August 1605, the blaze broke out in Manor Street and swept round a curve from the Red Hall into what is still called Manor Lane. According to one account, the fire raged for three days and left no house remaining and this part of the town was never completely rebuilt after the disaster.

The calamity was sufficiently grave for King James I to issue a royal proclamation appealing for assistance stating that " . . . *our poor subjects, the inhabitants of our Towne of Bourne, are at this time fallen into greate want and poverty, by reason of a greate misfortune of Fyer, which utterly consumed and burnt our said Towne of Bourne with all their goods and substance therein, amounting to the value of ten thousand pounds* . . . " Accordingly, by letters patent, the inhabitants of Bourne were authorised to receive the proceeds of collections that could be made for their assistance in the numerous counties of England although there is no record of how much was raised.

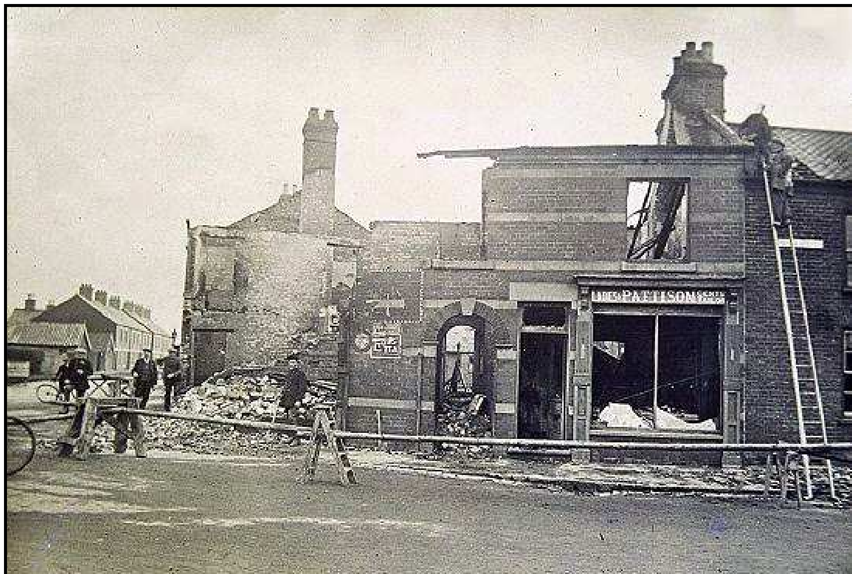
The second fire occurred in 1637 and broke out in Eastgate and Potters Street on the other side of Bourne and a large part of these areas were burned down. This probably marked the end of the potteries that had flourished in mediaeval times and Potters Street was not rebuilt although the recently established housing development called Potters Close reminds us of the town's once thriving industry.

Cliff's shop which was rebuilt after the fire of 1898

There have been several disastrous fires in more recent years and one afternoon in June 1897, the Baptist Church in West Street was badly damaged when flames from an adjoining workshop spread to the building although it was later restored. The fire had been started by a two-year-old child playing with matches. Early one Sunday morning in October 1898, Cliffe's shop premises in West Street, then used as a grocery shop, were gutted by a blaze that started in an upper storeroom although the

cause was never established. The roof fell in fracturing gas pipes and a huge sheet of flame shot out of the building watched by a large crowd of curious onlookers even though it was 2 am. In 1899, firemen were in action again for a big farm blaze at Dyke after a local man cycled all the way to Bourne to raise the alarm by ringing the bell at the town hall. Villagers helped fight the flames with buckets of water to stop it from spreading to the Wesleyan chapel that had just been used for Sunday morning service.

Another shop that was to become Bourne's first department store, the former Attica premises in Eastgate now a private house, survived a big warehouse fire on Thursday 28th October 1908. The owner, Mr John Branston was returning home late at night when he saw smoke and on opening the warehouse door, it burst into flames but the fire was extinguished before it spread to any of the adjoining premises although considerable damage was done to the building and contents. The red brick property on the corner of Meadowgate, recently converted into flats, was previously two shop units, one a grocery store and the other fronting North Street a tailor's shop. In November 1922, fire broke out and soon spread to both of them but the blaze was spotted soon after 11 pm by a patrolling policeman who raised the alarm. Firemen were hampered by a strong wind which fanned the flames and they were still at the scene at 7 am the following morning when both shops and their contents had been destroyed, leaving only a burned out shell.



The Meadowgate shop premises after the 1922 fire

In the winter of 1955, the records of 15,000 customers were destroyed when fire broke out in a wooden extension at the rear of the East Midlands Electricity Board offices in North Street, used as the accounts department and filled with equipment and filing cabinets. Flames thirty feet high were seen above the premises at the height of the outbreak and the contents were reduced to a mass of ash and twisted metal. The following year, fire destroyed a 60-foot long wooden classroom, also used as a dining room, at Bourne County Primary School in Abbey Road [now the Abbey Road Primary School] when the entire building was gutted within half an hour, shortly before children were due to assemble there for morning prayers. In October 1959, prompt action by a neighbour who called the fire brigade saved the Vestry Hall in North Street from being destroyed by fire and almost 20 years later another outbreak

seriously damaged the premises of W A North and Sons Ltd., the forage and potato merchants, in West Street. The blaze was spotted in the early hours of Thursday 11th June 1968 and although firemen managed to bring the outbreak under control, it caused extensive damage. There was a second big fire on the premises in September 1986 when a large Dutch barn and its contents were gutted.

It is interesting to note that many of the big fires in Bourne during past years were spotted by patrolling policemen, that is constables on the beat during the night, something that no longer happens. Naked flames such as candles, oil and gas lamps that were a frequent cause are rarely used today but the threat of fire is always with us although smoke alarms, the use of flame resistant materials in the home and an increased awareness of the dangers have reduced the number of outbreaks and the big blazes experienced in past times are now less likely to occur.

73: Opium addiction during the 19th century

The drug habit is seen nowadays as an outcome of the permissive society but the problem has always been with us. Today, heroin, cocaine and cannabis figure largely among the substances banned by law and horror stories surface almost daily to illustrate the destructive effects they have on the body and mind but in past times the scourge was opium, the juice of the white poppy which has been used for medicinal and social purposes since the earliest times because of its sedative and hypnotic powers.

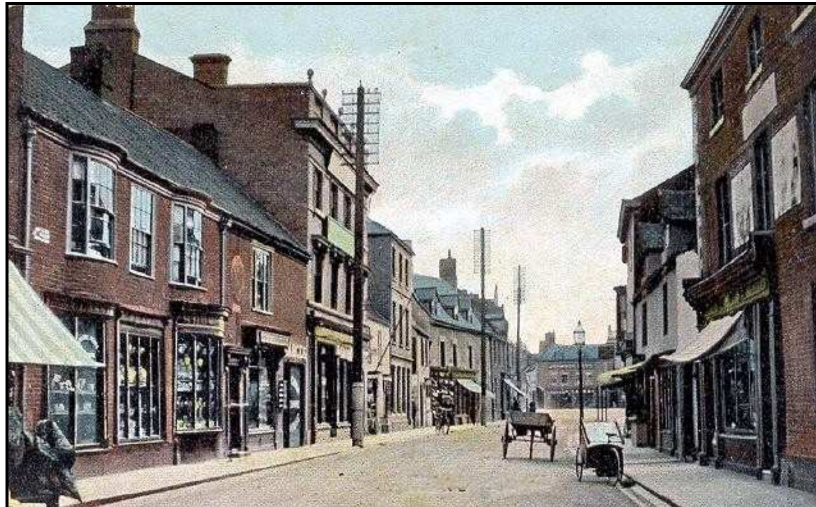
It was first cultivated in this country in 1794 and later widely grown in the fens, the yield being from 20,000 to 30,000 large heads per acre, the smaller ones being crushed for the production of laudanum, a solution or tincture of the drug containing equal parts of alcohol and distilled water, the result being a brown coloured liquid with the characteristic smell of opium and containing a small amount of morphine. Laudanum was obtainable from pharmacists on demand during the 19th century and its widespread availability and the lack of regulation over its sale meant that everyone had access to it.

The use of the drug was particularly prevalent in the South Lincolnshire fens and began largely as a remedial means to combat the ague, a malarial fever that is now unknown, and other popular ailments. In fact, it was so freely available that the quantity which a confirmed opium taker would consume was very large, averaging as much as a dram a day, and a labouring man and his wife would spend from 1s. to 1s. 6d a week in obtaining it. At this time, it was said that more opium was being sold by chemists in the fenland towns of Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk, as a stimulant used by the labouring classes, than in all the rest of England put together.

Chemists often made mistakes and in 1871, a baby died in such circumstances although no one was held to blame. The five-week-old boy was the son of Mr William Hind, a grocer, of North Street, Bourne, who had employed a nurse to look after him. She sent a servant girl, Ann Darnes, to fetch gripe water from the chemist shop owned by Mr Benjamin Wyles but the assistant, Arthur Thresh, aged 18, misheard and gave her laudanum instead with instructions how it should be taken but the baby died 17 hours later. The inquest at the Angel Hotel on Monday 13th February was told that the

servant girl had brought in an empty bottle with a gripe mixture label but Thresh had put a new label on saying “Laudanum - Poison”. The jury returned a verdict that the baby had been poisoned by mistake but exonerated the shop assistant from any wilful or criminal neglect.

Other abuses of the drug were common. On Thursday 9th September 1869, for instance, an inquest was held at the Golden Lion in West Street, Bourne, upon the body of James Lightfoot, aged 34, a former soldier with the Coldstream Guards who was nearly blind and had been discharged on account of his ill health occasioned by sunstroke. The coroner, Mr William Edwards, was told that of late, his mind had been unsettled and that he was “dropsical” [suffering from dropsy, a condition characterised by an accumulation of watery fluids in the body] and had not been to bed for some time. From a statement made by him to a neighbour the previous Tuesday, it transpired that on the Monday he had procured two pennyworth of laudanum at each of the three chemists' shops in the town, which he took that night. On Tuesday, he was attended by a doctor but passed away on Wednesday morning at about three o'clock. The jury returned a verdict that he died from the effects of laudanum taken when in an unsound state of mind.



North Street in the 19th century

Such cases were frequent during that period. An inquest was held on Friday 21st February 1879 at the Bull Inn [now the Burghley Arms], Bourne, before Mr F T Selby, the deputy coroner, on the body of Harriet Buckberry who had died suddenly the day before at the home of William Elliott in West Street and the jury returned a verdict of "death from natural causes accelerated by the habitual use of opium".

On 1st July 1897, the body of James Lee, aged 40, a shepherd, was found in a field near Bourne and although in good health and spirits, he was known to have occasionally taken laudanum. Ann Palmer, landlady of the New Inn [now a private house] said that deceased had called on the day before his death and asked if he could have a bed as he was on the road and wanted to lie down for a few hours. He looked excited but she did not think he was under the influence of drink but later that evening, George Henry Osgothorpe, aged 11, found him sitting by the hedge side in a field along the Fen Road, asleep and snoring loudly. The boy fetched help but by then, the man was dead, lying on the ground with his feet in the hedge and his head in the

field. Police found a bottle labelled "Laudanum" in his pocket and a small amount of cash together with letters relating to his job as a shepherd. Dr John Gilpin, who carried out a post mortem, said that the stomach contained no food but a few ounces of opium fluid which in his opinion had caused his death. The inquest jury returned a verdict that the man had died from an accidental overdose of laudanum.

Opium is remembered today as the stuff of drama and literature but it is worth remembering that this was a drug taken by thousands of working class people and ruined many lives as a result, only falling into disuse because it was replaced by other more dangerous substances that threaten the stability of our society today.

74: Poor sanitation a hundred years ago

The old English proverb that cleanliness is next to godliness was particularly popular during Victorian times and although an admirable sentiment, was not always appropriate when the people had to live with whatever was provided by their landlords or the local authorities. Fortunately, public hygiene has made tremendous progress in the past century but those conditions we take for granted were sadly lacking before the introduction of modern water and sewage systems.

The councils we know today did not appear until the Local Government Act of 1894 and prior to that, public health in the Bourne area during the late 19th century was the responsibility of the Rural Sanitary Authority which covered all 36 parishes in the Bourne Union. Their medical officer of health was Dr James Watson Burdwood (1827-1906), a general practitioner who was employed at a salary of £150 a year and whose job was to keep members informed about conditions in the area under their control.

In September 1891, he presented his 18th annual report detailing his investigations during the previous year, 1890. His account of conditions which existed in Bourne and the surrounding villages gives a remarkable insight into life expectancy and the possibility of sudden and often unexplained illness. The death rate was 16 per 1000, an increase on the previous year which the doctor blamed on an epidemic of influenza that had broken out about the middle of December and abated towards the end of February. Though only one death was directly attributable to this cause, that of a 72-year-old man who was also suffering from bronchitis, it materially affected public health generally and contributed in measure to the increased number of deaths recorded as having occurred from diseases of the respiratory organs. Out of a population of 19,085 from the town and rural area, there were 85 deaths between the ages of five and 60, and 75 of babies under one year. Scarlet fever was prevalent at that time and in those outbreaks which occurred, the medical officer ensured isolation as far as practicable and ordered steps to be taken to prevent the spread of disease.

All the cases recovered. Referring to sanitary matters in Bourne, the doctor said: “In all probability, either the present sewage works will have to be enlarged or some other plan of dealing with the sewage will have to be adopted. We would suggest that the Sanitary Authority give serious consideration to this advice. Nothing is more dangerous than delay in these matters. The public health overrides every other consideration.” Despite this grave warning it was to be another forty years before major work was carried out on the system as a result of the Public Health Act of 1936

with further improvements completed in 1960. Dr Burdwood concluded: "Housing of the poor and the labouring classes is a matter for earnest consideration by the Bourne Rural Sanitary Authority. Great improvements in the past have been made in the construction of their houses and in most instances, large landowners have greatly helped the Sanitary Authority by carrying out any suggestions made for the remedying of nuisances. "But there are still many cottages totally unfit for human habitation, being badly drained and ill ventilated, having only one bedroom and a shake-down on the landing in addition. In some instances the occupants constantly have to pass foul closets and ill smelling ash heaps. Others have no back way whatever. Many have no garden. In my opinion, where there is a family, no cottage should have less than three bedrooms."

A new sewage system being installed in 1960

As with all such reports, the numbers of cases of illness, particularly stomach upsets caused by badly handled food and water, was not actually known because most people could not afford a doctor and unless their condition was life threatening, continued working as normal. But the gravity of the situation may be assessed by today's standards when even a single case of scarlet fever or diphtheria is sufficient to cause widespread public alarm and put our local authorities on full alert.

75: Dreaded sickness and disease

The scourge of mankind in earlier times was illness and disease which were ever present. The type of complaint likely to be contracted has changed over the centuries but until the arrival of the National Health Service in 1948, poverty, hunger and a low awareness of hygiene were prevalent and the people lived in constant dread, not only of coughs and colds, cuts and bruises which were always with them, but of the very real possibility of contracting one of the more dreadful ailments which were the subject of frequent discussion over the garden fence, scabies, impetigo, mumps, measles, diphtheria, chicken pox, scarlet fever, meningitis, and worst of all, tuberculosis, all of which were likely to visit unannounced and claim their victims. Consumption, or tuberculosis as it is known today, was still prevalent in the early years of the 20th century and a particularly distressing case was reported by Mr

Joseph J Davies, headmaster of the Board school in Abbey Road, in his daily log on 21st July 1904: “It is with deep sorrow that I have to record today the sudden death during school hours of Arthur Young, aged 13, a seventh standard scholar. He was an inmate of the Union [workhouse] and of a delicate constitution. A fortnight ago he left the Union with his mother who took him on a tramp about the country for ten days. They returned to the Union famished and exhausted. The strain had clearly been too much for the poor lad. But though very delicate, he was able to attend school and appeared about as usual. This morning, as the boys were filing in from play, I noticed he looked pale and asked him how he felt. “I feel very poorly, sir", he said. I asked him if he would like anything from the house but he said: "No, thank you." He thought he would like to walk quietly home and I agreed, considering it the best thing, as he did not seem inclined to rest. About five minutes afterwards, I heard a peculiar coughing sound and going instantly out to the playground, found the poor boy vomiting blood. Blood was also pouring from his nose.

“I at once went to his help, asking Mr Butler to come, who came immediately. We carried him carefully into the porch. But he was unconscious and had probably expired almost immediately after the attack. I had sent urgently for the three town doctors, and for the nurse, the messenger fortunately met Dr John Galletly [senior], who kindly came at once, but pronounced life extinct. Death was due to the bursting of a blood vessel in the lungs. The poor lad's father died from a similar case. Nurse Bellamy kindly came and assisted with the body being taken home. Mr [Alfred] Yates, the Union Master, informed me that a doctor had been attending the boy this week but he had not seemed unwell today, having been hearty at breakfast. I am deeply touched with the sympathetic spirit shown by teachers and boys alike.” In a later entry, Mr Davies said that the boys and staff had subscribed for a beautiful wreath which was placed on the boy's grave when his funeral took place a few days later.

Today, the illnesses we fear have different names, cancer, heart attack, dementia and others but the welfare state has provided a universal care unknown in those days and there is a security in knowing we are in safe hands.

76: The smallpox outbreak of 1893

One of the most dreaded afflictions of past times was smallpox (variola major), an acute and highly contagious viral infection which has now been practically eradicated throughout the world and is extremely rare in the industrialised countries. It has disappeared from Britain and elsewhere because of a widespread programme of vaccination and so few can understand the fear that it once engendered when the very mention of the name was enough to frighten most people for although few knew much about its effects, it was generally accepted to be fatal.

The cause of the disease has never been determined exactly but low standards of nutrition and a general uncleanliness predispose to infection and every case can be traced to a previous one. It was because the illness was gradually becoming rare that few family doctors were able to diagnose the signs and symptoms correctly and commonly confused them with chicken pox, a situation that occurred during the Bourne smallpox outbreak in the late 19th century. There was a great deal of ignorance about the illness and in particular, whether vaccination was a suitable

precaution against infection and this was the climate of public opinion at the time of the Bourne smallpox outbreak which occurred in February 1893 when the Midland and Great Northern Railway Company were building a track through the Bourne area to link it with the main line to the Midlands and the North at Little Bytham. The disease broke out initially among Irish navvies employed on the work and soon spread to the town, notably to inmates of the workhouse in St Peter's Road.

The workhouse guardians in 1905

There was some doubt in the mind of the workhouse medical officer whether those who had been taken ill had smallpox or chicken pox and in a state of near panic, the Board of Guardians who ran the institution telegraphed the Local Government Board in London to "urgently send an inspector to verify the diagnoses", owing to the prevalence of smallpox at Castle Bytham and Thurlby, and to inform the board by telegraph of the time of the inspector's arrival at Bourne. Their reply refused the request and a letter that subsequently followed read: "If the medical officer to the Board of Guardians and the town's Medical Officer of Health [they were in fact, the same person] are unequal to verify these cases, it simply means that they are unfit for their posts. This board has no army of inspectors from which they can comply with requests like this."

By this time, the number of smallpox cases was increasing but medical facilities to treat them were totally inadequate. The Bourne Fever Hospital had been set up in 1885 when the Rural Sanitary Authority had purchased two empty cottages in Manor Lane for the purpose and the conversion work was carried out by a local builder, Mr Thomas Hinson, at a cost of £60, providing basic accommodation with ten beds in two wards for dealing with patients who needed to be isolated because they were suffering from an infectious disease.

In addition, because of the current smallpox outbreak, a makeshift hospital had been opened by the railway authorities at Castle Bytham. This was little more than a primitive building, situated to the south of the railway line and cemetery, that became known locally as the Small Pox Hut and is recorded on maps of the period as the Fever Hospital, being used for those navvies who had contracted the disease. But there was no room for further patients and all that could be done locally was to isolate and disinfect the cases. On February 25th, the medical officer wrote to the Board of

Guardians saying: "The cases of sickness in the Bourne workhouse are chicken pox and not smallpox and I cannot account for the disease except through tramps coming in and as far as I can ascertain there is not, up to the present time, a single case of smallpox or chicken pox in Bourne town. As regards the Bourne Fever Hospital, I have repeatedly pointed out its defects, to wit: water supply, none; drainage, inefficient; ventilation, imperfect; arrangements for lighting, cooking and bathing, inefficient; no apparatus for disinfection of clothes; no store room; no ambulance; no water closet; no mortuary. In my opinion, a temporary hospital should immediately be constructed. Otherwise, if infectious diseases are promiscuously congregated together, the death rate will be considerably increased."

But on March 9th, the public vaccinator for the Rippingale district, Dr John Galletly (senior), wrote: "Smallpox is breaking out in the district" and as the number of victims increased, they were sent to the fever hospital in Manor Lane. By now, they needed full time care and so the Nurses' Institute at Hull was contacted and one of their staff, Nurse Maud Beesley, volunteered to come to Bourne and look after the smallpox sufferers.

At last, on April 27th, the Local Government Board agreed to send an inspector and in his subsequent report, he stated that the workhouse medical officer had told him that there had been two cases of smallpox at the workhouse but that he had persistently described them as chicken pox and purposely concealed their true nature, presumably to avoid panic or because he could not distinguish between the two. It is impossible to know how many died. There is a record of the vicar, the Rev Hugh Mansfield, complaining that one victim was buried without benefit of clergy and that if only he had been told, he would willingly have officiated. No Register of Deaths for the workhouse from that time has been found although other documents relating to the outbreak that did survive have been likened to "a correspondence that reads like something from the Crimean War".

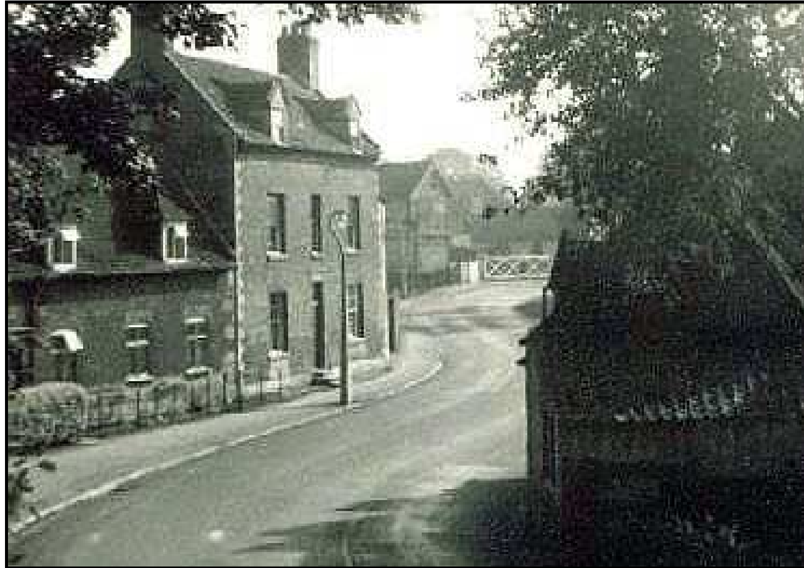
There was obviously a cover up, official or otherwise, to abate public alarm and it is not therefore known how many people died but by mid-summer, the outbreak had been brought under control and Nurse Beesley returned to her previous duties in Hull. On 23rd June 1893, the Stamford Mercury reported that the town of Bourne had acknowledged "her cheerful and invaluable service in nursing some of the smallpox sufferers single-handed" and the Medical Officer of Health, Dr James Watson Burdwood, presented her with a travelling bag together with a purse of money and an illuminated address. The fever hospital continued in use until Bourne Hospital, with its own isolation wards, opened in 1915 when the two cottages were sold and they are still in use as private homes.

77: Death on the railway line

The opening of a railway system for Bourne during the 19th century was one of the great engineering feats in our history but it was not achieved without a cost in human lives. Many of the construction workers were killed while working in dangerous conditions and with equipment that by today’s standards would be considered to be primitive while others succumbed to the unhygienic conditions, particularly during the 1893 smallpox outbreak. But there were other innocent victims, members of the public who lost their lives in less hazardous circumstances,

either through carelessness or by accident, bringing tragedy to families in an era that has become known as the railway age.

Railway lines have been a magnet for adventurous children and today they have been largely secured against young intruders but during Victorian times the installations were easily accessible and the novelty still apparent. A level crossing carried the main line from the station at the Red Hall across South Street where youngsters were frequently cautioned and told to stay away but they were always back, attracted by the sights and sounds of steam engines, passenger trains and freight wagons, and on Monday 8th July 1872 this fascination cost a little boy his life.

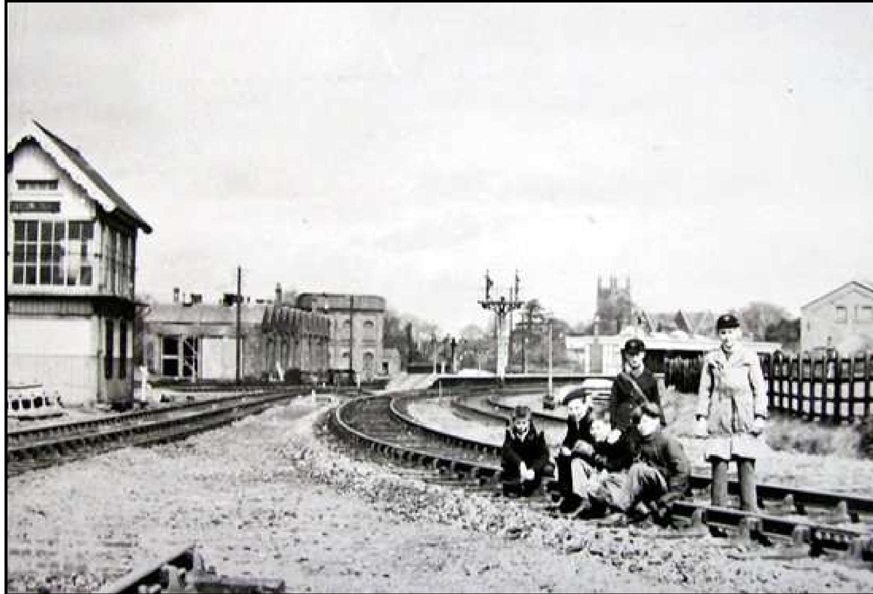


The railway crossing in South Street

John Northern, aged 6, had been playing with his friends around the crossing and as a train approached they were sent away by the gatekeeper, Samuel Davis. But as his pals fled, the boy managed to squeeze unseen through a space of barely nine inches wide between the gate and the gatepost to remain by the line when the train came through, standing so close that he was hit by one of the carriages as it passed and death was almost instantaneous. Dr Robert Watson told the inquest at the New Inn in Spalding Road [now a private house] on Wednesday 19th July that the boy's skull was fractured and internal blood vessels lacerated, and that he had died within a minute or two. The coroner, William Edwards, also heard from railway officials that the gates and gatepost were the same as all others on the line and that no similar accident had ever occurred before. The crossing, however, was often frequented by young lads who gathered there to watch the trains go by. The jury returned a verdict of accidental death and while expressing that no blame could be attached to either the gatekeeper or the railway company, hoped that something might be done to prevent a recurrence. The boy was the son of a labourer, John Northern, who lived in Eastgate, and the inquest was told that the family were in needy circumstances and could not afford to bury him. The jury therefore recommended that the Midland and Great Northern Railway Company should help pay for the funeral and the jurymen each left one shilling towards the cost.

A more bizarre fatality also occurred in 1872 resulting in the death of Mrs Ann Thurlby, aged 60, who lost her life in a terrible accident that actually occurred on the

station platform outside the Red Hall on April 8th. An inquest at the Horse and Groom public house in West Street [now closed] held the following day, was told that the dead woman, widow of Samuel Thurlby, was a very stout person which may have been a contributory cause of her death. Her daughter, Emma Thurlby, aged 20, said in evidence that she went to the railway station with her mother the day before to buy a ticket. She was going to Elton to see her brother by the 8.05 am Bourne to Essendine train but someone told her to make haste or she would be too late.



Young train spotters on the line in 1948

The engine driver, William Marsden, said that after the train was in motion, he saw Mrs Thurlby running along the platform. Someone from inside one of the carriages opened the door and she attempted to get in but fell down and was crushed to death between the carriage and the platform. Dr James Watson Burdwood, surgeon for the company, was immediately called out but she had suffered terrible injuries and her body was mangled. Subsequent evidence from railway staff revealed that the train was not leaving the station on its scheduled journey but merely moving away from the platform for the purpose of shunting some wagons to be attached to the rear of the train. Driver Marsden said that he had called out loudly to Mrs Thurlby to this effect but it transpired that she was hard of hearing. The jury returned a verdict of accidental death.

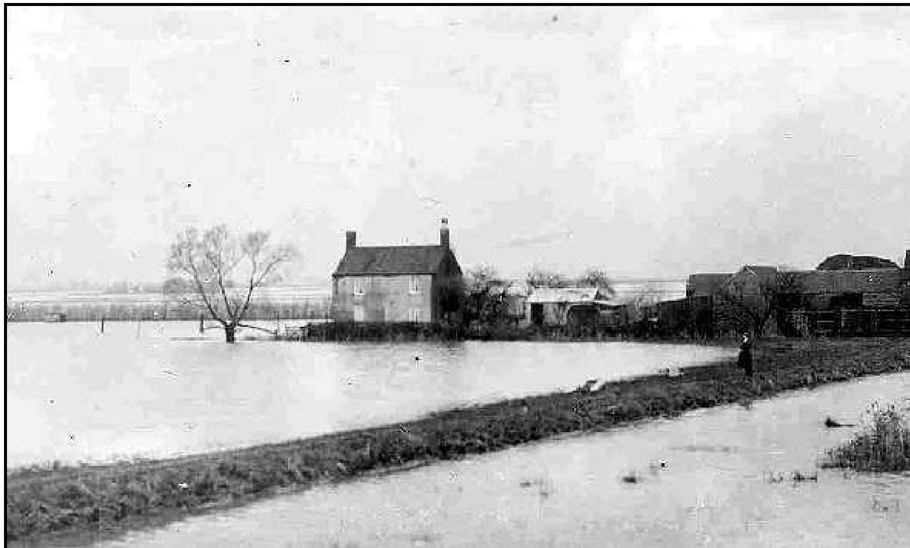
Thirty years later, another child was killed on the crossing, this time a girl. May Victoria Stubley, aged 8, was walking over it when she was knocked down and fatally injured on 21st September 1905. Martha Michelson, who witnessed the accident, told an inquest that she had been using the crossing with her sister and the deceased when she saw a goods train approaching from Bourne station. At the same time, she heard a passenger train coming from Spalding. She called to the girl to get out of the way and to wait until the goods train had passed but instead, she took no notice and stood on the inside rail of the line on which the passenger train was travelling. "The next thing, I saw that the child was under the passenger train", she said. "When the train had gone by, I rushed over and found that she was dead." The driver of the passenger train told the hearing that his view had been hidden by the goods train, the crossing being in the centre of a curve, and it was suggested by the jury that in future, instructions should

be issued to drivers to sound their whistle on approaching the crossing from either direction but railway officials warned that whistling engines had in the past brought complaints from residents living in the vicinity and damages had been successfully claimed against the company in some instances. The jury returned a verdict of accidental death and added that there was no blame attached to anyone concerning the girl's death.

There is no doubt that the early railways were dangerous and the level crossing in South Street a hazard and inconvenience for the increasing traffic flows of the 20th century but it was finally closed and removed in 1965.

78: The Great Flood of 1910

Flooding was a frequent occurrence before the fens were drained and the most serious recorded instance was in 1571. On November 5th that year, the entire county was struck by one of the worst storms in history. The roads into the town were turned into rushing torrents and the market place soon became a vast lake. The 16th century English chronicler Raphael Holinshed recorded that the flood water in Bourne rose "to midway of the height of the church walls" during a tempest which affected the whole district, particularly houses and other buildings on the eastern side of the town, and thousands of sheep in nearby fields were drowned.



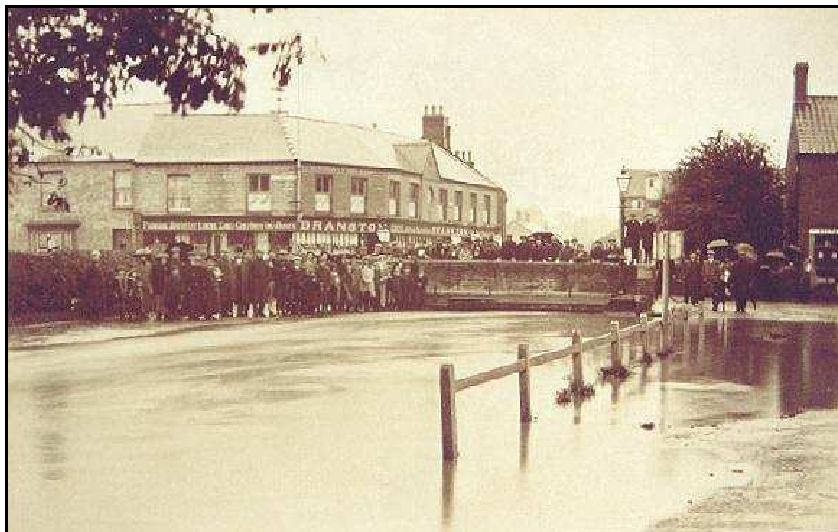
The Great Flood on 1910

The worst cases of flooding in the recent history of Bourne have all been caused by our fenland rivers bursting their banks during periods of continual heavy rain. There were four such occurrences during the late 19th century, in November 1852 when the north bank of the Bourne Eau broke between two and three miles from Bourne, and again in April 1872, December 1876 and October 1880, when the north bank of the River Glen gave way near Tongue End. The last incident was by far the worst with torrential rain falling for 24 hours, also flooding houses in North Street and around Queen’s Bridge, while on the main Bourne to Stamford Road at Toft, a man driving a horse and cart was washed away and drowned. The flooding became known as "The Bourne Fen Inundation" and on Friday 26th November 1880, it engulfed the entire South Fen, an area of about 3,000 acres of land, much of it containing newly cut corn

which floated out of the fields while a variety of farm implements were washed away. The land was submerged to the depth of up to seven feet, corn stacks, buildings and houses surrounded by one vast expanse of water. Looting was rife and cash rewards were offered for the apprehension of the culprits. A gang of 50 to 60 men were employed and large quantities of timber, thousands of sacks filled with earth, and consignments of stone were used on repair work although three feet of water remained on the land for several weeks.

In the winter of 1910, the River Glen again burst its banks at Tongue End, inundating the South Fen near Bourne and covering the main Spalding road towards Twenty with flood water. This disaster, occurring during the first week of December, subsequently became known as "The Great Flood of 1910" and for more than a month, the entire fen was one vast sea of floodwater. Emergency repairs mounted by the Black Sluice Commissioners continued day and night as attempts were made to repair the damage with workers filling the breached bank with sandbags but despite labouring for long hours, they had little success and farmers were forced to wait until the water subsided naturally although it was four weeks before it drained away and a complete picture of the damage emerged.

The Marquess of Exeter, one of the principal landowners, returned half a year's rent to each of his tenants while the Rev Alan Galton, Vicar of Edenham, offered to take a collection. Other churches and chapels in the district were urged to do the same and in the weeks that followed, events such as concerts and whist drives were arranged to add to the fund. The relief work continued for several months but it was to be more than a year before the land returned to its usual productivity and many of the smaller farmers never recovered from the financial loss they had suffered.



Flooding in Eastgate in 1930

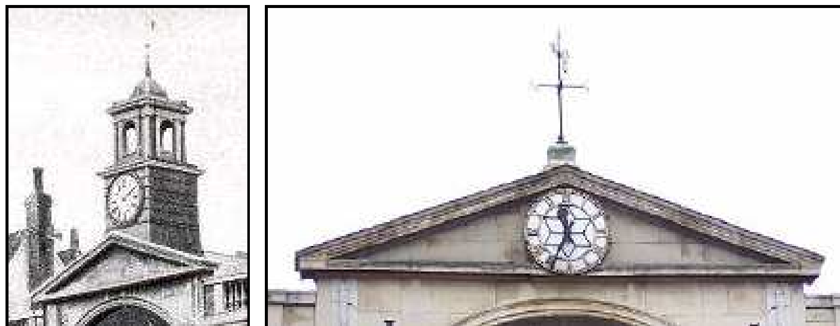
On 12th January 1911, farmers and landowners gathered at the Corn Exchange in Bourne to assess the damage and to set up a distress fund for those affected. Before the meeting were compensation claims from farmers tenanting 1,500 acres of land totalling £3,000 although the final figure was expected to be between £8,000 and £9,000 [over £4 million at today's values]. Subscriptions to the fund began immediately with £100 from the Earl of Ancaster and other amounts ranging from £50 to 2s. 6d. from wealthy landowners, businessmen and ordinary people in the

locality and a committee was set up to handle the distribution of grants to the more deserving cases.

There has been serious flooding in recent years but nothing to equal the disaster of 1910, mainly because of improved sewerage and drainage services. In August 1912, a downpour flooded the road outside the police station, then in North Street, and in the summer of 1915, a heavy storm resulted in the evacuation of girls from the Council School. In October 1960, three inches of rain fell in ninety minutes and most streets in the town were soon under water, with cars stranded at the kerbside. Bourne Grammar School was holding its annual Speech Day at the Corn Exchange and as guests left to go home, they found floodwater swirling around the entrance. Senior pupils volunteered to wade through it and carry some of the elderly people to dry ground while hundreds more waited inside for the water to subside. There was further flooding in 1968, 1980 and in 2002 when, after a month long dry spell, rain fell on Tuesday 15th October and the downpour lasted for more than 18 hours and was accompanied by high winds. The paved area behind the Town Hall where the weekly markets are held was flooded to a depth of several inches but fortunately, it had subsided by the time the Thursday stallholders had arrived. In 2004, torrential rain also caused widespread flooding, closing shops and streets which were several inches under water within an hour. The town centre was badly affected and firemen were called out to pump water from premises in North Street and West Street. A spokesman at the Meteorological Office suggested that the town had been hit by a tornado while Lincolnshire fire brigade reported 200 calls for help.

We have no control over the weather and heavy rain serves as a warning that the threat of flooding is always with us, especially in such low lying areas as the terrain around Bourne but we count ourselves lucky not to experience the meteorological extremes of many other countries.

79: Fire destroys the Town Hall clock



The clock in 1930 and as we see it today

The tower and the clock on the Town Hall were financed by Mrs Eleanor Frances Pochin shortly before she died in 1823 and the clock continued in use until 1882 when a new one was installed at cost of £85 [£4,500 at today's values]. The contract was awarded jointly to two local clock and watch makers, Thomas Pearce, of North Street, and Joseph Ellicock, of West Street, after they had submitted an acceptable estimate for a two-dial eight-day turret clock striking the hours and quarters. Work began in October and was completed by Christmas, the cost being met by donations and public subscriptions. This clock remained in use until the end of the century when

the parish council decided that the tower needed strengthening and that the clock should be illuminated at night. The work was carried out in 1899 by a local expert Mr Edward Pearce, a clock and watch maker with premises in North Street, and the son of Thomas Pearce who had helped supply the previous clock.

The timepiece had been in need of restoration for some time and Mr Pearce fitted a new dial with gilded hands and black figures in an opal glass, allowing the clock face to be illuminated after dark, a modern innovation at that time. The illumination was provided by gaslight regulated by automatic machinery and the old wooden turret or cupola was lined with asbestos to render it fireproof. The clock mechanism was sited in the constable's room in the Town Hall below and connected to the dial by wires. Total cost of the work was £47 14s. 1d. [£3,000 at today's values]. "The illuminated dial of the clock gives universal satisfaction", said the Stamford Mercury. "The new clock is a decided improvement for which councillors may justly claim credit."

The Town Hall fire in 1933

The clock continued in use until 1933 when the wooden clock tower that then adorned the top of the building caught fire on Saturday 31st October. The market was held in the town centre at that time and although most traders were packing up and going home, the stalls had not been cleared away. The fire was extinguished although the clock tower was destroyed and an investigation later revealed that a gas lamp inside the cupola had overheated and caused the outbreak. During the fire fighting, Fireman Charles Moisey climbed into the tower with a branch hose to tackle the flames but was overcome by thick smoke and would have been suffocated had not colleagues pulled him out by his feet, the only method they could employ to rescue him.

The fire attracted many sightseers who flocked around and watched the firemen at work, some with cameras which were rare in those days. The picture on the right was taken by an unknown observer who later hand-tinted the print to produce this dramatic shot and you can feel their excitement at being present on such a dramatic occasion. The tower was never replaced and the clock was later reinstalled on the pediment below where it can be seen today. Ironically, it would appear that it was the gas lamp in the turret used to illuminate the clock that overheated and caused the fire of 1933.