

HEMPSTEAD is one of those pretty, inglenook-infested Essex villages beloved of merchant bankers as a retreat from the City.

Set among a cluster of similarly pretty villages, it is remarkable mainly as the birthplace, in 1706, of the legendary highwayman Dick Turpin. In summer the tourists flock to see his cottage, and the pub of which Pere Turpin was landlord, photographs of both appearing with monotonous regularity on the covers of glossy magazines.

Now the rural peace has been shattered. Hempstead today is as much a village of fear as it was three hundred years ago: In the early hours of January 11 yet another thatched cottage caught fire.

And for Hempstead's 400 souls, and for the Saffron Walden police, it was just too much of a coincidence.

Already they had had to swallow the idea that three major fires in four months had all been accidental.

The blaze that did about £7,000 damage to the village shopkeeper's cottage was certainly arson. And so, it then seemed, were the rest.

The fact that 29-year-old Harry Gilbert had only come to the village to take over the shop in October, and an anonymous phone

Ed Steen

visits

Dick

Turpin's

birthplace

where

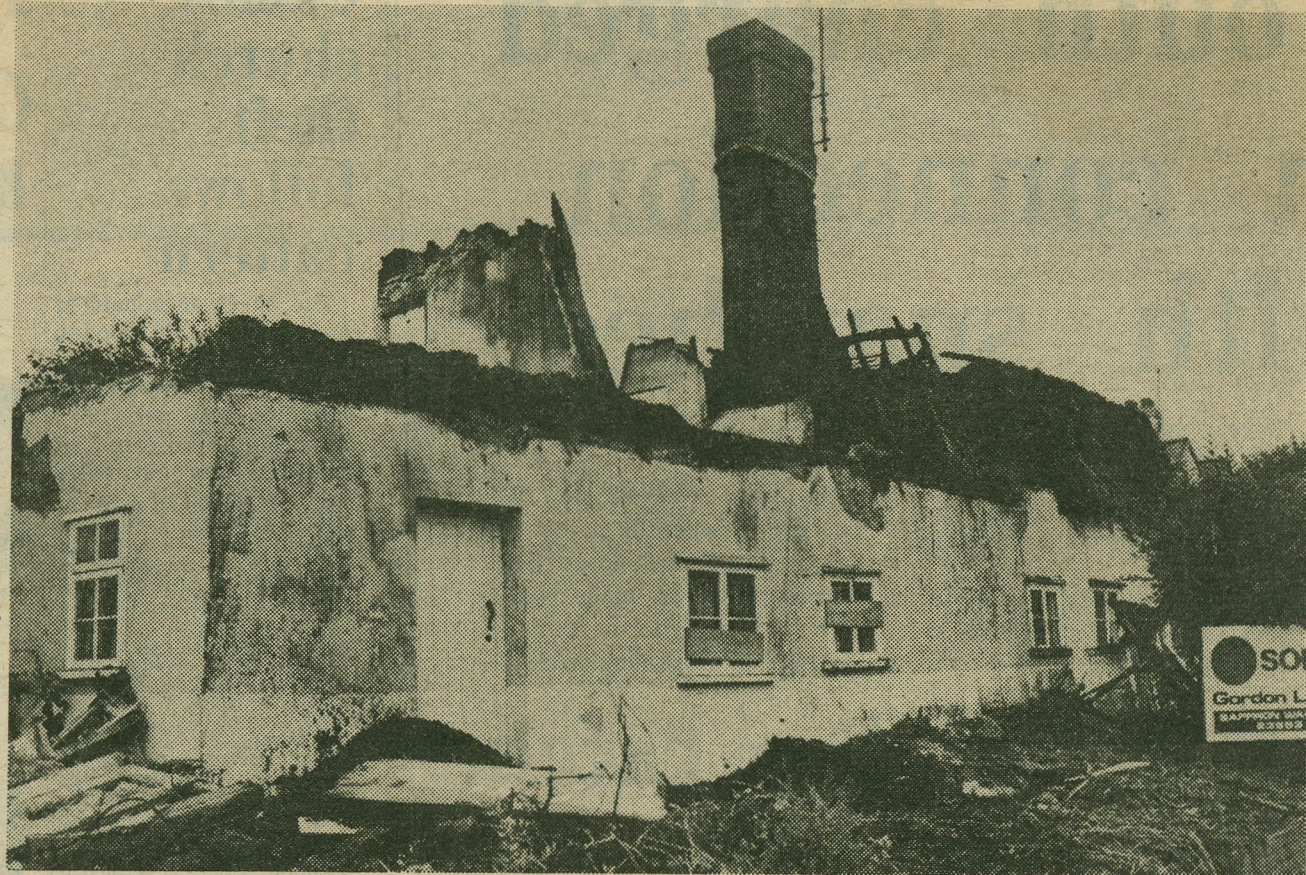
the word

of the

moment

is 'arson'

## VILLAGE



● ABOVE: The first sight to greet the visitor to Hempstead — once-

call, led to a theory that the firebrand hates newcomers.

Police are dismissing no possible leads while they try to find a pattern in these events:

● August 15: Picturesque Long Corner Cottage at western approach to village gutted; thatched; worth about £30,000; just sold by a couple in their twenties planning to move to another village.

● October 6: Isolated cottage, High Banks, at eastern extremity of Hempstead, destroyed; thatched; worth over £20,000; occupied by 79-year-old widow who had lived there for years. She was rescued from first floor by lorry driver on way to London during the early hours.

● November 3: Pig farm storehouse and workshop wrecked — about £30,000 damage; tiled roof; police ruled out arson.

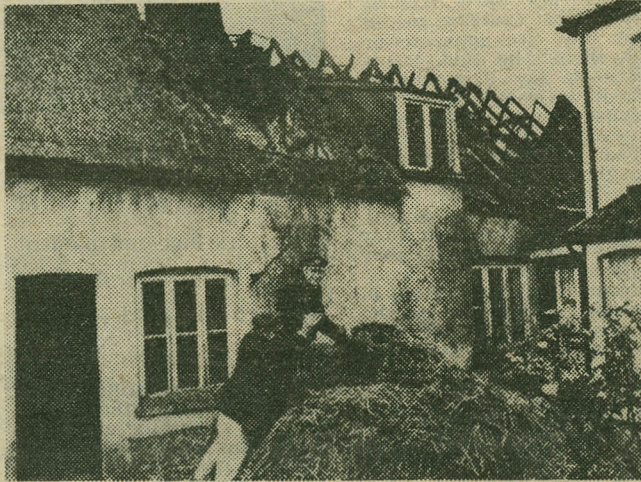
● January 11: Empty cottage behind village store badly damaged; thatched; worth about £15,000.

One common factor running through these fires was that all but one of the buildings were thatched and on the main road linking Saffron Walden and Haverhill.

The farm building was 100-odd yards down a side-road. But every one caught fire around 2am, and Det Sgt William Lambourn, who is heading the police investigation, told me all the fires were now being treated as arson.

"You would have thought in a little village like

# OF FEAR



Hempstead somebody would have suggested a name," he said with a hint of despair in his voice. "No names come up. It could be someone who regularly, like a lorry driver passes through on the way to Haverhill. We check up on anything that anybody throws us.

"But the manpower situation being what it is, we can't have patrols hanging around every night."

There was a similar spate of fires in Arkesden six months ago—all directed against a particular farmer.

The fact that that still remains unsolved can be little consolation to the frightened villagers of Hempstead.

"We wouldn't leave this

place for more than a day I can tell you," said 76-year-old Bert Baron, owner of the five-centuries-old — and thatched — Dick Turpin cottage.

Beyond hinting darkly about "one or two queer fellows that won't work", and "long haired louts," Mr Baron had to admit: "It's a mystery. We've all got the wind up."

The fire in the shop cottage was what really worried people. Before that, various causes were fancied. Victim number 2, for instance, thought mice could have nibbled through the wiring in the loft.

But the front door she locked that night was,

picturesque Long Corner Cottage, burned down in August.

● RIGHT: At risk — Dick Turpin's reputed birthplace, Hempstead, near Saffron Walden.

● LEFT: The village shopkeeper's cottage — certainly arson.

strangely, found open by the man who rescued her.

Victim number 4, Mr Gilbert, has no doubt that his cottage was deliberately set on fire. Nor does anyone else.

"It was very, very wet that night. There was so much water around that even a cigarette end thrown down by someone leaving the pub couldn't have started it."

It seems a brand must have been pushed under the eaves—all the wiring was sound, and provided light throughout the blaze.

"People are pretty worried. Two or three have said they're thinking of getting fancy burglar alarms, even a regular vigilante patrol was mentioned, but I can't see much good coming from that: there's no street lighting



in the village at all." —The shop and cottage represented a lifelong ambition and Mr Gilbert's savings from five years working as a telephone engineer in South Africa. Now his plans to "do up" the little cottage will have to be put back.

Next door at the Rose and Crown, once Pere Turpin's pub, landlord Les Henson, 45, said: "If this place was thatched I don't think I'd be living here.

"The people with thatched cottages are really worried—they're certainly upping their insurance."

A few doors up lives a woman — just arrived in Hempstead—who received an upsetting anonymous call: "If you don't watch

out your house will be cinders."

A mother of two small children, she dismisses it as a probable hoax, partly because the voice sounded like either a boy or a woman, and the call was made on a private phone.

But it has set the whole village on edge.

"People are wondering if it's someone who used to live here, with a grudge against the village," said parish clerk Mrs Margaret Grimster.

"It could even be children or teenagers.

"But you can't stay up till 2 am every night in case someone comes along to burn your house down.

"I must admit if I had thatch after this last fire I'd be worried."