

Chapter VIII

Bonfires

The Jubilee of Queen Victoria, on the 22 June, 1887, fell within the time of the footpath dispute, but nothing daunted, Hardwicke launched himself into the thick of organizing the celebrations which culminated in a series of bonfires.

In *The Book of Coronation Bonfires*¹, several explanations are given for the origin of bonfires*. 'Bain', 'baen' or 'ban' fires in Celtic and Roman times were connected with sun worship. Some people leapt through these fires and by the 7th and 8th centuries the Church attempted to suppress these practices. Fires made by the friction of rubbing pieces of wood together came to be called "need" fires.² Hardwicke had spoken to farmers in the north of England, who remembered that in time of plague the animals were driven through the smoke, hoping that this would end the plague.³ The Scandinavians, especially the Danes, had the word, 'bana' for a beacon fire. As their influence is strong in the Lake District, this is the most likely explanation. The beacon fires were a method of signalling warnings of danger, disaster or triumph, also as aids to seamen. This system was developed from the time of Henry III and an Act of Parliament, in the reign of Elizabeth I placed the seaboard beacons, under the control of Trinity House. It was for Queen Victoria's Jubilee that the first organized attempt was made to mark a day of rejoicing, by lighting beacons throughout the British Isles. In Cumberland, Hardwicke was the organizer for this occasion with Mr. Cooper of Monk Coniston and Mr. Baddeley of Windermere as helpers.

*¹*The Book of Coronation Bonfires*, compiled and edited by the Rev. Canon Rawnsley, Hon. Sec. of the National Bonfire Committee, published by Charles Thurnam & Sons, 1911 (price one shilling or one shilling and three pence - post free)

² Until 1760 it was written 'bonfire' perhaps referring to a fire of bones - a martyr fire

² Then fires were called 'nedfre' or 'nodfru' and were banned in 742AD by Pope Zachary at the Synodus Francica

³ These 'need' fires were carried from farm to farm

There had been a great bonfire on Skiddaw in 1815 to celebrate the victory of Waterloo at which Southey, Wordsworth with his wife, sister Dorothy and eldest boy were present. Southey in a letter¹ to his brother has described the occasion vividly, which took place on 21 August.

" ... The weather served for our bonfire, and never, I believe, was such an assemblage upon such a spot ... We roasted beef and boiled plum puddings there; sung "God save the King" round the most furious body of flaming tar-barrels that I ever saw, drank a huge wooden bowl of punch; fired cannon at every health with times three, and rolled large blazing balls of tow and turpentine down the steep side of the mountain. The effect was grand beyond imagination."

They all got very drunk in spite of Wordsworth knocking over the bottle of water which had been specially carried up the mountain for heating the punch.

" ... one fellow was so drunk that his companions placed him upon a horse, with his face to the tail, to bring him down, themselves being just sober enough to guide and hold him on."

Perhaps Hardwicke drew inspiration from accounts of the Waterloo celebration, being an admirer of the works of Wordsworth and Southey. Macaulay's words about the Armada mentioning the "red glare on Skiddaw" rousing, "the burghers of Carlisle", would no doubt also stir his imagination.² Since Hardwicke was a strict teetotaler, his planning of the bonfire for the Queen's Jubilee made no provision for drunken revelry. He organized a chain of bonfires in Cumberland and personally supervised building the piles on Helvellyn and Skiddaw, which were built scientifically with cross flues and chimneys so that

¹The Lake District, an Anthology compiled by Norman Nicholson, Penguin Books, 1977, pp211-2,

²The last 4 lines of the poem:
 "Till Skiddaw saw the fire that burned
 on Gaunt's embattled pile,
 And the red glare on Skiddaw roused
 the burghers of Carlisle".

they would burn properly. All the material had to be hauled up the mountains which was a very arduous task, as they included peat and paraffin. Fortunately, the evening of the 22 June 1887 was fine and clear. Over four hundred people, with Hardwicke as their leader, climbed to the top of Skiddaw for the lighting of the well constructed fire. They were rewarded by seeing, not only their own bonfire, but also as many as one hundred and forty eight other fires glowing on mountain tops, as though they called to one another. The "National Anthem" was sung and then Hardwicke was lifted up and carried shoulder high as the crowd cheered.

A year later, Hardwicke, pleased with the success of the Jubilee bonfire, decided to mark the tercentenary of the victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588. Therefore on the 19 July 1888 he organized an even greater fire on Skiddaw. William Hodgson, Robert Harrison of Derwent Folds and Daniel Gate of Brundholme were responsible for cutting and carrying over forty cart loads of peat, which would have to be dried, to the top of the mountain, together with two casks of paraffin.¹ This was no mean feat, as cutting and drying peat is a tricky business, both for men and horses. On the day when the celebration was to take place, I. Hodgson, J. Gibson, D. Pape with the Hawells of Lonscale and their men, led by Hardwicke went to build the great pile.* First they had to make sure the peat was dry. It would have been stacked in the proper manner in case of rain. Then the remains of the Jubilee fire had to be cleared. Great care was taken over the arrangement of cross flues at the corners with a central chimney, plus eight small ones, to make sure of the through draught. The pile was twenty two feet high. One of the paraffin casks was poured over it and the builders retired until 9.30p.m. when they returned and added the remnants of the Jubilee fire and saturated the whole with the second cask of paraffin. By this time about two hundred people had climbed Skiddaw, to whom Hardwicke

¹Today, the conservationists who are trying to persuade gardeners to use substitutes for peat, in order to preserve peat bogs, would have been horrified. Country people in Cumberland held rights to dig peat for fuel in certain fell peat bogs

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gave a talk about the Armada. After this, rockets were fired, before Mrs. Rawsley, with a long pole, having burning peat on the end, lit the bonfire. There were loud cheers for Queen Elizabeth and the great victory over the Spanish Armada, three hundred years ago. The crowd then sang, "Rule Britannia" and Mr. Highton read Macaulay's poem. At eleven o'clock the fire and rockets were finished and the happy but sober group returned home. Hardwicke gave another lecture on the Armada the following evening and composed a hymn for the occasion, which was sung in Crosthwaite Church on the next three Sundays.

Part of the Tercentenary Hymn composed by Hardwicke for the Spanish Armada Celebrations.

"Lord, who before has set
The bounds of every nation,
Look down upon us met
In joyous exaltation.
And teach us all we know
It was Thy gracious will
That triumphed o'er the foe
And kept us England still.
Three hundred years are past;
Again thy people wonder:
We feel the tempest blast,
We hear the cannon thunder:
Lo scattered o'er the sea
The Crescent fleet of Spain
Has left us conscience free
To serve our God again."

Hardwicke was now considered to be an expert on bonfires, which he regarded as a token of loyalty to the throne.¹ Nine years later he was one three secretaries in charge of organizing over two thousand and five hundred fires throughout the country, to mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Naturally, Skiddaw was his special concern.² The previous pattern was followed, with

¹Many bonfire sites of earlier times had been fenced off and closed to the public. Hardwicke was aware of this (Graham Murphy, p94)

²Skiddaw has been used as a bonfire site more recently - in 1935 there was a Jubilee bonfire for George V and Queen Mary, built by Mr J.W. Slec. →

improvements, due to lessons learnt. He supervised the cutting of peat and arrangement of flues for many Lake District fires. The actual night, the 22 June 1897, began by being dull and cloudy, but those who climbed Skiddaw for the occasion, were assured by the keeper of the hut on Jenkin Hill, that according to Old Moore, Skiddaw would clear and they would have a grand time.¹ This proved to be true. the fire was very successful and blazed brightly which made the firework display all the more enjoyable, as there was a cold wind blowing.

Five years later found Hardwicke busy with bonfires nationally for the coronation of King Edward VII. Some difficulty and confusion arose when the King had to have an emergency operation. Some dismantled their piles, rebuilding them later, others guarded them day and night. Eventually on the 30 June the first were lit in spite of cloudy skies and strong winds and although two barrels of paraffin and tar were blown over and rolled down Millbeck Ghyll. There was another fire in 1911, for King George V's Coronation. There were fifty five fires in Cumberland and twenty four in Westmorland. The tallest fire in the whole country was at Whitehaven at one hundred and three feet.

headmaster of Crosthwaite School and the Keswick Scouts. In 1981 the bonfire was for the wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana. The materials were delivered to the summit by helicopters and landrovers - 8 tons of wood and old tyres. Skiddaw was shrouded in heavy cloud on this occasion

¹Old Moore's Almanac

The Coronation of King George V on the 22 June 1911:

For this occasion, the Central Coronation Bonfires Committee, with the Earl of Carlisle (then Lord Morpeth) as Chairman, with seven Honorary Co-Secretaries,¹ one of them being Hardwicke (by now Canon Rawnsley),² met unofficially in the House of Commons on the 21 March and issued suggestions and guide lines for the organizing of celebratory bonfires.

Fires were to be lit at the same time, i.e. 10p.m. in England, but 10.30p.m. in Scotland because of the long light in the north. If properly made the bonfires were expected to last until midnight. Rockets at 9.55p.m. had to be fired as warnings that it was time for lighting the bonfires. The "National Anthem" had to be sung. Wherever possible the fells had to be illuminated at the same time with red, white and blue coloured fires in tins of five pounds each.

The public were warned against standing too near the fires especially at the time of ignition because of the unstable character of paraffin, which had a habit of flaring out suddenly. Safety precautions were urged, as today. Local committees could order fireworks, rockets and the coloured fires from Messrs. James Pain and Son, by Royal Warrant Pyrotechnists to His Majesty the King. If this was done by the 15 July, with a card from the Central Committee, there was a reduction of twenty five per cent, with a further fifteen per cent, if within the time limit.³

Hints for constructing bonfires were issued by the Committee. It was suggested that railway sleepers, tar, wood etc. were too costly and furze, whin bushes, thorns and faggots, although they blazed brightly, burned brightly but went out too quickly, therefore peat cut thinly and dried well was considered to be the best material. Certainly, peat burns slowly. There had to be provision for flues,

¹The others were W.R. Champion, Esq., M.P.; H.M. Cadell, Esq.; J.M. McCalmont, Esq., M.P.; T.H.W. Idris Esq.; F.W.S. McLaren, Esq., M.P.; G.H. Milward, Esq.

²Hardwicke became a Canon in 1909

³ See p.113, Hardwicke's letter.

with a central chimney, so that there would be plenty of air to make the fire burn brightly. To ensure that the fire got off to a good start, the whole had to be saturated in paraffin, petroleum or creosote, applied with a water-can sprinkler or long handled ladle. The peat had not to be placed solidly, but with plenty of air spaces and a few layers of dried larch cuttings or faggots, could be added. The fires had to be lit from the top and the bottom flues raked out with a larch pole to keep the air passages clear. The cost of two bonfires on Skiddaw was £20.¹ If the bonfire was going to be very large up to fifty feet for example, a pamphlet in verse could be obtained - "A bonfire Ballad for Boy Scouts" for 2d from the Boy Scouts' Headquarters in Scotland.

If the high place was too difficult for the building of a conventional fire, it was suggested that a flare be used. At the Diamond Jubilee there had been a successful one on Coniston Old Man, which shone like a star for more than two hours. This flare came from a "Lucal" lamp weighing about one hundred weight and costing £7 plus carriage costs. Details of how to get these lights and use them were given. Coloured lights on buildings had to be burned in iron buckets as a safety measure. The Committee also pointed out that there was no central fund available to subsidise local efforts. It was also hoped that the Boy Scouts would help in gathering materials and guarding fires, so that they were not lit before time.

There follows details of the firing of the bonfires on 22 June. The problem was due to rain falling in many places, especially Wales and the Lake District. No telegraphic messages could be sent on Coronation Day, so some fires were lit on the Thursday, if dry while others waited for better weather on the Friday. The Lake District fires were not lit until the Friday, when it was very calm and beautiful displays took place. People throughout the country went to extraordinary lengths, with great enthusiasm, to make a success of the occasion whatever the weather. Singled out for special mention in the Lake District was the school and village of

¹A bonfire today has been quoted as costing £15,000, with fireworks

Braithwaite, the school children of Threlkeld Quarry and the Bengal light on Helvellyn, organized by Mr. Easton of Wythburn.

For real effort, the honours go to Nenthead, one of the most exposed places in Cumberland, especially in the efforts made to light a very wet bonfire, using tar barrels, paraffin papers, one man crawling into a barrel to light papers, leaping out at the last moment and throwing blazing tar barrels on the pile. Finally a dry place was found in the bottom and the bonfire blazed. A Socialist newspaper denounced the master class for making workers lose two days wages for an, "ornamental function of no interest to them." Yet the people of places like Nenthead, made every effort to make a success of the occasion, willingly giving their time to gather materials and organize the event in very harsh and difficult conditions.

The farmers and townsfolk in Canon Rawnsley's parish, like those of Nenthead, willingly helped in gathering materials and getting them to the top of Skiddaw. As today, the organizing of events such as bonfires, sports, fêtes etc. brings communities together and gives much pleasure and enjoyment. Canon Rawnsley in reply to the few who complained at the waste of money, pointed out that throughout the nation much waste material had been used, e.g. rotten tree trunks, old boats and even bits of a very old windmill, while the fire on Skiddaw cost £7-5s which included the cutting of peat and the team labour that was hired.¹ There was much eating and drinking on these occasions which was part of the fun, but he said that long after the refreshments had been forgotten, the memory of the building and firing of the bonfires would remain and be recalled many times. An old shepherd said to Hardwicke,

"Ah heo' foller'd t'sheep for forty years upon these hills, and nivver seen the likes o' yon ... bonfire or nea

¹Well below the estimated £20

bonfire, it's wuth t'clime up Skidda to neet fur see a sight as that noo. Ah wadn't ha' missed it for punds."¹

He was referring not only to the Skiddaw bonfire but also the tremendous view stretching from the Solway to Helvellyn full of bright, sparkling lights.

Hardwicke's greatest bonfire was to celebrate the end of the 1914-1918 War. He was the general secretary to the national committee and from surplus war stores he sent out to applicants, six thousand flares and thirty four thousand rockets. Many amusing letters were received by Hardwicke at Grasmere, where he was living in retirement. Some were addressed to "Cannon Rawnsley and Co.", others wanted guns, tanks and even airships, in addition to flares and rockets.²

Hardwicke wrote a letter to the *Mid Cumberland and Westmorland Herald* dated 14 June 1897. In the letter he urged precautions to be taken if the wind was blowing and paraffin had been used, as the flames could fly one hundred or one hundred and fifty feet. All pipes had to be put out. Those in charge of rockets had to be very careful and use time fuses to allow enough time to move to safety. He then gives details of the times for lighting the fires and setting off the rockets in England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland later. The "National Anthem" was to be sung at the beginning and end of the evening.

¹"I have followed sheep for forty years upon these hills and have seen nothing like this ... it's worth the climb up Skiddaw tonight to see such a sight as this"

²The Fiery Canon, an article in the *Cumberland and Westmorland Herald*, the 23 July 1988 by Mr George Bott of Keswick.