

Peep at the Past

*Ken Frost, amateur historian and museum volunteer, takes a look at what was making news in the Totnes area in days gone by. The archive Totnes Times reports published on this page are made available through the courtesy of the study centre at Totnes Elizabethan Museum, 70 Fore Street.
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Staff at Churchward Woollen Mills, Harbertonford in 1902, before the fire

100 Years Ago

On Thursday night, Harbertonford was thrown into a state of great excitement by an outbreak of fire at Messrs Churchward and Sons' Woollen Factory.

Work ended for the day shortly before 6 o'clock, and about an hour later the end of the engine house, in which was a 250hp Crossley engine - worked by suction gas - was seen to be on fire by Messrs Bickford and Malpass.

They raised the alarm but before anything could be done the building, of corrugated iron, wood lined and with a wooden floor, was a mass of flames, which shot through the roof within a few minutes and seriously threatened the six-storey factory, full of valuable machinery and materials in process of manufacture, which was separated from the fire by only a few yards.

Fortunately there was no wind, and although one of the windows caught, the fire was prevented from extending. An urgent message was sent to Totnes for the steam fire engine, and it was on the way as soon as horses could be obtained from Mr F Shinner.

Recognising the gravity of the situation, the factory employees made every possible effort to prevent the conflagration spreading. They used all the fire extinguishers in the mill, and the supply of pails there was supplemented by those brought from all parts of the village.

A motor car brought Mr JS Hall, manager of the mill, from Totnes, with Police Sergeant Mortimer and Police Constable Oaif, who organised a double line of willing helpers to pass along pails of water to attack the fire.

It was creeping along to the dye house and the drying loft adjoining, but their efforts, supplemented by those of the village constable PC Cotton, who was on a high ladder against the building, and Messrs Willcocks, Bickford H, Bickford A, Came, Harding and others, who threw water on the fire from the

top of the main building, 60ft or more high, were happily successful in keeping it in check, the pulling away of part of the roof of the adjoining building also helping in that direction.

Police Superintendent Hulland was also early on the scene of the outbreak.

The arrival of the Totnes Brigade, in command of Captain R Reed, was a great relief to the workers, many of whom had become soaking wet through their endeavours.

The steam engine was ready for action and with a plentiful supply of water from the Mill Pond the Brigade speedily got the fire under.

The engine house was, however, completely gutted. The damage done by the fire was considerable and is covered by insurance, but the firm will also sustain loss throughout the mill - which had been working full time - having to stand

idle until the engine can be restored to working order, the engine supplying the motive for the whole of the extensive machinery, and it being impossible at present to use the turbines as an alternative owing to the water power, which formerly drove them, being low.

This will be a serious matter for the villagers, upwards of 100 of them whom will be temporarily thrown out of employment.

50 Years Ago

Totnes Municipal Charities have informed the borough council that the property 1-5 Almshouses, The Grove, was in a very poor state of repair, and that in the view of the trustees it was unsafe and unfit for human habitation.

The trustees had no funds available for repairing property, and requested the council to re-house the occupants.

The council have resolved that the occupants of these almshouses be placed on the housing list, and that the chief public health officer be requested to inspect the property.

25 Years Ago

Self-proclaimed prophet David Icke is to appear at Totnes Civic Hall to spread his message of 'world conspiracy'.

The former professional footballer, TV journalist and Green Party activist will be in Totnes on November 15 to promote his latest book, and apart from Bath, this is the only date he has in the West Country.

Part of the tour is to bring his message across to the nation. He believes that conspiracies connected with religion and science are denying people the truth behind the nature of life and death.



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The Grove almshouses, just before demolition in 1970