

THE LUNDY FIRES OF 1933

By

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The average rainfall throughout southern England during the 1930s was well below average and this, coupled with warm dry summers, heightened the risk of fire in the tinder-dry vegetation. Once established, the dry continental southeasterly breeze served only to fan such outbreaks.

During the late summer of 1933 no fewer than three serious fires broke out caused, it was believed, either by picnickers or the discarding of a cigarette butt by one of the many hundreds of visitors to the island.

The first fire started in the western sidings somewhere near Long Roost around August 23rd and spread rapidly up the sidings to the plateau where it took firm hold in the dense growth of heather which then overlaid the dry peaty soil. In no time at all the fire had crossed the plateau and was burning vigorously in north Gannets Combe. It then advanced slowly, against the wind, towards Threequarter Wall. G.A. Turner, writing from the island at the beginning of September, described the scene: "From Tibbets Hill last night. Looks like Brighton Pier on a gala evening. A long line of red five-foot flames roaring along south westwards under a big full moon. Wickstead and I spent a great part of the night beating out outlying fires and sparks — am exhausted and generally useless. Hartland (coastguards) has been asking about the position as the flames can be seen on the mainland". Turner then adds mistakenly, "However, I fancy the worst is over".

During the seven weeks that this North End fire raged, two other fires broke out.

The second fire started on the evening of September 4th when smoke was seen rising from near Pilots Quay. Mr Gade and a work party from the village worked all night digging trenches but failed to check the flames which spread from sea level to the plateau and onwards over the rising ground towards the Old Light. This fire fortunately did not become too serious a problem for three reasons: the wind changed direction slightly and backed to easterly; the vegetation near the Old Light was sparse and, although it flared up quickly, it soon died down; perhaps most important, there was a fall of light rain on the evening of September 5th.

Meanwhile, the keepers at North Light, struggling with the North End blaze, reported another outbreak in Gannet's Combe and a new fire which had broken out and was spreading near the Cheeses. This third outbreak was, however, the most easily dealt with as on reaching the plateau the fire died out through lack of combustible material and the flames at the original site were beaten out within hours.

The rain which fell in the evening and overnight on September 5th dampened the south end of the island and allowed all effort to be concentrated on the North End fire. It was not until October 12th 1933, however, that the North End fire was finally extinguished, after burning for 52 days.

Such a record of the 1933 fires provides a background both to the vegetational history of the area, and the archaeological finds which resulted from the clearance of ground cover. A survey has shown, for example, that the area burned totalled 67.5 acres, some 6% of the total area of Lundy, and the recolonisation of these areas has been progressing slowly ever since (Wilkins and Debham 1973). Archaeological finds to emerge following the fires include the prehistoric settlement around Gannets Combe (Gardner 1956) and a large collection of lithic artefacts (Schofield this volume), all of which are believed to be broadly contemporary.

REFERENCES

Gardner, K.S. 1956. Prehistoric Settlement — Gannets Combe, Lundy. *Annual Report of the Lundy Field Society* 10, 56-7.

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