

THE DELUGE. Scenes Amusing and Otherwise

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The worst thunderstorm that has visited Aldershot for some years broke over the town on Tuesday evening, and lasted for two hours. It was marked by vivid flashes of lightning, tremendous crashes of thunder, torrential rain, flooding and fire. It was not one long continued storm but a succession of three storms with very brief lapses between each, and for most of the time, the storm centre was directly over Aldershot. A few drops of rain fell about five o'clock in the afternoon. They were just a warning that impelled people to look upward and then hasten home, those of them who had no special reason to be out. Meanwhile the dark clouds massed overhead, gloomy forbidding masses that deepened in intensity rapidly and before six o'clock, rain commenced to fall heavily and soon afterwards a vivid flash of lightning heralded the arrival of a storm of almost unprecedented violence.

The lightning flashed with vivid intensity and with appalling magnificence, the thunder crashed overhead, with at times scarcely a break between flash and crash and rain and hail descended with tropical violence, clearing the streets so effectively that none could be seen except those taking shelter in doorways. For half an hour the storm continued, and then it died away only to break out in a quarter of an hour with redoubled violence; then it almost died away and the third storm broke. In the two hours that the storm lasted 1.35 inches of rain fell representing many thousands of tons of water over the area.

The second storm was the most severe. The rain was so heavy as to convert the street into rivers, the surface water drains could not carry the water off fast enough and the water flowed along the streets, many inches deep. The Fire Brigade were called out twice. The first alarm was caused by lightning striking the wires and the second was to a house at Heath End being struck and set on fire.

The flooding was pretty general in all parts of the town, and many residents in the residential and trading parts were able to appreciate the feelings of a certain King of England when he found that even his royal command was not sufficient to sweep back the waters of the ocean. Brooms were freely used to keep the water from entering private property, and in many cases it was only by almost superhuman efforts that the water was kept out. It is one thing to sweep away the dust but to tackle water is quite another proposition.

Distinctly amusing scenes were enacted at the junction of the camp and town. The water tore down Middle Hill across Wellington Hill into Court Road almost to the Royal Hotel, and then finding insufficient outlet, returned and formed a miniature river down Wellington Avenue in places nearly two feet deep. The parade grounds adjoining were converted into lakes on which soldiers disported in tubs. One woman found herself stranded. The water came along so quickly that before she realised her position, it had surrounded her, and she was left on a small bit of higher ground quite surrounded by water. Planks were laid over the water to enable pedestrians to cross and more than one "Tommy" took an impromptu bath. Many girls were carried across by soldiers. One old lady who desired to cross watched the fun for some time and then she observed, "Ah, they don't mind taking then dainty things across, but that they won't take me." And it is sad to relate that no "Tommy" was gallant enough to grant her desires.

Scenes in the Camp

During the storm and afterwards, some extraordinary scenes were witnessed in the Camp. Soon after the first storm broke a regular torrent of water began to rush from the high land at the back of the Badajos Barracks, and on between the two blocks of barrack-rooms at Salamanca Barracks, and then on across from the road leading from the top of Hospital Hill into Talavera Barracks. At the point where it crossed the road it was met by a heavy rush of water from Hospital Hill and during the heaviest fall of the second fall, a regular whirlpool was created there and at times there was quite four feet of water. But the pressure of water from Salamanca Barracks, the ground floor of which were flooded and the "Tommies" had the time of their lives, paddling in places kee-deep, catching a few odds and ends which had been swept from the rooms by the rushing torrents.

But the place to suffer most was the Officers' Mess at the Talavera Barracks, where the torrent was met by another heavy stream which was tearing down Middle Hill. In an incredibly short space of time the whole block of buildings was surrounded by a whirling torrent, and pots, pans and boxes were swept out of the kitchens and servants' quarters at the base of the building, and went sailing merrily around the parade ground at the back. The men who went in to save the articles were in places waist-deep in the water and it was not until several hours after the storm that the flood subsided. The force of the water, too, was so great that several tons of gravel and sand were collected by the rush of water from the parade grounds and dumped at Talavera Barracks or carried on into the Wellington Avenue and the High Street.

Canal Overflows

In the centre of the Camp and at North Camp, the effects of the flood were not felt quite so much, as the water got away much quicker, but the most curious thing of the whole evening happened in the section of the canal between Fleet and the Wharf Bridge on the Farnborough Road. During the storm, the water rushed down from the high lands on the side of the Long Valley into the Canal with such force that it dislodged two huge banks of mud and rushes from the Flash near the second drawbridge and swept it bodily down the Canal towards Farnborough. On it swept, like a huge tidal wave of mud and water and when it reached Hill's boathouse, it lifted several boats from their moorings and carried them on until it reached Wharf Bridge. Here the mass jammed and formed a huge dam. The water then began to surge over the banks on the Farnborough side of the Canal, and a vast body of water swept over Laffan's Plain and through the School of Farriery which was quickly flooded out. Several members of the "School" rushed out and with great difficulty managed to build a dam of earth to turn the water off their allotments, where the raging water was doing considerable damage, and they eventually succeeded, but not before considerable damage was done.

After the rain, where the mud had formed the dam several soldiers had rare sport at spiking some big fish which had been left stranded by the flood. One man spiked a fine "jack" which was nearly three feet long, and several other big fish were caught in this way. It was a long time before the water got below the level of the bank, and it will be several days before the mud bank is cleared away.

Canal Banks Burst

The high pressure of water caused in the section of the Canal between Fleet and Wharf Bridge, through the dam formed by the bank of mud at Wharf bridge, was too much for a high bank which skirts Laffan's Plain with the result that in the evening some twenty yards of the embankment behind Bridge hill suddenly gave way. The water poured over the Plain in a mighty torrent, spreading out as it went into a huge moving lake. All night long and well on to mid-day on Wednesday, the water poured out in such a volume that nothing could be done to stop it. An idea of what amount of water passed away can be got from the fact that from Basingstoke to Gas Works Bridge at Ash Vale, there is no lock or weir of any kind so that through the breach nearly 21 miles of Canal emptied itself. It was extremely fortunate that the break came where it did, where there was plenty of room for the great mass of water to spread, and where there were no dwelling places or other property in the way of the torrent of water. As a matter of fact, although Cove lies in the direction the water went in finding the lowest level, the people of Cove generally knew nothing of the break, and looked upon the sudden flooding of ditches and water cuttings as merely the result of the deluge of the night before. Even as we go to press the water is still running through the breach in considerable volume but a large party of Royal Engineers are hard at work getting two dams of sand bags and wood across the Canal each side of the break, and also repairing the embankment, so as effectively stop up the breach.

Struck by Lightning

During the height of the storm lightning struck the house of Mr J Wells, "Woodlands", Heath End occasioning considerable alarm to the family and causing some damage. The lightning struck the from gable, and after smashing several ridge tiles and slates, set fire to the rafters. It then appears to have passed down the wall and entered a bedroom on the top floor, passed along a brass curtain rod above the window, and struck a large mirror on a dressing table, smashing it to atoms. It then appeared to have struck upwards to the electric light pendant, the lamp being smashed and the wires fused, and finally ran down the wires through the house to earth. There is no doubt that this saved the house from great disaster. The family were thrown violently together by the shock, and were greatly alarmed, but escaped injury.

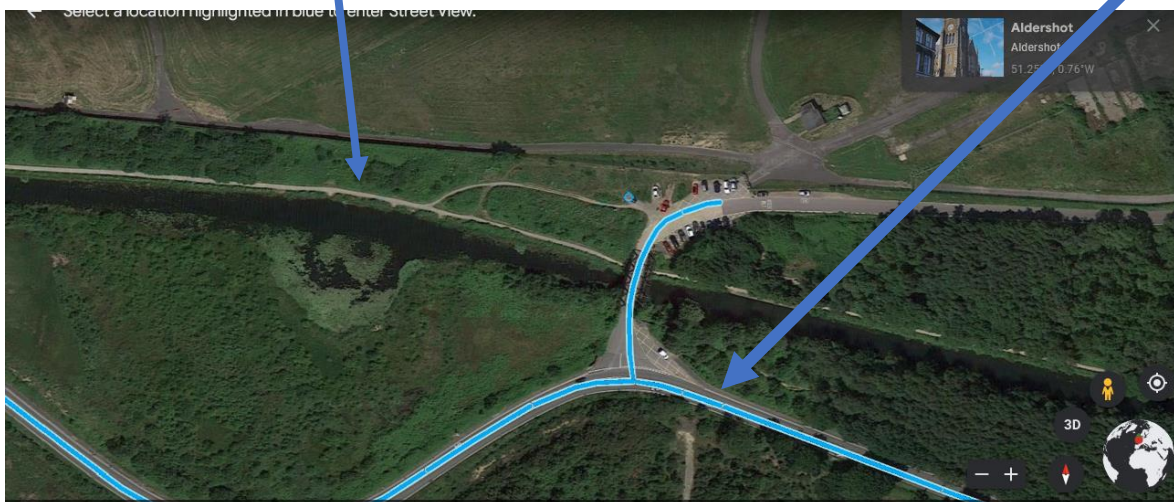
Meantime Mr Wells had proceeded to the top of the house and at once detected the fire which had broken out in the roof, and gave the alarm. Mrs Charman, of Heath End Nursery, promptly telephoned to the Aldershot Fire Brigade, and Mr Charman ran to the scene of the fire with a chemical extinguisher. Other neighbours were quickly on the spot, and with the aid of buckets of water kept the fire in check till the arrival of the Brigade who quickly extinguished it.

An elm tree in Highfield Avenue was also struck by lightning in the course of the storm and split for about three parts of its length.

Modern day Google Earth!

Basingstoke Canal breach, where 21 miles of canal emptied here

Fleet Road



Laffans Road, off Fleet Road with Farnborough Airport to the north, Fleet to the west and Aldershot to the east

