

The Fire at Hazelwood House, 1908



Hazelwood House and gardens (later Hunton Park) before the fire in 1908, c1900. *Photo: David Spain Collection*

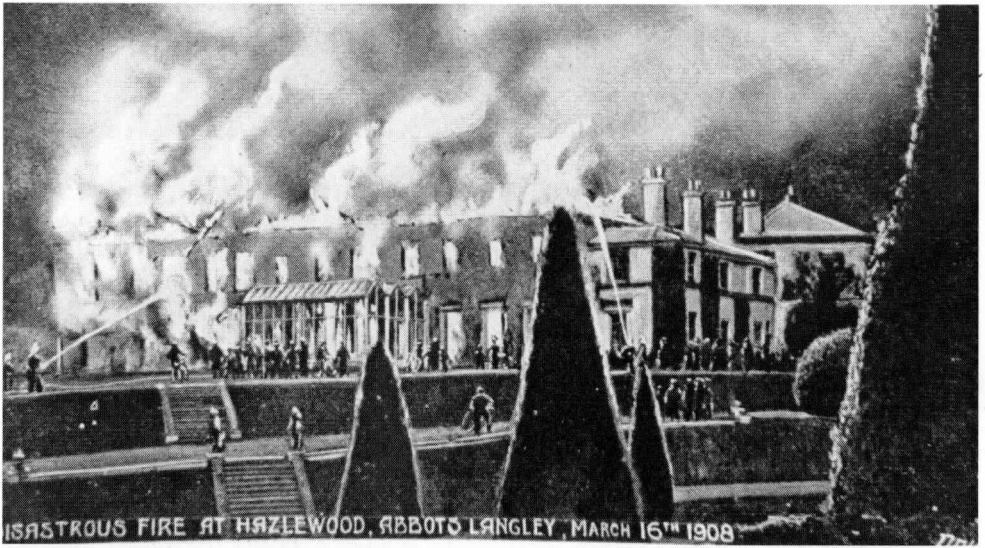
On Monday 16th March 1908 at about 7.50pm, as George Litherland, assistant gardener at Hazelwood House, crossed the Italian Garden, he noticed some sparks shooting from one of the chimneys of the main house. Looking closer he then saw flames through the window near the butter pantry and realised the house was on fire.

The head gardener, William Stannard*, who had also seen the fire, began to organise the estate workers with buckets of water, but soon realised the fire was more than the staff could control. He quickly sent his son Will, who, possibly together with George, ran down to the Station Telegraph Office at Kings Langley. The urgent message was sent via Watford Junction and then relayed to the High Street, and by 8.15pm it was acted upon

by Superintendent Danzey of the Watford Fire Brigade.

With Danzey at the helm and six men, they set off with the county engine along the Hempstead Road, followed by Captain Thorpe. The horses galloped at a fast pace then turned into Gypsy Lane, slowing down in Hunters Lane due to the stony road surface. When they arrived at the main entrance they could see the building was blazing furiously. Danzey surveyed the situation and was no doubt relieved to learn from William Stannard that the house wasn't occupied.

Enquiring about the water supply, Danzey was shown to a small pool in the garden to which the engine was promptly taken. By 8.40pm the hoses were going well, but as the



The fire at Hazelwood House, 16th March 1908. Photo: *The Dobson Collection*.

fire took hold and the water gave out, it soon became clear that there wasn't enough supply! With more water required, an estate worker spoke of the recently installed private hydrant in Hunters Lane and the firemen quickly attached their hoses to this, enabling the firemen to continue with their increasingly enormous task.

As gusts of wind fanned the flames it was then realised that the front of the mansion could not be saved and it was decided to concentrate their efforts on the two wings, coach-house and stables. Another problem began to emerge with the hydrant, which only gave one jet of water. This meant the engine had to be taken from the garden pool and into the lane, where two lines of hose were then attached, allowing each hose to be trained on each wing simultaneously.

The interior of the building was almost a furnace. The intense heat caused bricks and stones to collapse along with falling roof timbers making it especially difficult for the firemen – one man had a narrow escape from falling masonry.

With the fire gaining pace, William sent his son back to the Station again to telegraph for more help. This time he sent for engines from Sedgwick Brewery, with Captain Harold Sedgwick, and from Dickinson's Croxley, with Superintendent Lovett. However, with their arrival there wasn't enough water for the two engines to work the hoses. As the firemen continued with their difficult task, a five-foot soft water tank was discovered over the billiard room, but this water caused further problems – along with some amusement. Danzey warned of the dangers too late, when suddenly fireman Judge jumped over a hosepipe and fell straight into the water tank up to his waist. He was swiftly followed by Captain Sedgwick and finally Danzey himself, who despite his own warnings and before he could stop himself, fell backwards into the water and was thoroughly soaked!

Watford Police Station had also learned of the fire by then and Inspector Dormoney, with four men, walked out to the mansion. Several other constables nearby also set off to

Hazelwood: P.C. Bavister and Sergeant Stoten of Hunton Bridge and also Superintendent Wood who was at Nash Mills that day.

The flames and smoke could be seen from Abbots Langley and other villages nearby. People soon gathered to witness the sight at first hand of this once grand mansion being reduced to ashes. Some no doubt were remembering its former glory and recalled the many gentry who had lived there over the years.

The large house known as 'Hazelwood' had seen many owners and residents. The once impressive house, built in 1812 in some 43 acres, by Henry Botham and his wife Lydia, was set back off the Hempstead Road and situated between Hunton Bridge and Abbots Langley. During their lifetime at the house Henry and Lydia eventually created over 70 acres of beautiful grounds.



Damage after fire at Hazelwood House, 16th March 1908.
Photo: The Dobson Collection

Henry died in 1825 and in 1838, Lydia willed the house to a nephew, Samuel George Gambier. He subsequently sold the house on to another nephew – Henry Robinson Montagu. Montagu, who in 1847 became the 6th Baron Rokeby, was a professional soldier; he had fought at Waterloo and was later a Major General in the Crimean War. After his wife died in 1868 he lived at

Hazelwood with his daughter Elizabeth, where he spent his life focusing on improvements to the estate – especially the gardens – until his death in 1886.



Damage to entrance after fire at Hazelwood House, 16th March 1908. *Photo: The Dobson Collection*

The property then belonged to Admiral Ralph Cator, after which the house went to his stepson, Revd. Henry Stewart Gladstone – in 1896. At first Gladstone leased out the property, but by 1907 he decided to move into the house with his family and he spent some £1,000 on renovations to the house. With everything completed by March 1908, some furniture was moved into the building and Revd. Gladstone then arranged with the builders J & G Waterman to take his family to see the house prior to moving in. The viewing was to take place on the Tuesday, which ironically was the day after the fire!

Despite the large numbers of people, the crowd were orderly and some 20 to 30 men, along with Mr F. Guerney, a gardener, and other estate workers, assisted in saving furniture and effects. Mrs Guerney provided the much needed refreshments for the firemen.

After several hours and the front part of the building having fallen in, the fire was averted from the wing, coach-house and stables, all of which were saved. By the early hours of Tuesday morning the fire was out and both

Sale of Plants.
"HAZELWOOD."
ABBOTS LANGLEY.

To be Sold by Auction by
SEDGWICK, SON & WEALL

On the premises, on Wednesday, April 15th, 1908, at 2 o'clock precisely, by direction of the Rev. H. S. Gladstone, about

3,000 BEDDING, STOVE and GREEN-HOUSE PLANTS, comprising Geraniums, Coleus, Marguerite Daises, Pentstemons, Chrysanthemums, Palms, Ferns, Primulas, Arum Lilies, Imantophyllums, Cyclamen, and others, and also a quantity of Strawberry Plants.

May be viewed on the morning of sale. Catalogues may be obtained of Mr. Gurney, the Gardens, "Hazelwood"; and of Messrs. Sedgwick, Son and Weall, land and timber surveyors, estate agents, and auctioneers, 38, High-street, Watford, Herts.

Watford Observer, 1908

Sedgwick and Croxley Brigades left the site. Although the building continued to smoulder for several hours, some new firemen arrived from Watford to relieve those who had been on duty the night before. The cost of the damage was estimated at about £10,500, which, without the efforts of the firemen and volunteers, might have been much worse. Danzey expressed his thanks to all those who had helped, but it was said the water supply wasn't enough to cope with the strength of the flames.

The fire was thought to have been caused by the overheating of a flue that passed through a corner of the grand staircase and up through a bedroom before entering a chimney stack. Possibly the flue was defective or it just over heated. Fortunately the building firm, having just completed the work, were still at the premises. This meant that once the insurance settlement was in place, Gladstone could make a determined effort to re-build the house.

What a sorry sight it must have been that met everyone that afternoon. Where once had been a drawing-room, dining-room, study and other ground floor rooms of the main

building, all that was left were charred wood, bricks and stones of a once grand mansion. But one day it would rise again from the old ashes...

Based on a Watford Observer report, Ed.

* from Clive Clark's book – Abbots Langley Then: 1760-1960

It isn't certain which insurance firm dealt with the settlement. However, it is also interesting to note that within a month of the fire an advertisement was placed in the Watford Observer concerning the Sale of Plants at Hazelwood – by Auction. It was to be held under the direction of Revd. H. S. Gladstone – on the 15th April 1908!

Journal outlets

We would like to acknowledge and thank the following local shops and offices for their continued support as outlets for the Journal:

- Alliance Pharmacy, High Street, Abbots Langley
- Leavesden Pharmacy, Katherine Place, College Road, Abbots Langley
- Bedmond Post Office Stores, Bedmond
- Abbey Pharmacy, High Street, Abbots Langley
- Abbots Langley Parish Council Offices
- St Lawrence Church Office, Abbots Langley
- Abbots Home and Garden, Langley Road, Abbots Langley

EDITOR'S NOTE

Our thanks to all those who have contributed to this issue of the Journal. We are happy to receive articles, letters, poems, etc. on any aspect of history relating to Abbots Langley and the surrounding. We look forward to your memories, stories and anecdotes which will be included as space allows. Any photographs sent will be respected and promptly returned.

Some back copies of the Journal are available – please contact Robin Mann or the Editor for the list.

Please send all Journal contributions to:

**The Editor, 32 St Peters Way, Spixworth,
Norwich NR10 3NS.**