

4. Fire and Flood



Lympstone History Society archive, October 1960.

Introduction

The Great Fire of Lympstone happened in June 1833. It started in Quay Lane at about six in the morning and burnt until it was finally put out around midday. By that time 58 houses had been destroyed and 248 people were homeless.

There have been many floods in Lympstone but the worst came in October 1960. Houses and shops in Lower Lympstone were waist deep in filthy water, but there was also severe flooding higher up where the Wotton Brook had burst its banks.

To find out more, scroll down.

This is one of a set of info points around the village.

For more information click [here](#).

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Fire

On June 12th 1833 a lighterman by the name of Lyddon, living in Quay Lane, rose early to catch the ebb tide. He lit a fire to cook his breakfast and left his cottage at 3 a.m. with the fire still burning. At about 6 a.m. his thatch caught fire, presumably from sparks from his chimney. The fire quickly spread to other roofs in that densely populated area.

The first fire engine – from Nutwell – did not arrive until after 8 a.m. and was followed shortly by engines from Exmouth and Topsham. By mid-morning three more engines arrived from Exeter and by midday the fire was extinguished, having spread to the other side of the Strand.



58 houses were destroyed and 248 people were left homeless, with nearly 100 completely destitute. Donations for the relief of the homeless started in the village that afternoon and were followed by collections in Exmouth and Topsham as well as further afield, including a national appeal.

The rebuilding of this area was carried out in brick and stone with slate or tile roofs since the traditional cob and thatch was held responsible for the rapid spread of the fire. This is why those common Devon materials are not to be found in this part of the village.

Flood

Lympstone has always suffered flooding. With the tidal Exe estuary on one side and the Wotton Brook coming from the other, carrying spring and rainwater from the Common and all the land between, the danger was always there.

The worst flooding came early in October 1960 and affected the whole village. Mrs Bastin of 12 Bakers Cottages, near the top of Longmeadow Road, said 'the water was blood red with mud.' Inside the cottage it rose to a depth of over one metre.

At the lower end of the village things were even worse: Mrs Coombes, manageress of the hairdresser and drapery in the Strand, reported, 'At 1 p.m. the water was round our ankles; half an hour later we were soaked up to our waists.' Other shops lost most of their stock, washed away or ruined by foul water.

More floods came over the next two weeks, worsened by blockages in the Brook and culverts. Rose Cottage and Ventnor Cottage, half way up the village, were among those flooded this time. Underhill became impassable except by boat.



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After the floods, the Wotton Brook was channelled between two high walls in the heart of the village and work was undertaken to clear blockages higher up. In 2006 the Environment Agency spent £900,000 raising sea defences and installing floodgates along the estuary. Villagers still keep a close eye on the water level when heavy rain accompanies a spring tide.

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