

HISTORY

Bicester With A **BANG!**

Peter Chivers describes memories of Bicester residents who witnessed the extreme dangers of Bonfire Night in years gone by. Thank goodness for the work of today's volunteers who make this traditional night much safer.

Celebrations will hopefully have passed without serious incident by the time you read this Gazette. Events organised by local voluntary groups today are a far cry from Guy Fawkes festivities that were once a part of life in Bicester, when rarely was there a thought for 'Health and Safety'.

At a talk to the Bicester History Society in 1957, one local resident, Mr Fred Hudson, described his memories of 'Bonfire Night in the 1870's' that was positively lawless. He recalled bonfires being lit in the streets and local youths on the rampage. No property was safe. Shops, in an attempt to limit damage, put up shutters to cover the windows. This, however, didn't always prove effective as one shop in the Causeway had the shutters torn down with the wood added to the bonfires!

So riotous was it, on occasion, that police had to be drafted in from surrounding districts to control proceedings. Barrels of tar were set alight and rolled around the streets with the aid of long poles. While police were dealing with one incident, another barrel would be lit and rolled around another part of the town. In the early evening it was a treat for young children to be taken out by their parents to see the bonfires. As events became more out of hand they were whisked back home and to safety. Reports indicate that after the fires had died down, those still celebrating threw fiery sticks in all directions!

Sid Hedges was later to describe Bonfire Night traditions that took place in the early decades of the twentieth century. One Bonfire Night, Fred Stockley,



Sam Pitts and Harry Bourton lost their fiery football, a large ball of rags soaked in paraffin and enclosed in wire netting, to a constable. They were pursued by the policeman down Water Lane (Chapel Street), but escaped by hiding in a sawpit at the Old Priory for over two hours. On Bonfire Nights 'fiery footballs' usually started their flaming careers round Back Way (Victoria Road). Dark streets and no traffic in the evening made their use practicable, though dangerous. Back Lane was handy because balls could

emerge into Sheep Street from Bell Lane, from the passageway by the Edinburgh Wool Shop, from the White Hart Yard, which was then a public right of way, or by the long routes using Launton Road or Crump's Butts. There were not enough police, even with the few extra brought in, to guard all five entrances! Back Way was ideal for the purpose because shopkeeper Tom Herring stored paraffin supplies behind his grocery store and so could prepare footballs, assisted by Norman Prentice. Sid Hedges was thrilled as a



small boy to see the blazing ball come like a meteor from Bell Lane, lighting the dark street, pursued by yelling men with the police struggling to control the situation. The younger boys had to be content with carrying burning 'tar cord' which was procured from the railway coal yard in London Road. Charity Bonfire Night celebrations have long replaced the mayhem of the past. It must be with some relief that town centre residents can now enjoy Guy Fawkes Night without the concern of losing house and home to a fiery fate!

