

A DISASTROUS INUNDATION SATURDAY JANUARY 16 1841

About five o'clock in the evening of Saturday, the 16th of January last, the snow, which had been drifted in immense quantities about Shrewton, Maddington, Tilshead, the Two Orchestons, and Winterborne Stoke, melted in consequence of the unusually-sudden thaw, and formed an immense body of water, which rushed with resistless violence through the villages, carrying with it in its course alarm, desolation, great destruction of property, and even loss of life. Providentially, the awful visitation took place at an early hour in the evening. Had it occurred at a later period, the horror of the scene would have been fearfully increased, and, in all probability the loss of life would have been much greater.

Between four and five o'clock, the waters from the surrounding hills rushed like a torrent into the village of Shrewton, destroying in their course twenty-eight cottages, and rendering upwards of 130 persons houseless. Such a scene of devastation, by water, within so short a space of time, and over so small a compass, has perhaps never been witnessed in England. Some of the cottages were swept entirely to the ground; portions of the walls of a few, and of the roofs of others, remained standing — but all was a wreck. Three lives, we regret to say, were also lost during the evening; and had the flood taken place an hour or two later, ten times that number would, probably, have been sacrificed. In the adjoining village of Maddington, seven cottages were destroyed. The water in some parts of the villages was seven or eight feet high; in others, four and five feet in its progress it burst the doors of the Wheel Inn, and washed the beer from the cellar into the yard. In every room on the ground-floor it was from two to three feet in depth. The neat little cottage at the entrance to the residence of Mr. Maton was demolished, together with all the front walls. In short, the whole place presented a picture of devastation.

In one part of a cottage on the road leading to Salisbury, Mr. Fulford and his daughter resided. In another was an old woman, upwards of 90 years of age, and her great-grand-child, a girl about seven years of age. The old woman and the child went to bed soon after six. Between six and seven, the girl Fulford came to the front window, and exclaimed "Joseph Grant! Joseph Grant! do ye come to our help, for the house is falling." Joseph Grant lived on the opposite side of the road, not more than twelve or fifteen feet across. The water at this time was about four or five feet deep, and rushing with so much violence, that no one could stand against it. Grant told her he could render her no assistance, and urged her to throw herself, if possible, from the window. The chimney now fell; and the girl, after retreating for a minute or two, again made her appearance, exclaiming, "Do ye come - do ye come, Joseph! for my father is killed!" Efforts were made, but without effect. Soon afterwards the walls gave way, and the inmates fell with the ruins. The girl

Fulford, having recovered herself, advanced to the rails by the side of the road, and implored in the most piteous and agonising terms that they would come to her relief. She shortly lost her footing, and Grant says he saw her "purl" over into the water; she, however, regained her feet, and renewed her entreaties for help. She stretched her hands as far as she was able, and supplicated "Joseph" to put out his and meet her. "Do ye come, do ye come, Joseph," was her constant cry. Grant says he made a desperate effort, but failed; the girl again fell, and "rolled over and over with the torrent," until she was drowned. She was dug out of some ruins about 200 yards from the spot. What this poor girl, who was about 13 years of age, suffered for about an hour and a half, no pen can describe. Grant's attention was now directed to the cries of the child. "Take my Granny out - take my Granny out, or she will be dead," was her cry. The father and the mother of the child were within a few yards of the spot: they could distinctly hear the cries, but had no means of rendering help. At length a horse was procured, when Langtrey, a policeman, with another person, went across, up to their middle in water, holding by the horse, to prevent their being carried off by the torrent, and, after a great deal of difficulty, rescued the old woman and the child. The old woman said she should have been suffocated in the ruins but for the exertions of the child. Unable to move her hands, from the position in which she fell, the child employed herself in removing the rubbish from her grandmother's face. The poor man Fulford was heard, for a quarter of an hour after the chimney fell, imploring the Lord to have mercy upon him! His body was also dug out on the Sunday forenoon; and the remains of father and daughter were laid side by side in an adjacent barn.

Langtrey, the policeman, had, just before he came to Fulford's, rescued a man named Borough, his wife, and three children, from the ruins of a cottage, at the upper part of the village. As he was about to leave, he heard some feeble cry proceeding from the spot. It was then recollect, that an aged man named Stone was in the cottage: Langtrey went back, and, with assistance, got the old man out, also alive.

A man named Windsor, a blacksmith, who resided near the Wheel Inn, had but just time to take out his children and place them on an elevated spot, before his cottage fell in. His cries brought assistance from the house of Mr. Smallbones; and, at the risk of their own lives, two or three persons brought the children safely into the Wheel.

Whilst this was going on at the upper part of the village, most appalling scene presented itself at the lower part:- In a cottage recently built, and which had a solid foundation, resided a labourer named Blewden, with his wife and five small children — the oldest about seven years of age, and the youngest an infant. No one suspected that

this cottage was in danger here, indeed, any of the neighbours, it was thought, might have gone for security. If danger had been anticipated, the family could safely have walked out, between five and six o'clock, after most of the other cottages had fallen in. Blewden had not, up to this time, returned from his work at Orcheston; and the waters continuing to increase in height and violence, the west end of the cottage fell at about seven o'clock. At this time it was impossible for any of the inmates to make their escape, nor could any persons come to their rescue. The mother, with the infant in her arms, and drawing a cradle, into which she had placed a little boy about two years of age, after her — her other children dining around her, rushed to a casement at the east end of the house, and here her heart-rending cries for help attracted a great number of persons near the spot: but all attempts to get to the cottage were fruitless. The night was dark and dismal — the rain at times fell heavily, the wind was remarkably high, and the rushing of the waters resembled the roaring of the sea. By means of a light at the casement, the mother and her children were distinctly seen; and whilst she earnestly supplicated for relief, the shrieks of the children rent the air. A more harrowing scene can scarcely be imagined. Blewden had now returned from his work, and hearing the cries of his little ones — being on the Orcheston end of the cottage he could not see them — rushed into the water, and, but for a person more powerful than himself, would have been drowned. Among those in front (not more than 100 yards distant), and who could witness the struggles of the family, were the father and brother of Mrs. Blewden: their efforts to come to her rescue, as may be conceived, were untiring; but for upwards of an hour the family were in the situation described at the casement. In a moment a loud crash was heard — the light was extinguished, and for a short time all was hushed. It was thought that the mother and her five children were all buried in the ruins. A part of the side wall, it appears, had fallen down, and killed the little boy in the cradle. The mother, for a minute or two, was overpowered by the shock; on recovering herself, she gave a loud and piercing shriek, and the cries of the children were renewed. Two or three more hours passed away; another crash took place — the whole of the east end of the cottage fell, and the mother and her children were thrown upon the ruins. During all this time, every possible effort was made to rescue them, but in vain. Several times, at the imminent risk of his life, Mr. S. Mills, of Elston, endeavoured on horseback to brave the torrent, and, if possible, to save some of the children. Some idea of the rapidity of the waters may be formed, from the fact, that a wagon, with one of Mr. Mills's largest farm-horses attached to it, was carried over the ruins of the cottage into an adjoining orchard. The young man who rode the horse kept his seat, and, nothing daunted, repeatedly tried to bring the wagon to one part of the cottage, then to another; and at length he succeeded. The brother of Mrs. Blewden was among the first to her rescue; he found her under a large heap of earth, and took the infant from her arms, uninjured: how it was preserved, it is

impossible to say. A little girl, three years and a half old, was next extricated: whilst taking this child out, it appears that Mr. Pearce, for that was the brother's name, stepped upon the elder boy, about seven years of age, who immediately cried out, "Uncle, Uncle! here I am!" This poor boy's thigh was broken, and he was otherwise severely injured by the rubbish which fell upon him. By the light of the lantern, the head of the other boy was seen just above the wins: he, too, was extricated; and, last of all, the mother, who was immediately put to bed at an adjoining public house. The cradle, with the dead child, was dug out of the ruins the following day.

Mr. Pearce, father of Mrs. Blewden, kept an ale-house: his cottage was washed down between five and six o'clock, as was the one adjoining, belonging to his son. The cottage in which Blewden resided was built by the savings of his industry — it was "his own". The loss this family sustained amounted to between 200/- and 300/- — nearly their all. Pearce, the son, in endeavouring to get to the relief of his sister, would inevitably have been drowned, but for Mr. Mills. He was nearly overpowered, when, seeing Mr. Mills on horseback, he begged to be allowed to catch hold of the stirrups. Mr. Mills immediately rode to his assistance; but, like a drowning man, Pearce first caught the reins, then the mane of the horse, and for a time the whole three were in danger of falling together. He was at length extricated: but he did not cease his efforts for his sister until she too was saved — between twelve and one o'clock in the night.

A very short distance from the Blewdens, an old woman, named Sarah Munday, between 60 and 70 years of age, resided. The water came into her cottage between five and six in the evening, and soon afterwards, some of the walls gave way. She sought shelter up stairs; and, being wet, took off her clothes, and wrapped herself in a blanket. Other parts of the cottage soon fell, until at length nothing stood but the chimney, to which she clung — exposed, almost naked, to the weather, and in momentary danger of death — *for nearly seven hours*, without any one being enabled to come to her rescue. "I did not (the old woman said) forget to pray to God. I prayed until I was exhausted. I revived, and I prayed again!" At midnight she was extricated from her perilous situation, without receiving the slightest personal injury.

At the same end of the village, but farther on towards Orcheston, were four or five adjoining tenements; the inmates of which, with the exception of an old widow named Vallis, seeing the approaching danger, made their escape between six and seven o'clock. Poor widow Vallis was obliged to remain: her cottage fell around her, and she could not be taken from the ruins *until four hours afterwards*; but she too was preserved.

The number of cottages destroyed at Shrewton, Maddington, and the Orchestons, adjoining villages, was 47; and the number of persons rendered houseless, 195; viz. — at Shrewton, 28 cottages destroyed, and 130 persons houseless; at Orcheston St George, six cottages destroyed, 22 persons houseless; and at Orcheston St. Mary, six cottages destroyed, and 18 persons houseless.

The Rev. Mr. Atkinson, the clergyman of Maddington, and his wife, sat up during the whole of Saturday night, administering to the wants of their unfortunate poor parishioners; and at a meeting on Monday they contributed 7/- towards a fund for relieving their immediate wants. A large fire was made in the spacious school-room erected through the munificence of Mr. Maton, where a number of poor families were not only comfortably lodged, but supplied with food by Mr. and Mrs. Maton. The old Manor-house adjoining the residence of Mr. Maton was also appropriated to the same benevolent purpose. Mr. and Mrs. Smallbones, at the Wheel Inn, also exerted themselves to the utmost to relieve the destitute.

A great amount of property was thus destroyed, the sufferers being chiefly labourers — persons who had laid out the hard-earned savings of their lives — some in the building of a little cottage — others in the purchase of furniture — the whole of which was thus swept away.

Major Olivier was at Shrewton on Tuesday, and earnestly recommended that committees should be formed in each of the suffering parishes: viz., Shrewton, Maddington, the two Orchestons, Tilshead, and Winterbome Stoke; and that subscriptions should be opened in every town in the county, for the general relief of the sufferers. This recommendation was adopted.

Among the persons who particularly distinguished themselves during the evening at Shrewton, was Langtrey, the policeman; and many persons owed their lives to his exertions. Pook, the driver of the Devizes and Salisbury mail, upon finding that it was impossible to proceed through the village with the bags, also rendered very great services; as did Miles, the mason, and several others. The Salisbury mail, which was due at seven on Saturday evening, did not arrive in Devizes until five the next morning — the bags being conveyed on horseback.

At Orcheston, the road for a considerable distance was excavated by the waters to the depth of four feet, in as straight a line as if drawn by a rule; and hundreds of earth were thrown up, which formed an excellent embankment.

The water at Shrewton was at its greatest height between nine and ten o'clock.

At Tilshead, nine houses were either entirely destroyed or must be taken down. No lives were lost; but the escape of several families were almost miraculous. A labourer of the name of Baker, with his wife and five children, was in the upper room of his house, when the foundation began to move; the roof was already falling, when he assembled his family in a corner of the room most likely to facilitate their escape; but, to his great alarm, found one was missing. Calling the lost child by name, the boy replied, by saying that

he was under the bed, where the failing timbers had probably forced him. Driven to desperation by his perilous condition, the father seized a pick-axe, and succeeded, before the floor went down, in forcing an opening through the gable of his cottage, into the upper part of a carpenter's shop, through which he dragged his family only a few minutes before the whole building gave way, having no time to save a single article of his property.

An adjoining cottage, occupied by Richard Gale, the oldest inhabitant in the parish, next gave way — a female and several children escaping before it fell. A cry was then raised that the old man was buried in the ruins. Mr. Folliott and Mr. Henry Norris almost immediately procured a horse, and, with the assistance of a labourer, attempted to reach the ruin; but the stream was too powerful, and the horse was unable to keep its feet. It then occurred to them that, probably, by following the course of the water into the field, they might find less difficulty. This plan succeeded, and they found Gale standing with his back against the chimney, which, being of brick, the water could not remove. Though much exhausted, they were soon able to place him beyond the reach of further danger.

Owing to the rapid thaw on Saturday, the water rose to an unusual height at Codford and its neighbourhood; the turnpike-road was for a while nearly impassable, and the inhabitants near the stream running from Chittam were obliged to leave their dwellings, from the dread of their being washed down upon them. Mr. Fry, blacksmith, of that place, a very honest and industrious man, had his shop and a great part of his premises carried away, and great fears were entertained for the dwelling-house, which for some time was in imminent danger. Mr. Wm. Bennett was also seriously inconvenienced from the same cause. So rapid was the increase of the water, that during the time his carter was eating his dinner, it had risen to the horses' middles in the stable. The horses were removed as quickly as possible to the George inn. A flock of sheep belonging to the same gentleman were obliged to be carried off in wagons, which was not effected without great difficulty. The cribs from which they had been feeding were all washed away. Several cart-sheds and mud-walls have been completely razed. This was the highest flood ever remembered.

An extract from the Salisbury and Winchester Journal published by W. B. Brodie & Co. price threepence because "interest in this melancholy event continues to be so intense"

Researched by Ann E 1988-89