

## Their Clothing Caught Fire 1824-1835

This compilation of 'mini stories' was inspired by a list of coroner's cases as found in the North Devon Journal compiled by Lindsey Withers.

(<https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/DEV/CourtRecords/InquestsNDJ1824>

accessed January 2023. The dates given are those of the newspaper reports).

Between 1824-1835 about 5 inquests per year were reported in North Devon where death was due to clothing catching fire. Almost 90% were children aged 6 or younger. Inevitably some of the reading describes or implies very unpleasant deaths.

### IN MEMORY OF LIVES CUT SHORT

<i>William Lewis 3y</i>	<i>Susan Simmonds 4y</i>
<i>Augusta Connett</i>	<i>Mary Clarke 4y</i>
<i>John Cornish 3y</i>	<i>Ann Acland 3y</i>
<i>Elizabeth Dadds</i>	<i>Elizabeth Lord 5y</i>
<i>Sarah Cosway 2y</i>	<i>James Blake</i>
<i>Jane Rowland infant</i>	<i>Elizabeth Thornne 6y</i>
<i>John Furze 2 1/2y</i>	<i>Ann Pickard 4y</i>
<i>Frances Marsh 5y</i>	<i>Mary Trent 3y</i>
<i>Mary Williams 8y</i>	<i>William Bale 2y</i>
<i>Georgiana Irwin 6y</i>	<i>Frances Holland 3 1/2y</i>
<i>Harriett Bond</i>	

NORTH DEVON 1824 -1835

A few names are mentioned here to represent all those forgotten victims of fire.

Two reasons why these appear on the 'Forgotten Women' website. Before civil registration, many of the young victims may or may not have featured in a census, and perhaps the only record of their short lives is the inquest, easily missed by family historians and at risk of being 'forgotten'. Secondly reports rarely name the mother, even when the father is named, typifying one of the

reasons women are more difficult to trace than their male counterparts and may easily become 'forgotten'. Many of the mothers here will have been very distressed by the loss of their child compounded by the responsibility for not preventing their accidental death. We do not even know their names.

This is a typical scenario:

31 Dec 1829 "ELIZABETH ANN ACKLAND, aged 4 years, daughter of ABRAHAM ACKLAND, labourer. On Thursday, the 17th, the mother of the deceased went into the garden adjoining the dwelling-house leaving the deceased and two other children by the fire, the eldest of whom was six years old; she had not been absent above a minute or two before the eldest child came running out screeching, and told her that the deceased was on fire. She instantly ran into the house and wrapped an apron round her, and extinguished the fire: a surgeon was also sent for, who administered to her necessities, but the deceased died on the following day. Verdict, Accidental Death."

Thinking about the 50 cases gives an insight into daily life at that time. The fire in the hearth functioned not only to provide heat for the house but also for cooking.

### **1. The fire functioned as a stove**

On 2nd April 1835 we read of Mary Parker, 9 year old daughter of a labouring man, who was "hanging a kettle on the fire" when her clothes caught fire.

13 March 1834 "a child, belonging to MR TURNER, aged 6 years" "her clothes catching on fire in taking a tea kettle of boiling water off the fire."

22 November 1827 JOANNA MORRIS, a charwoman when taking a "vessel with turpentine from the fire, at the house of Mr Lee, druggist," spilled a small portion, which falling on the fire, the whole became ignited, and communicating to the woman's clothes"

18 December 1834 Inquest “in the parish of Goodleigh, on the body of a child, called JOHN, the son of WILLIAM LOCK, aged 6 years, who in the absence of his mother, who was gone to Barnstaple, accidentally caught his pinafore on fire, whilst putting over the tea kettle”

There is often more detail for teenagers and adults.

30 April 1835 “GRACE STOWELL, nineteen years of age, in preparing a solution of beeswax and turpentine, to polish her furniture, unfortunately overturned the vessel which contained it into the fire, and the flame occasioned thereby communicating to her apparel, set it on a blaze, in which state she ran into the yard” “This unfortunate girl was highly esteemed for her modesty and piety, and was shortly to have been married to a young man who is mate on board a trading vessel, which arrived in this port from a voyage a day or two before the occurrence of the accident.” She was buried at Marwood Parish, the coffin “was borne by eight sailors, dressed in blue jackets with white trousers and gloves, and followed by a train of several hundred sympathizing individuals.”

## **2. Candles were a hazardous source of light.**

14 March 1833 we read of “a girl 7 years of age, named BURNETT, who, in the absence of the mother, from her residence” ... “caught her clothes on fire with a lighted candle”

11 December 1834 “a child, twenty months old, son of MR JONES, cabinet maker, in Boutport Street; which in the temporary absence of the servant,” ... “who had left the child sitting in his arm chair, had drawn the candle off the table on himself, and set his clothes on fire”

## **3. Children did household chores, helped set and maintain the fire**

16 February 1827. On Saturday, two little girls, daughters Mr. R. Baker, carpenter, of Lyme, got up before their mother to light the fire, when the youngest about 7 years old, by some means set fire to her clothes

24 May 1832 SUSAN BROWN, aged 7 years, whose clothes caught fire whilst she was putting on some wood.

#### **4. There were many reasons to leave the house or room for a short while**

17 December 1835 THOMAS PRICE, aged three years, whose mother had gone into the garden to hang out some clothes.

12 November 1829 an infant named YHEO “met its death by going from its bed to the fire, in the absence of its mother, who had gone to fetch water for breakfast from the conduit.”

3 April 1828 “ANN LOCK, aged four years, whose cloaths caught fire while playing with her brother, about two years old; the mother had left the kitchen but a short time before, and on her return, observed the poor girl (through the window) in flames;”

21 May 1835 “MARY ANN SNOW, aged three years, who had been left by her mother in bed the preceding morning, at seven o'clock, whilst she went out but for a few minutes, and during her absence the child quitted the chamber, went down stairs, and got to the fire, which catching her night dress, set it on fire”

4 December 1834 “On the morning of Wednesday last in the absence of the mother, who had gone with her husband's dinner, a little boy, between six and seven years of age, son of JAMES WEBBER, jun., a journeyman mason, residing in a courtlage in Bartholomew Yard, caught his clothes on fire by coming in contact with the grate

17 September 1835 “a little boy, scarcely two years of age, son of a labourer named BROOKS, who had come to his death under the following melancholy circumstances; his mother had gone out on an errand to a neighbour's house, and had left the child alone; on her return, after about two minutes absence, she was shocked to find her infant son enveloped in flames; having approached too near the fire”

On 31 January 1827 we can read of "GRACE MARSHALL, an infant aged 3 years, who was on Sunday left with a younger child by the fire-side by their mother, while she went about a quarter of a mile to fetch milk."

"The Coroner noticed in strong terms the extreme carelessness of the mother, in leaving children of such tender years alone in the house." In every case though the verdict was "Accidental Death".

Some suggest more sympathy for the mother:

WILLIAM HAMMETT, aged five years. "The mother was not absent from her house ten minutes, during which time the melancholy accident occurred."

## **5. Much time was spent close to the fire**

No doubt people sat close to the fire for warmth, and in many cottages there was a lack of space.

19 February 1835 "MARY STONEMAN, 16 years of age, in the service of Miss Paget, of Derby in this town, whilst sitting before the fire, occupied in dressing a little child, which she was nursing for an afflicted neighbour, and during the absence of her mistress, who was from home on a visit; her clothes caught fire"

9 February 1827 "Inquests held by Mr Partridge" "on ELIZABETH PARKER, wife of a dairyman, whose clothes caught fire unperceived while she was plucking poultry by the fire-side"

## **6. The style of clothing and type of material may well have contributed**

26 November 1835 "Another of these accidents, by which human life is so frequently sacrificed, and which in many cases are mainly imputable to the thoughtlessness or negligence of their natural protectors, occurred on Saturday morning last, to a little boy, two years and eight months old, son of a sawyer, called GEORGE PARKMAN; the father being gone to his labour, and the

mother still in bed, having just before been confined, the child went down stairs, and seating himself before the fire, in his loose night dress, a spark flew out and set him on a blaze”

## **7. Mothers had to work**

1 October 1835

“a little boy, two years and half old, son of a widow woman, called MARY ROWLER, who was engaged out at a day's work, leaving the deceased in the care of a sister about eight years old, in the temporary absence of whom the child caught its clothes on fire”

Sometimes it was not just a life that was lost:

17 December 1824 The wife of a labouring man, of the name of TALLIN, went out to a field to winnow some barley, leaving three children, the eldest of whom being about seven years old in the house, where she locked them in till her return, leaving no fire in for fear of accident. During her absence, the eldest child lit a match, in doing which she set her cloaths on fire, and in her alarm ran into a back house, where was a quantity of straw, to which the fire communicating, the whole was soon in a blaze, and the house, with an adjoining cottage, was quickly reduced to a heap of ruins. The Beds and Furniture, with the whole of the little property of this poor industrious family, was destroyed, and they are hereby left destitute of every thing save the cloaths they had on;” The eldest child died.

“Whilst the narration awakens the most sympathetic feelings, it presents an inviting occasion for the exercise of public philanthropy and benevolence. An Inquest was held over the remains of the child on the following day, when from the evidence collected by the Coroner of the industrious habits, the honest deportment, and the affectionate disposition towards their children, of these poor sufferers, he was humanely induced to furnish them with sundry articles of clothing, an example which we sincerely hope will be followed by many of the children of affluence.”

## **8. There was some play and leisure too**

24 May 1832 “a child five years old, daughter of MR AVERY, of the Bampfylde Arms, in that place, who whilst at play with other children caught her clothes on fire”.

11 October 1832 LUCY VINNICOMBE, aged 14 years. “On the Sunday previous, deceased had been left by her parents to take care of her brothers and sisters (five in number,) during their absence from home. In the evening she sat down by the fire with a book, intending to read, when she fell asleep, and was awoken by a flame of fire emitted from her clothes. She called for assistance, and the fire was soon put out. Medical aid was also procured”, but sadly she died on the following morning.

## **9. Lack of fire extinguishers, blankets or running water.**

Of course no mention is made of the lack of running water easily available to douse the flames or reduce the heat of the burns, though this undoubtedly is a factor contributing. In their panic the children will not have made use of the available resources. One example:

11 September 1834 “ELIZABETH PHILIPS, seven years old, whose clothes, as she sat by the fire on Saturday last, accidentally caught the flame”... “On the occurrence of the accident, in the temporary absence of her mother, the child ran out into the street, and passed over a stream of water, but her extreme agitation prevented her from availing herself of its assistance to extinguish the destructive element.

Lessons could or perhaps should have been learned.

HINT FOR THE NURSERY—The lamentable accidents occurring to Children in the winter season by their clothes taking fire, may be effectually prevented by the use of wire-guards, so as to preclude the possibility of children coming in contact with the grate or stove ; but when such unfortunate casualties happen, immediate recourse should be had to an efficient remedy, which ought to be always at hand

Part of an advert for a remedy for burns Morning Advertiser - Saturday 12  
December 1829

*Helen Shields January 2023*