

## **Great Fire of Haddenham**

*Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> June 1788 Haddenham*

It was another hot day in Haddenham, and was about to get even hotter. The heat wave had been going on for months, without any rain. It was all anyone could talk about. Although in the previous year there had been enough rain to produce a good harvest, the weather had returned to the extreme conditions that had been hampering crops since 1784. Some people blamed it on the strange darkness that followed the volcanic<sup>i</sup> eruptions in Iceland in 1783 and 1784, which went on for months, but others said that was ridiculous; how could something so far away affect us in Haddenham? On the morning of Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> June farmers had taken the labourers down into the fen to try to water the wheat crops from the fen drains. Meanwhile, a gusty wind had started blowing from the north.

The usual daily activities carried on in the village, people getting up at 5:00am and preparing for the day ahead. At Robert Pate's bakery in the High Street, the dough, which had lain in the two dough troughs overnight, was being kneaded, ready for shaping and putting on the trays in the vast proving oven. Robert was 38 years old and from one of the wealthier families in Haddenham. They owned the corn mill and had acres of productive land between them. Being the main baker in Haddenham gave Robert respect and status. This was tinged with sadness though, as his wife, Lydia, had died 10 years previously, after just five years of marriage, leaving him with their four-year-old, daughter, Mary, to bring up. Maybe Mary was helping him in the bakery that day, when Robert and his apprentice stopped for breakfast about 7 o'clock, or maybe she was still at home, in the house next to the bakery, doing the morning chores. After breakfast the bakers got all the bread into the main oven and started organising the orders for delivery. The queue for bread outside the bakery would have started to form by 9:00am. A busy time followed as the freshly-made bread made its way to homes throughout Haddenham on the back of the baker's cart and in shopping baskets. By half past ten the bakery shop was quiet; there was to be no afternoon baking as it was half day closing in Haddenham on Wednesdays. It was time to catch up with other jobs.

The next job at the bakery was the weekly deep cleaning of the bakery and oven. First things first, to get the oven cleaned and the fire bed cleared of ashes and prepared for the rest of the week's work. A long pole with a woollen cloth tied at one end was soaked in water and used to swab around the furthest reaches of the oven and the proving oven, which lay underneath. Next the floor was cleaned with a mixture of straw and water and the dirty straw brushed outside into the yard. Only the fire bed at the back of the oven was left to be cleared. Using a long-handled flat shovel, the ashes were drawn to the front and collected in a metal bucket and sprinkled with water, in case any were still hot. Maybe it was Robert who did the raking out of the fire bed, whilst the apprentice was out delivering the rest of the morning's bread, and Mary had the job of taking the ashes out into the yard at the back of the bakery.

What happened next was to stay in the hearts and minds (and purses) of the folk of Haddenham for a long time. That windy day, around eleven o'clock, a tiny spark blew off the top of the bucket as Mary brought it into the yard and landed on the dirty wet straw setting it alight. Within minutes, flames had started to rise up, caught by the warm wind. Mary had gone inside for the next bucketful of ash and did not see what had happened until she came out again. The cry of "Fire, Fire!" which every soul dreaded, was taken up by Robert as he struggled to put out the flames. The next-door neighbours and visitors at the Rose and Crown knew exactly what to do. It was the habit of people to run towards the cry to help quench the fire, as fear of fire was something instilled into everyone from the earliest age. Despite access to the well and water trough, and beating of the fire by numerous people with brooms and shovels, the fire jumped nimbly out of their way into the tinder-dry thatch of the neighbouring house. That gusty north wind was blowing down the High Street towards Linden End and sprinkling dangerous red hot ashes onto anything in its path.

Most of the men were still down in the fen working so, at first, only those with businesses and shops were there to fight the flames. The elderly and women with small children joined in to try to put out the fires or, when they realised they could not be saved, to drag their belongings out of burning buildings. Someone got on a horse

and sped off to Ely to summon the fire engine and the men in the fields had started running up towards the village, seeing the smoke rising on the ridge above them. One building after another joined the frightful bonfire, barns and hovels disappeared, together with their contents, in minutes. People were running about screaming and trying to soak their houses to stop the fire taking hold. They tried to get in front of the fire and stop it, but to no avail. Buildings started to collapse and then it was a case of looking out for each other, your family, your things, your friends, letting the animals loose to escape. Everyone was shouting.

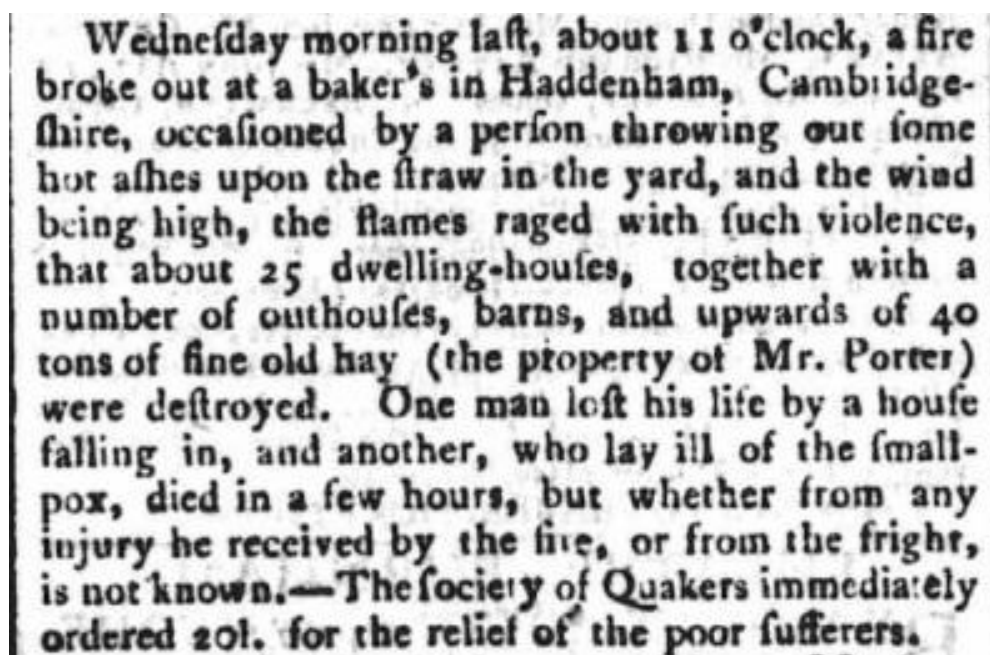


**Figure 1 After the fire- from the Illustrated London News, when Cottenham burnt down in 1850**

The smell was terrible, it was hard to breathe; the fire just marched on down the High Street, missing some houses, those built from brick and tile, and devouring others, particularly the smaller sort of one-roomed house that the poorer families lived in. At one point it was possible to look up the road towards where the fire had started to see flames on either side, and the piles of bedding and furniture that had been dragged out into the middle of the street. After the coughing, the crying, and the pointless fire engine from Ely had turned up, there was nothing to do but sit in the road and count up one's blessings. It was a disaster, but no-one had died. That is what people were saying. Others were secretly relieved that they had been able to afford fire insurance from the Sun Alliance agent when he had last visited. As each family gathered what they could to take it where friends had offered to put them up

for the night the terrible truth started to circulate, that poor Thomas Wayman had died in his bed. He had been left in the cottage on his own because he had the smallpox. Everyone had forgotten about him in their fright. He had come to Haddenham for work a few years back so there was no family to look out for him. Another body had been found under a pile of rubble, where the wall had collapsed. No-one knew who he was. Suddenly the village realised that they had been the lucky ones, they had escaped with their lives.

The following day was a bleak one. (Fig. 1) After the euphoria of survival came the reality of loss. 25 homes had been burnt to the ground, another 15 outhouses and barns full of grain had been destroyed. The Society of Quakers put up £20 towards the relief of those whose homes and property had been lost, which at least gave some people a bit of hope for the future. Most people turned up at Holy Trinity for the funeral service, conducted by a very solemn Reverend David Wray, for Thomas Wayman and the poor unknown man. There was no work to be done, other than to help the families whose lives had been devastated. (Fig. 2)



Wednesday morning last, about 11 o'clock, a fire broke out at a baker's in Haddenham, Cambridge-shire, occasioned by a person throwing out some hot ashes upon the straw in the yard, and the wind being high, the flames raged with such violence, that about 25 dwelling-houses, together with a number of outhouses, barns, and upwards of 40 tons of fine old hay (the property of Mr. Porter) were destroyed. One man lost his life by a house falling in, and another, who lay ill of the small-pox, died in a few hours, but whether from any injury he received by the fire, or from the fright, is not known.—The society of Quakers immediately ordered 20l. for the relief of the poor sufferers.

Figure 2 Account of the Haddenham Fire in *The Bury and Norwich Post* of 18<sup>th</sup> June 1788

The above is a quasi-fictional account of the Great Fire of Haddenham based on the newspaper reports of the day. However the Sun Alliance insurance records provide a bit more detail. It is clear from the fact that when the Sun Alliance agent, Mr Brackenbury, turned up seven days later, on the 18th June, people were hungry for Great Fire of Haddenham: 1788

by Jez Reeve 2021

pay-outs and to buy insurance cover. Mr Brackenbury would have had a busy time of it.

509682 Robert Pate of Haddenham in the Isle of Ely  
 10/ in the County of Cambridge Miller Baker and  
 Mich 1786 Farmer — On his new dwelling house, Baking house,  
 10/2 Stable and Offices adjoining situated as aforesaid  
 Armiger not exceeding One Hundred Pounds 100  
 Household Goods therein only not exceeding Twenty  
 Six Pounds 25  
 Utensils and Stock therein only not exceeding Thirty  
 Six Pounds 35  
 Ricks Stacks and Hovels included in the yard  
 not exceeding Forty Pounds 40  
 £ 200  
 NB. The Society not to be answerable for any Loss  
 or damage by Fire that may happen by Hay or Corn  
 being stacked too wet or green  
 D Pitcairn C Bewicke G Mavon

Figure 3 Robert Pate insurance 19 September 1785

We know that Robert Pate had been insured, since at least 1785, (Fig. 3) paying £0 3s. 0d. to cover £200 worth of his property, which comprised his “dwelling house, Baking House, Stable and offices”. From that insurance entry it is possible to get a feel for the property, which also had “ricks, stacks and hovels” in the yard. Presumably these had also contributed to feeding the fire, once it had taken hold. It is likely that the bakery and house of Robert Pate was destroyed during the terrible fire, as four months later Robert took out Sun Alliance fire insurance again, but this time the value of his property had increased to £360 and was clearly described as “brick and tiled”. He had presumably used the insurance money to upgrade his home and business, rebuilding it with more fire-proof materials. However he did something else when he made his contract with Brackenbury. He also insured the

barns of Mr Gooday, worth £20 of Mr Cuttriss, worth £70, of Mr Robinson, worth £40, of Mr Daniel Pate, worth £20 and Mr Daniel's chamber, worth £20. In addition he insured Mr Gooday's yard, which was worth £160, and his own corn mill, worth £150. For all this he paid the annual premium of £0 13s. 0d.

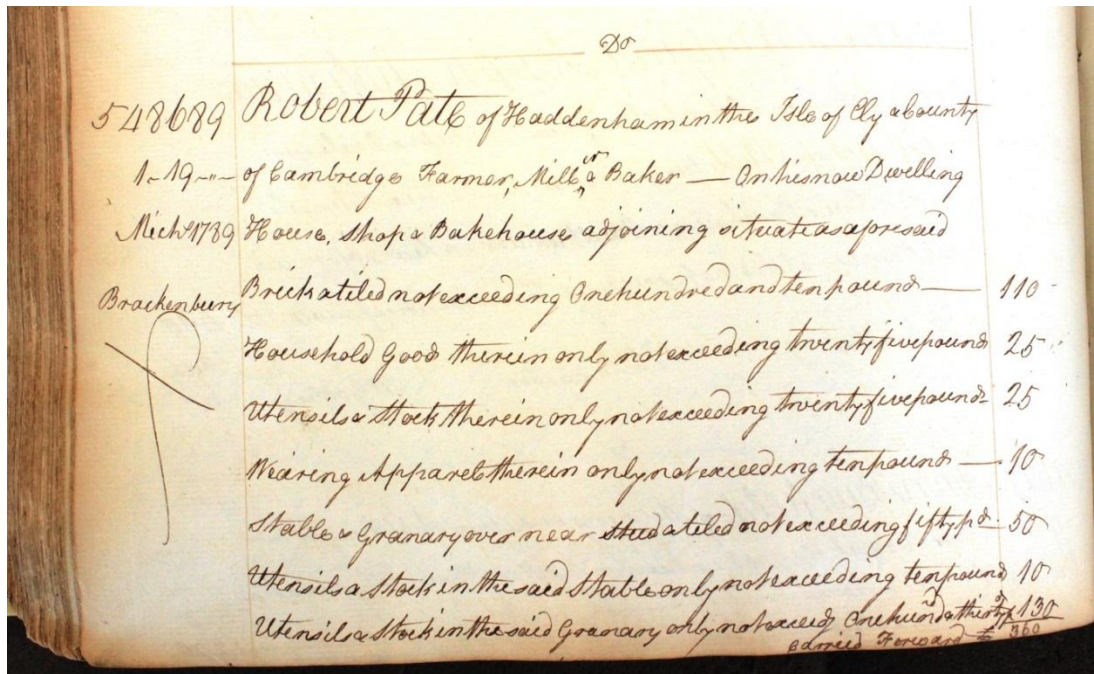


Figure 41 Robert Pate insurance 17 October 1788 p1

He was the only purchaser of insurance who paid for others' property that year, (Figs 4 & 5). One can only imagine the recriminations and arguments that followed that fateful day in June 1788, in which the finger of blame for the disaster was pointed roundly at Robert Pate. He was made to pay compensation, at least, in the form of insurance cover for the property owners who lost barns and businesses because of the fire. Francis Gooday was the neighbour of George Watts, the blacksmith, having the property south of his. It seems remarkable that the fire took Francis Gooday's property but that George Watts' was saved, or why else was he insuring it just a few days after the fire. Maybe, because George had been on site, at work, when the cry of fire had been given around 11 am, that he had been able to use the pump in his yard to drench his thatched building and thus save his business and his home.

20 Oct 1788 189

Brought forward	£ 360
Tools only in the yard not exceeding ten pounds	10
Utensils & stock viz <sup>d</sup> in the Home yard & Road therein only not exceeding fifty pounds	50
In M <sup>r</sup> Goodays yard only in said Parish not exceeding one hundred	160
In a barn only near not exceeding twenty pounds	20
In M <sup>r</sup> Buttricks Barn only near not exceeding a twenty pounds	40
In M <sup>r</sup> Robinsons Barn only near not exceeding forty pounds	40
In M <sup>r</sup> Daniel Pates Barn only near not exceeding twenty p <sup>d</sup>	20
In M <sup>r</sup> Dan <sup>e</sup> Pates Chamber near not exceeding twenty p <sup>d</sup>	20
Wind Corn Mills with the going Gears belonging near not exceeding one hundred and twenty pounds	120
Utensils & stock therein only not exceeding thirty pounds	30
13 three from Loss on such Hay or corn as shall be destroyed or damaged by its natural Heating	£ 900
	out
	13/6

H. Boulton                      W. Goofrey                      T. Pigeon

Figure 5 Robert Pate insurance 17 October 1788 p2

Using the evidence of insurance take up within the month of the fire, presumably by property owners whose buildings had been spared it is possible to track the random destructive path of the fire as it made its way down the High Street. (Fig. 6)

Mr Richard Robinson, a cordwainer, insured his brick and tiled house, as did Lydia Cory, who owned the Maltings (62 High Street), and Richard Green, the blacksmith at 2 Aldreth Road, just close by. Daniel Pate, whose house was thatched, paid for the insurance on his house which was worth £200, whilst his brother had covered his barn. The Rose and Crown, (18 High Street) which lay just north of Robert Pate's bakery, is described as "brick and tiled" and was insured on the 20th Jun 1788, so presumably survived the fire, unlike the Bell Inn, which was more or less opposite George Watts and Francis Goodays' places, as it only reappears for insurance purposes in January 1790, as a thatched building worth just £100.



£100 worth of property. His fire plaque can still be seen attached to the front of the building. (Fig. 7)



Figure 7 John Burgess insurance plaque 24 January 1789

The Great Fire of Haddenham, (Fig. 8) which started at Robert Pate's bakery, on 11th June 1788 was a disaster for many of inhabitants of the High Street. The property owners who had lost valuable grain in barns and property that fronted the High Street found some compensation in the fact that Robert Pate took on the responsibility for insuring their properties until he died in April 1791, just three years later at the age of 41. Robert's brother continued paying the compensation even after Robert had died. Two men lost their lives in the flames and confusion of the fire, one of whom was never identified. His entry in the burial register for 12th June 1788 was, "a stranger killed by the falling of a wall upon him at a dreadful fire, pauper". Nothing is recorded about what happened to the twenty or so poorer households, whose wattle and daub single-roomed hovels had disappeared without trace. Maybe they were able to rebuild their lives with some of the £20 that the Society of Quakers had raised for the purpose. It would be good to know that that £20 was increased, through public subscription, and those affected were able to rebuild their lives. The villagers would have been relieved to have been spared themselves, and hopefully therefore able to help their distressed neighbours.

yesterday, a most terrible fire broke out at Haddenham, near Ely. It began at a baker's near the Rose and Crown inn, and the wind being high, and every thing so very dry, all the houses, barns, &c. in the direction which the wind blew the flames were destroyed in a few hours, from the place where it began to the extremity of the town: Above forty houses were destroyed; and so rapid were the flames, that several of the sufferers had not time to save even their money or plate; the chief of what was saved was their bedding. It began about twelve o'clock. Engines were sent from Ely but we do not hear of there being of any use upon this occasion.

Figure 8 Report of the Haddenham Fire in Stamford Mercury 13 June 1788

### Note on 1783 Volcanic eruption

<sup>1</sup> Laki, as it became known, erupted violently for eight months between June 1783 and February 1784 from the Laki fissure and adjoining volcano, Grímsvötn. The impact was devastating in Iceland and continued to affect the world's weather for several years afterwards. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laki>