

The 1905 London Road Fire

by Theo van de Bilt

On the 1 February 1905 a serious fire broke out on the corner of Hoestock Road and London Road, at the site where nowadays the Mark David Company sells designer kitchens; some people may also remember it as the International Stores. The fire must have been one of the worst of its kind in Sawbridgeworth's history. A grocery store, a house and five thatched cottages were destroyed; 22 people were rendered homeless.

The Fire Brigade were called at 11:50pm and arrived nine minutes later. They were hampered, however, by the fact that, locally, after 9pm pressure on water supplies had been turned down. One of the brigade members, Mr. Harry Taylor, rode all the way to the waterworks at Redricks Lane on his pony to have that pressure turned up again. As a result of that delay, the fire must have become all the more serious. So fierce were the flames that they reached right across to the hedge on the other side of the road and it took a long while before things were under control. All in all, the brigade was at the site for two days, or as its official records mention more accurately, 37 hours. As sparks from the fire threatened the timber yard of Mr. T. W. Burton, the brave firemen were still able to save two nearby houses. Mr. Bryan Nockolds, the chief officer and his lieutenant, Mr. Lee, had a narrow escape when a chimney stack collapsed. The latter was knocked down and bruised.



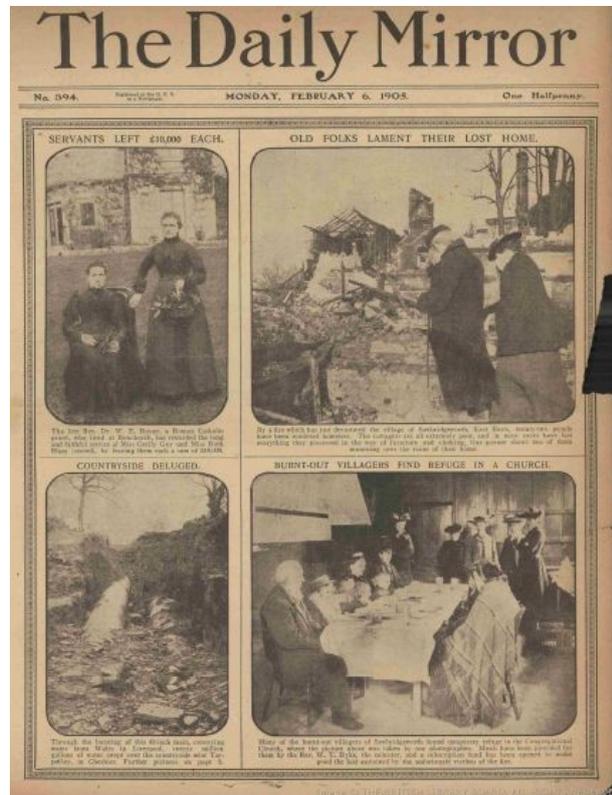
The event was of course covered by the press, not just locally, but nationally. The *Herts and Essex Observer* reported on it. One of the national papers, however, the *Daily Mirror*, sent a photographer round, and on Monday 6 February, Sawbridgeworth made the front page of that paper; see below for two photographs from it. According to the *Mirror* the people who lost their homes were already poor and now had lost all they possessed by way of furniture and clothing.



They were provided with temporary refuge in the Congregational Church (just round the corner) and given meals by the Rev. W.T. Dyke, the minister there.

That same Mr. Dyke set up a subscription fund to help the unfortunate victims of the fire. One week later a grateful Mr. Dyke wrote to the *Mirror* that, thanks in part to the publicity in that paper, he had received many subscriptions to that fund. "I have acknowledged them all except for one, an anonymous POO received from London". That postal order was for £1 10s, a very generous gift indeed. An "efficient committee has charge of the relief fund and we hope to make good the loss sustained by the cottagers".

The cause of the fire was recorded as 'unknown' and the damage estimated at £2,500. What happened to the victims afterwards I have not been able to find out. Maybe some of my readers can help. It seems, however, that the Rev. Dyke's efforts did help quite a lot. James Dyke, as he is referred to in the Church's records, had come to Sawbridgeworth in 1904 and served until 1913, when he was succeeded by William Rosewarne. Under his stewardship a new organ had been installed and the Sunday school classrooms were built.



Above on the left: another, picture of the aftermath of the fire and the site of the fire as it is today. On the right, the *Daily Mirror*'s front page of Monday 6 February 1905 is shown.

Sources for this article were the *Daily Mirror*, the *Herts and Essex Observer*, John F. Wright of the Sawbridgeworth fire brigade website, www.sawbridgeworthfirebrigade.co.uk, and my own article on the history of the Congregational Church, see: <https://www.sbwhistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/The-Sawbridgeworth-Congregational-church.pdf>