

RUTLAND LOCAL HISTORY & RECORD SOCIETY

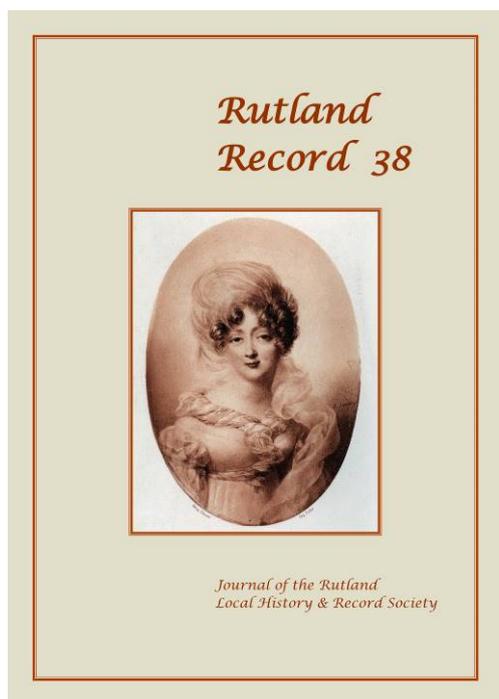
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*** *PRESS INFORMATION* ***
*** *NEW PUBLICATION* ***

Disastrous fire destroys nearly 30 houses at Belton – in 1776!



Wednesday 29th May 1776 was a day of high drama and terrible loss in the Rutland village of Belton. It was a dry day with a stiff southerly breeze blowing. Around mid-day, a servant girl threw some hot ashes out onto dry litter in the yard of William Allin's house near the south end of the village. This promptly caught alight, and within a short space of time, fanned by the wind, the fire had spread to the thatch of neighbouring buildings. Nothing could be done except rescue animals and belongings, and despite the best efforts of the villagers, aided by the Uppingham fire engine and the Rutland Militia who happened to be assembled for training in Oakham, the fire raged all day and through the night, leaving a trail of smoking ruins through the village. In the space of 24 hours, though there had been no human and few livestock fatalities, nearly 170 villagers had been left homeless and bereft of their possessions.

This tragic and dramatic event is the subject of the main article in this year's issue of the Rutland Local History & Record Society's annual journal, *Rutland Record*, which has just been published. Robert Ovens and Sheila Sleath describe what happened next, with the setting up of an appeal fund to aid the afflicted, nearly all of whom would have had no insurance cover. Appeals in the local press – *Stamford Mercury*, *Northampton Journal* and *Leicester & Nottingham Journal* – and in the surrounding counties led to the collection of nearly £3,400, which was distributed to those who had lost homes and possessions. The article gives details of many of these people and their background, and indeed how much compensation they received. William Allin, in whose yard the fire started, received £339 13s 10d (around £30,000 in today's money), whilst at the other end of the scale 53 sufferers shared £130 (around £11,000, or £200 each) for lost possessions. Robert and Sheila have been able to trace the course of the fire and have identified several buildings in the village whose fire-reddened masonry still bears witness to that dreadful event today.

In a second article, Paul Reeve tells a fascinating story, linking the French aristocrat Mme la Comtesse de Boigne by way of her memoirs to George Finch, Earl of Winchilsea, and a childhood Christmas at Burley on the Hill in 1789 when her family had fled France and the terrors of the French Revolution. This is a many-faceted story, bringing together an unlikely combination of the American War of Independence, Spanish aristocracy, a 16-gun American privateer capturing Winchilsea's sister off the coast of Spain in 1781, the hospitality of Monseigneur Dillon, Archbishop of Narbonne, an essay by Marcel Proust – and finally the construction of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link at St Pancras!

The other main contribution is an essay by Malcolm Tozer in which he identifies the scarce surviving evidence for the Uppingham High School for Girls, a short-lived venture in High Street West which ran only from 1888 to 1893. It was set up by Miss Mary Beisiegel, the daughter of one of Edward Thring's masters, the Prussian Georg Beisiegel who taught gymnastics and music. Its early success under Mary and her sister Lillie soon evaporated when they ceased their connection with the school, and their successor Miss Florence Wilde could not maintain the momentum: the school seems to have faded away. Malcolm ends by making an appeal for any photographs of Uppingham High School pupils, perhaps at their annual prize-giving: no such photographs have been found to date.

The issue closes with notes of finds recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme in Rutland, including a Bronze Age gold ring from Whissendine, and annual reports on historic building surveys and on the activities of record offices and local societies with an interest in the history and archaeology of the county.

The Society's Honorary Editor, Tim Clough, said, 'Once again, we are grateful for the expertise of contributors with a special interest in Rutland's long and varied history. *Rutland Record* is free to members, and we encourage anyone with an interest of Rutland's past to come and join us – full information about our activities including our meetings and our other publications is given on our website, www.rutlandhistory.org'.

Copies of the new publication can be obtained as usual from the Rutland Local History & Record Society at the Rutland County Museum for £6.00 (plus £2.00 p&p), via local bookshops, or on-line via www.genfair.co.uk. ISBN-13: 978-0-907464-59-4.

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