

Destruction of Duxbury Hall by Fire

As reported in the Preston Guardian March 5 1859.

“Travellers by railway from Preston to Manchester will have noticed, when just beyond Chorley, a little to the west, Duxbury Hall, the stately mansion of the Standishes, situated in the midst of an extensive and undulating park, rising from the banks of the Yarrow. Of this mansion, the greater portion is now only a charred and blackened ruin. With the exception of the south wing, and a portion of the eastern front, nothing now remains but the bare walls. The accident to which is owing the destruction of one of the finest mansions in North Lancashire occurred on Wednesday morning last.

About two o'clock in the morning of that day the proprietor of the mansion, William Standish Carr Standish, Esq., was awakened by the barking of a little favourite dog, which was in his bedroom, where it usually slept. He immediately afterwards heard a noise as of glass and timber cracking and breaking. His first impression was that thieves were in the house, and he got up with a view of obtaining his pistols. He soon, however, had a sensation of suffocation from smoke and heat, and thereupon naturally concluded that some part of the house was on fire. He immediately went to the bedroom of his mother and sister, and alarmed them, and afterwards he roused the whole household. This was only the work of a few moments, and he returned to his own bedroom to dress, but it was enveloped in flames, and in a very few minutes the floor gave way, precipitating the bed, the furniture, and every article in the room, into the blazing abyss below. Had Mr. Standish been alarmed only a few moments later, there is scarcely any doubt but his life would have been sacrificed, and probably the lives of others of the inmates. The favourite creature to whose timely warning the safety of so many lives and of much valuable property is owing was engulfed in the flames when the floor of the bedroom fell in. Neither Mr., Mrs., nor Miss Standish were able, when the alarm was given, so rapidly did the flames progress, to secure more than a few articles to throw over them; almost all their clothing was destroyed in the conflagration.

Immediately on the household being roused they endeavoured to extinguish the flames. The fire had commenced in the butler's pantry, immediately under Mr. Standish's bedroom, and by this time the flames had communicated to a great portion of the north wing. On the north side of the house is a plug,

communicating with a reservoir of water in an elevated portion of the park, and a length of hose being attached to the plug, the servants began to direct the water upon the flames. It was some time before it could be got to work efficiently, and at the best the supply was utterly inadequate to stop the progress of the devouring element. A mounted messenger was therefore sent to Chorley, to ask for the assistance of the fire brigade there. As Chorley has no engine, the elevated position of the water supply, and the consequent pressure, requiring merely hose, the required assistance could not be got there. Mr. Beetham, the active superintendent of the Chorley division of police, with a body of constables and a number of the Chorley firemen, however at once set off to the scene of the conflagration. It was then about three o'clock. On approaching Duxbury, the scene was a terrific one. Flames were issuing from every window on the north wing, and from the roof, and they could be seen for many miles around; indeed, their lurid glare illuminated the whole district. Being unable to meet with a fire engine in Chorley, the messenger went forward to the Birkacre print-works, for the engine of Messrs. McNaughton and Thom, which was promptly sent, and Mr. Thom himself accompanied the engine to Duxbury. This engine was stationed near the reservoir, in the grounds, and between three and four o'clock it was got into play. Until it was brought to bear on the flames, they continued to get a head. Fortunately, the wind was light, and the little that blew was from the south, so that the fire was kept from the south wing of the building. The progress of the flames was now somewhat checked, but they had still a fearful and threatening aspect, and the supply of water being still unequal to the emergency, a messenger was dispatched to the print works of Messrs. Ridgway and Co., of Horwich Vale, for their engine, which arrived about six o'clock. It was affixed to the plug at the north front of the hall, and from this time the flames ceased to progress, and were gradually though slowly subdued.

Until the arrival of the engines the efforts of the servants and others to check the ravages of the fire were comparatively unavailing. It was soon seen to be impossible to recover anything from the rooms on the north side of the building, and as the total destruction of the whole edifice appeared probable, the efforts of the firemen, constables, and servants were directed to the saving of the contents of the suite of rooms on the south side of the mansion, where fortunately was the more valuable property. The whole of the library, comprising the accumulations of several generations of the family, and consisting of many thousand volumes, and a very valuable one, although the

last possessor but one of the estate bequeathed his choicest biblical possessions as well as his pictures to the late King of the French, was saved, as were the whole of the family portraits, and the principal portion of the other paintings, including all those sent by the late King of the French, in return for those bequeathed to his majesty by Mr. Frank Hall Standish. The largest portion of the family plate was also rescued from destruction. The books, paintings, and the furniture of the apartments to the south of the house, including the drawing room and other principal apartments, were taken out and spread upon the lawn, the operations in this respect being directed by Mr. Rawes, the agent of the estates of the Standish family, and Mr. Superintendent Beetham, of the County Constabulary. They were subsequently removed to outhouses with comparatively little injury.

About four o'clock the roof of the whole building, with the exception of that portion over the southern apartment, fell in with a crash, as did also the fine dome over the noble staircase, in the principal entrance to the Hall. By ten o'clock the fire may be said to have been virtually subdued, although every now and then, until late in the afternoon, some of the smouldering ruins burst into flames, but they were soon suppressed by the prompt direction of a stream of water upon them. About three o'clock the danger of the flames again getting a-head was so far passed that the engine from the Horwich Vale Works left Duxbury; that from Birkacre, however, continued on the ground, and occasionally played on the ruins. During the night relays of watchers remained about the Hall in case any of the ruins should burst into flames, and also to guard the property.

When we saw the ruins on Wednesday afternoon, the spectacle was a most melancholy one. With the exceptions we have named the building was entirely gutted. Not a particle of the floors or ceilings was left, and the outer walls in many places bore traces in the cracks through the solid masonry of the fearful heat to which they had been subjected. Every apartment was strewn with debris, and around the hall were lying charred beams, and embers of the valuable contents of this so recently magnificent and elegant mansion. The gardens so recently bearing the evidence of tasteful superintendence, showed the effects of the confusion which had so recently reigned there, having been trampled upon so as to present in many places the appearance of a brick field than the pleasure grounds of a family mansion. As might be expected large numbers of persons from Chorley and the surrounding villages visited the ruins in the course of the day, and general were the expressions of sympathy for the

respected family under the loss which they had sustained in the destruction of their ancestral home. Mr. Standish, and his mother and sister, remained near the scene of destruction until afternoon. They all contributed, by their self-possession, valuable assistance in the various operations, and they bore their heavy, and to some extent, irreparable loss, with great calmness and fortitude.

The precise cause of the fire has not been ascertained, nor from the total destruction of that part of the building in which it originated, can it now possibly be traced. It is known, however, to have begun in the butler's pantry, where a rather large fire had been left burning when the family retired to rest, before which the butler had left some clothes to dry. Various rumours as to the cause of the conflagration are in circulation, the authenticity of which is, however, questionable. The butler's pantry is a small apartment, with a boarded floor, and the butler states that the fire he left in the grate was not a very large one, and that a ring fender, about two and a half feet in height, was kept constantly before the fire. There were several tables and cupboards in the pantry, the cupboards extending from the floor to the ceiling, affixed against the wall. The chimney-piece in the pantry was also wood-work. The rapidity with which the flames spread their destructive course may be imagined when we state that in little above two hours after the time the fire was first discovered it had made sad havoc with the farther extremity of the building, as one of the clocks in that part of the house, which has since been recovered, stopped at twenty minutes past two o'clock.

The assistance rendered in the carrying of water, the working of the engines, and the removal of furniture by all classes of persons, more especially by the servants and the working people, was most cordial and valuable. We regret to state, however, that one person so employed met with an accident; and many had rather narrow escapes. On the morning of Wednesday, the police got sledge hammers and broke the iron safe door, where the greater portion of the plate was kept, the key being in a cupboard in the butler's pantry, which was destroyed. After hammering a considerable time, they succeeded in breaking the bottom part of the door sufficiently to admit a man. P. C. Lowe got through and pushed the plate through the hole, the fire above continually falling whilst he was inside the safe, and he had not been out more than a second before the roof fell in. About four o'clock in the afternoon Mr. Yates, ironmonger, was engaged in the ruins searching for valuables, when one of the inner walls from above fell upon him. He was cut on his head, and bruised on

his body, but not seriously. He was conveyed home, and we are glad to learn he is now so much better that he only suffers from a little stiffness in his limbs.

The amount of damage sustained is, of course, very large; in the aggregate probably not less than £15,000, for notwithstanding the large amount of valuable property saved, a very great quantity of household furniture, including, among other choice articles, an elegant dessert service, the present of King Louis Philippe, are destroyed. The house was insured to the amount of £8,000 in the Phoenix office; we believe there was no insurance on the furniture or other contents of the house.....

Since the unfortunate casualty, Mr., Mrs., and Miss Standish have been staying at the Yarrow Bridge Inn. Workmen have been busily engaged since Wednesday morning, in searching the debris for jewellery and other articles of value, some few of which have been recovered, but, of course, much injured.”

Footnote Mr. Standish was grateful for the help he received on that dreadful night. To Sgt, Bibby he gave “a handsome silver tankard” and to P.C. Lowe “a handsome patent silver watch”. Both were engraved “For services rendered at the fire at Duxbury Park March 3 1859. (sic)” Superintendent Beetham was presented with “a splendid silver inkstand.” It was inscribed “for his indefatigable and perilous services at the fire at Duxbury Park, 2nd March 1859.

The next issue of the Preston Guardian, on 12 March, reported that furniture that had been saved was being stored in the stables and outhouses, although some had been taken to the Yarrow Bridge Inn to be used by the Standish family. Paintings were taken to Gillibrand Hall under the care of Mrs. Fazackerley.

By July, the Preston Guardian was able to report that Sir Charles Barry, architect of the new Palace of Westminster, had been entrusted with the task of restoring Duxbury Hall and two of his assistants were at Duxbury, making arrangements “for the speedy completion of this work.” The rebuilding of Duxbury Hall cost £20,000.