



Crime News

Bishopstone

1886

Incendiary Fire at Two Farms

The village of Bishopstone was thrown into a state of excitement on Saturday night by the outbreak of a fire in the centre of the large rick barn at **Mr. Hibberd's** farm, where there were large quantities of corn stacked.

The village engine was at once got out and efforts made to check the spread of the flames, which had got hold of two wheat ricks. These efforts were fortunately successful, although the ricks were destroyed. Directly after the discovery of the fire at Mr. Hibberd's the report spread that **Mr. Thomas Hickman's** premises at Townsend farm were also on fire. This was of a far more threatening nature than the other, the buildings being dangerously near the ricks. A messenger was despatched to Swindon for the fire brigade, and, after some delay in getting horses for the engine, those usually used having just come off a journey to Devizes, the brigade left Swindon at 1 p.m. On Sunday. By the time of their arrival three large ricks were involved, as well as a barn stocked with some 200 sacks of corn. Fortunately water was plentiful, and the firemen were able to prevent the fire spreading, although they did not think it safe to leave until 2 a.m. This (Monday) morning.

As to the cause of the fires there is unfortunately little doubt that it was the work of an incendiary, a man named Norris, a labourer, having been caught almost red-handed, and is now in custody at Swindon. The damage must be considerable. We are unable to say at present whether this is covered by insurance.

Swindon Advertiser and North Wilts Chronicle, 18 September 1886

The village of Bishopstone was thrown into a state of excitement on Saturday night by the outbreak of a fire in the centre of the large rick barn on **Mr. Hibberd's** farm, where there were large quantities of corn stacked.

The village engine was at once got out and efforts made to check the spread of the flames, which had got hold of two ricks, one of oats, the other of beans. These efforts were fortunately successful, although the ricks were destroyed. The fire was first discovered by a young man named **Holliday**, who immediately gave an alarm, being P.C. F. Read and others quickly to the spot. Mr. Hibberd was also early on the scene. As there were other ricks within a couple of yards of those attacked the gravest apprehensions existed as to the result. **Mr. J. Povey**, however, manipulated the water through the parish engine in a skillful manner, and the villagers, especially the females, worked hard to avert further danger.

Directly after the discovery of the fire at Mr. Hibberd's the report spread that Mr. Thomas Hickman's premises at the Forty Farm were also on fire. This was of a far more threatening nature than the other, the buildings being dangerously near the ricks. Mr. Hickman was at the time of the discovery rendering all the assistance in his power at Mr. Hibberd's. The utmost panic ensued at this second outbreak, no one

knowing what was going to happen next. With praiseworthy thought P.C. Read at once sent to other farm premises to have a strict watch kept, it being evident that an incendiary was abroad. A large barn, stocked with corn, a wheat rick, an oat rick, and two large hay ricks were soon involved, and the greatest exertions had to be made to save three other corn ricks and a hay rick. A messenger was despatched to Swindon for the fire brigade, and, after some delay in getting horses for the engine, those usually used having just come off a journey to Devizes, the brigade left Swindon at 1 p.m. On Sunday, soon, getting over the nine miles of the road. Fortunately, there was plenty of water in a stream near. The brigade had plenty of willing help to work the engine, and soon a large quantity of water was being poured on the burning mass. The engine was kept on all day Sunday until nearly midnight. The fire then appearing to be extinguished, the brigade left some time Monday morning. Before midday on Monday, however, the fire broke out afresh in a most threatening manner. Luckily, the parish engine – which had been in use at Mr. Hibberd's fire at Old Farm, and had done such good service in mastering that conflagration – was quickly brought into use, under the control of Mr. J. Povey. A large number of hands were employed. The remains of the oat rick, wheat rick, and two hay ricks had to be entirely carted out in the open fields. Mr. Povey and his men worked hard until Tuesday night, when they got the place free of danger. As it is, about £1,000 damage is done by the both fires. A more determined attempt to burn down both farm yards and premises could not possibly have been made. P. C. read very quickly had a man named **Henry Norris**, a well known bad character, in his custody, an act of promptitude which gave satisfaction throughout the village and neighbourhood. Some hundreds of spectators visited the scenes of the burning during Sunday.

Confession of the Incendiary

We understand that yesterday (Friday) afternoon the man Henry Norris, in custody on suspicion of causing the fires, made a full confession to the police.

Swindon Advertiser and North Wilts Chronicle, 25 September 1886

Swindon Police Court, Monday

Before D. Archer, Esq.

Henry Norris, 31, labourer, of Bishopstone, was brought up on suspicion of setting fire to a rick of beans and a rick of oats, at Bishopstone, the property of **Mr. Charles Hibbard**, farmer; also to four ricks of hay and corn, and a barn containing corn, the property of **Mr. Thomas Hickman**, of Townsend Farm, Bishopstone, on the night of the 18th inst. Mr. Supt. North said he was not prepared with evidence today, and had to apply for remand until Thursday.

The prisoner said he did not know that he had done anything to remanded for.

Mr. North, in answer to Mr. Archer, said he had no doubt from what he had heard that he would have ample evidence on Thursday. If not he would apply again. He was acquainted with the nature of the evidence to be produced, but did not think it necessary to get the witnesses in today.

Mr. Archer said he should remand prisoner until Thursday, when he could bring any evidence to show that he was not at the place alleged.

Swindon Advertiser and North Wilts Chronicle, 25 September 1886

Swindon Police Court, Thursday

Before D. Archer, Esq.

Henry Norris, 31, labourer, of Bishopstone, was brought up on remand charged on suspicion of setting fire to property at Bishopstone, on Saturday last. Mr. Supt. North said he only proposed today to call sufficient evidence to justify a further remand.

Maurice Sangster, labourer, of Ashbury, said he was entering Bishopstone on Saturday evening with bloaters for sale. At 6 o'clock he met prisoner and asked him to purchase some. The prisoner replied that he had no money, for he had been up to b---- Hibberd's for money and could not get any. He added that he would make it b---- hot for Hibberd before long, and also that "Dicky" up at the big house. He saw prisoner again shortly after nine outside the True Heart.

Mr. Supt. North explained that the big house meant Mr. Hickman's place.

Walter Pugh, labourer, Bishopstone, said he was passing Mr. Hibberd's premises about a quarter past ten at night when he saw the prisoner opening the yard gates. Ten minutes after that the farm was on fire. The ricks which were burning were in the yard he saw the prisoner entering, and were within ten yards of where he saw him. Later on he saw the fires were well on in half an hour.

Mr. Supt. North said he had other important evidence to produce next week. Prisoner had nothing to say, and was remanded.

Swindon Advertiser and North Wilts Chronicle, 25 September 1886

Swindon Police Court, Thursday

The Bishopstone Fires

Henry Norris, 31, labourer, of Bishopstone, was brought up in custody charged with setting fire to a rick of beans and a rick of oats at Bishopstone, the property of Mr. Charles Hibberd, farmer; also with setting fire to four ricks of hay and corn, and a barn containing corn, the property of Mr. Thomas Hickman, of Townsend Farm, Bishopstone, on the night of the 18th inst.

Mr. Thos. Hickman was the first witness. He said on the night of Saturday, the 18th inst., he heard an alarm of fire, and on going out found a wheat rick, an oat rick, a barn full of barley, and two ricks of hay on fire. The prisoner he knew, but he had not worked for him for several years. He (prisoner) lived in the village. Had never heard of the prisoner using any threats towards him, nor did he know of any cause for animosity, except that day he had refused to employ him. The damage done by the fire would amount to £800 to £900. The yard gates were kept locked, and the prisoner would have no right whatsoever to be on the premises.

Mr. C. J. Hibberd said he occupied the Prebendary Farm, Bishopstone. On the night of the 18th Sept., at 10.20, he heard an alarm of fire, and on going out found an oat rick and a bean rick in flames. From the appearance of the fires he should think that both ricks were set on fire at the same time. They were both destroyed. The gate of the yard was secured each night by a The yard was almost one hundred yards from the new farm house. Prisoner had worked for him during the last two harvests. In the last harvest prisoner and his mate went off drinking in the middle of the work without tying the corn. He had to put other persons on to finish the work. On the Saturday of the fire prisoner and his mate came in state of drunkenness, and asked for their money. He refused to pay them, saying as they had gone off at their own pleasure they could wait until Christmas for it, or summon him before the magistrates. There was 10s. 12s. due to the men on the land being measured. The ricks burnt were in the centre of a lot of others, but fortunately there were plenty of willing helpers, and a plentiful supply of water.

Richard Povey, of Bishopstone, tailor, said on the 18th of September he was coming from his father's house in Spring Hill about 10.18, when he met the prisoner, who wished him good night, and passed on towards Mr. Hibberd's Old Farm. He (witness) proceeded on his way home, and one hundred yards further on met Thomas Holloway and William Cue. When he got home there was a cry of fire, and directly after there was a call for the fire engine, which he kept at his home. "He got the engine out at once, and took it to the Old Farm, where he found the ricks on fire. They succeeded in keeping the fire to the ricks first attacked.

Walter Cue, labourer, said he was passing Mr. Hibberd's yard at 10.20, when he saw the prisoner opening the gate and going in. Ten minutes later he **Thomas Holloway** (spoken of by the witness Povey) heard the alarm of fire, and saw the ricks burnt, said after leaving Mr. Povey on the night in question he passed on towards Mr. Hibberd's yard. When he got to the corner he heard a "popping and craking", and on turning round saw a fire lighting up in the rick yard. He suggested to Cue, who was with him, that they should give an alarm, but Cue said they had better not run. He then heard a noise as of someone running away towards Mr. Hickman's farm. He did not go to see who it was, but directly after met John Derham, who must have met the party running.

John Derham, labourer, said he heard the cry of fire, and on going out met the prisoner running, on the bridge. He said to him "Holloa, Harry, here's a fire", but the prisoner would not answer, although he stopped. Prisoner then ran off towards Mr. Hickman's, where the second fire occurred.

Charles Titchener said he heard the alarm of fire, and on going towards Mr. Hibberd's met the prisoner hurrying from it, 190 yards off. He stopped him and asked where the fire was. Prisoner replied that it was up at Mr. Hibberd's, and that he had been trying to "dout" it, but could not. Prisoner then went off towards Mr. Hickman's farm.

Maurice Baxter, fish hawker, of Ashbury, said on Saturday, the 18th, he met prisoner at 6 o'clock, when he threatened to make it hot that night for Mr. Hickman and Mr. Heberd.

Henry Draper Pearce said he was at the True Heart on the night of the 18th with the prisoner. Whilst they were together the prisoner said three times in succession that he meant you have a good "blow up" in the Forty that night. Prisoner asked him to give him a match. But as he had not got one he said he could not give him one.

P.C. F. Read, stationed at Bishopstone, said he was on duty in the High Street, Bishopstone, at 10 p.m. When he saw the prisoner leave the True Heart Inn, and go in the direction of Mr. Hibberd's farm – contrary to his way home. 25 minutes after he was on duty lower down the street, when he heard the alarm of fire. He sent messengers at once for the fire engine, and ran off to the scene of the fire. There were three or four other persons then there. The oak rick and bean rick were on fire at the bottom, and the fire had extended to within a foot of three other ricks. He picked up a rack and prevented it spreading to these ricks. A quarter of an hour later he noticed that Mr. Hickman's ricks, 600 yards off, were on fire. He went there and gave Mr. Hickman the alarm. and sent to other farmers to put them on their guard. Just after 11 o'clock he saw the prisoner standing near Mr. Hickman's fire, with his hands in his pockets. He went to him and charged him with firing the places. Prisoner replied that he did not know anything about it, and said he (witness) had got the wrong man that time, for he (prisoner) was at home and in bed at the time. He took him into custody and searched him. In his trousers he found several loose matches, a piece of coloured linen shirting, some loose paper, and other articles. He brought him to Swindon. The prisoner appeared to be sober.

Prisoner said he had been drinking all day. As for the rag, he did not have that to make a fire with, but to tie his hands when the harvest field.

Sergt. Tidyman was called and proved the distances apart from the various points spoken of by the witnesses.

P.C. Matthews, warder at Swindon police station, said on Friday last he was with the prisoner cleaning the cells, when the prisoner said to him "Do you think I shall get it very hot for firing those ricks?2. He cautioned him as to what he was saying, when the prisoner added "I was full of beer that day, and they owed I some money or I should not have done it".

The above evidence was taken in support of the charge of setting fire to Mr. Hibberd's ricks. On being read over to the prisoner he, in answer to the usual caution, said he had nothing to say more than he should not have done it if he had not had drink. In support of the charge of firing Mr. Hickman's ricks. **Alice Jane Pearce** was called. She said she knew the prisoner. On the night of the fire she saw him run past her, going from Mr. Hibberd's to Mr. Hickman's premises, about twenty five minutes to eleven o'clock. She saw him go through the gates into the farm yard where the ricks were, and in three or four minutes she saw a light at the south end of the barn", about the size of the bottom of a pail". She at once gave an alarm. She did not see the prisoner again until P.C. Read had his in his custody.

Daniel Haines, an aged labourer, said on the day of the fire he was talking to the prisoner, when prisoner, who is a pond maker, said he had three months "ponding" on, but instead of doing that he should have twelve months in goal, for he meant to have a b----- fire on that night. Prisoner appeared to have had a little beer, and he (witness) told him he had better go home to bed.

Sert. Tidyman, recalled, said on the morning of the 19th he examined Mr. Hickman's premises. In the eaves of a shed adjoining the rick yard, about 15 yards from where the barn was fired, he discovered a patch of burnt thatch, about the size of his hand. It appeared to have been tried to be set on fire. On looking round an oat rick, on the south side, 27 yards off, he found on the ground a small piece of dirty tobacco paper, and near it a piece of linen rag, underneath the oat rick. This rag and paper exactly fitted that found in the prisoners pocket, having evidently been torn from it.

Richard Povey and **P.C. Read** corroborated as to the finding of the rag and paper.

The prisoner said he had nothing to say in answer to the charges, and was committed to take his trial at the next assizes at Winchester.

Swindon Advertiser and North Wilts Chronicle, 2 October 1886

Winchester Assizes, Friday

Pleaded guilty

Henry Norris, 31, pleaded guilty to setting fire to a stack of beans and stack of oats, at Bishopstone, near Swindon, on September 18, the property of Mr. C. Hibbard, and also to a second charge of firing a barn containing barley at the same place and on the same day, whereby a rick of wheat and a rick of oats were burnt and two ricks of hay partially burnt, the property of Mr. J. Hickman. Mr Ravenhill who prosecuted, said the damage amounted to over £1.000. The judge said he would make an example of the prisoner, and sentenced him to seven years penal servitude.

Western Daily Press, 13 November 1886