



## BONFIRE NIGHT CELEBRATIONS

The earliest report to date of local bonfire celebrations on 5<sup>th</sup> November is at Dormansland in 1887 when the Dormans Land Bonfire Boys make their first appearance. It is thought that the event could go back even further, but to date this has not been corroborated.

In 1888 the Dormans Land Bonfire Boys organised a grand procession starting off from the Post Office at seven o'clock. At the head of the procession was carried a large banner proclaiming the "Dormans Land Bonfire Society", followed by the Dormans Land Brass Band and a train of Bonfire Boys in various costumes carrying Chinese and Japanese lanterns. Blazing tar barrels which were to have completed the scene were abandoned after the police stepped in. The evening ended with a blazing bonfire and a 'capital display' of fireworks.

The following year in 1889 there were two processions, one starting from the Royal Oak and the other from the Plough. The first procession started at 7.30pm with the Juvenile Bonfire Boys carrying Japanese lanterns, followed by the Dormans Land Brass Band 'playing a lively march.' The second procession was led by the Marsh Green Drum and Fife Band. The whole evening was a great success, only marred, the East Grinstead Observer regretted to report, by 'an act of wanton mischief' whereby a hand-cart kindly lent for the purposes of carrying the guy was thrown on the bonfire in the late evening, rousing much indignation in the village.

A Blindley Heath Bonfire Society had also been in existence since 1892. Building their bonfire at very short notice in Mr Prickler's field, at Hunters Hill, the Blindley Heath Bonfire Boys Association organised their first celebrations to great acclaim. The procession started from Godstone Station and was held up when the train carrying several members of the proceedings was half an hour late. The 1901 carnival was held in heavy fog. The Blindley Heath event seems to have been dogged by fogs, which is a possible reason for its demise.

The first mention of a Lingfield Bonfire Society is also in 1892 when the East Grinstead Observer reported the formation of two societies; one society meeting at the Greyhound public house and the other meeting at the Lingfield Hotel.

The procession started at 7.00 p.m. from Lingfield Hotel. It was a lengthy procession lead by several people on horseback.

Head the Builders' float showing a carpenter, a saw sharpener and a couple of 'energetic shoemakers' made a mention in the newspaper and it turned up again in the procession the following year. Music was supplied by Mr Pocock's band from East Grinstead and the Lingfield Fife and Drum Band.

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From the hotel the procession went down the Godstone Road and Common Road to the Hare and Hounds, where it halted. From the Hare and Hounds it made its way to the Star. From the Star the Observer writes “the route lay to the Greyhound and it was astonishing how quickly the party got from place to place and how long it was found necessary to stay when once the next licensed beacon hove in view.”

Once the procession returned back to the Lingfield Hotel the crowd was addressed by ‘the Lord High Cardinal Archbishop of Plaistow Street’; the bonfire was lit but before the grand display of fireworks began, a spark from a giant Catherine wheel fell into the box containing the rest of fireworks setting all in a blaze. The Observer reported “less than three minutes saw the consumption of over £5 worth of rockets and set displays.”

It seems as if the Dormansland and Blindley Heath celebrations eventually fizzled out after a few years and Lingfield came to prominence.

In 1907 the East Grinstead Observer reported the Lingfield and District Carnival Society “turned out in grand style” from Star Hotel. Again the route of the procession, led by the Oxted Band and Lingfield Fife and Drum Band, was a long one going through New Town (Saxby’s Lane), round the Common to Ray Lodge, Godstone Road, back to the High Street and then to the field adjoining the Star. A crowd of close on 2,000 people had assembled. Again several in the procession were mounted on horseback.

The paper reported “The Lingfield Fire Brigade mounted on the engine decorated with bunting and Chinese lanterns, was a noticeable feature” and “A very striking tableau was formed by the Ardenrun Place car with its merry band of outlaws.”

Lingfield celebrated the event each year until 1909 when there was a gap of fifteen years mainly due, one surmises, to the First World War.

It started up again in 1925 in great style. The local press reported that it was “a particularly gorgeous spectacle, the procession being about half a mile in length, and comprising bands, banners, effigies, tableaux, coloured fires and about 400 members of the Society in full costumes and several hundred flaming torches.” The paper reported approvingly that “an outstanding feature of the proceedings was the orderly manner in which the huge crowd behaved.”

Early torches were made from 6ft hazel sticks which were cut at Christmas when the sap was down. They would be wrapped around with tow and tied with wire.

The local newspaper reported in 1928 that 4,000 torches were carried through the procession. In the thirties the torches and firework tableaux were built at the back of the pickle factory in Blackberry Lane.

After the war torches were made in a building known as The Ark in Saxbys Lane. Flax would be wrapped around sticks with wire and then soaked in paraffin.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s it became a very popular event. People used to come from miles around in special buses and coaches.

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Every year the event went from strength to strength. Local bands were always prominent in the procession and by 1938 there were four torchlight processions with five bands.

During the 1930s and 1940s there were always two bonfires - usually one in the Lingfield Hotel field<sup>1</sup> and the other in the Recreation Ground. The torchlight procession with everybody in fancy dress behind the bands used to take various routes but would end in the firework display at the Talbot Road Recreation Ground.

The main grand torchlight procession would start from the old Lingfield Hotel in Godstone Road and go through the High Street, Town Hill, Church Road, Saxbys Lane, Station Road, Blenheim Road (Bakers Lane) to finish at the Recreation Ground in Talbot Road.

Each year giant effigies of Guy Fawkes and Robert Catesby would head the procession, while other effigies stuffed with fireworks would already be waiting at the bonfire.

Mr Simmons the gent's outfitter in the village used to hire costumes from London for the occasion which people would order and collect from the shop.

The village would be crowded with people from outside coming down on special trains and coaches from London. British Movietone News always came to film the procession and display. Local pubs would be packed and Slades the bakers would stay open and sell doughnuts and sausage rolls to the crowd. It was the biggest event of the year.

There were no Bonfire Nights throughout the Second World War as fireworks were banned and people had other things on their mind, but after the war the Bonfire Society was re-formed.

The 1954 event almost did not take place due to lack of funding, but at the last minute enthusiasm grew and the local paper reported "a tremendous procession made its way to Jenners Field." Ninety children entered the fancy dress competition and they all received a box of sweets. However it was then reluctantly decided to discontinue the Society due to the difficulty in finding people to maintain its high standards.

In the late 1950s/early 1960s Dormansland once more hosted their own Bonfire Night celebrations at the Old House at Home. The event was organised by the landlord, Johnny Cusden, and the fireworks would be let off from the flat roof of the pub; the fireworks having been bought from money collected in a box on the bar in the weeks preceding November 5th. A large bonfire would be lit in the recreation ground and there would be a children's fancy dress competition.

After a twenty-year lapse it was decided to start the Lingfield Bonfire Society up again and in 1974 it was once again reformed, despite a local councillor trying to stop the event on environmental health grounds. Common sense prevailed and in spite of the councillor's fears the evening was a great success and heralded another 17 years of wonderful Bonfire Nights.

By the 1980s the crowds had grown to 10,000 and more, and on grounds of safety the bonfire and fireworks were moved to the Racecourse.

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<sup>1</sup> now Jenny Lane

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The procession by that time started from Bakers Lane; the signal for the start being a deafening maroon set off by Frank Jenner.

By this time the fireworks were ignited by electronic ignition with Roy Payne in charge of pyrotechnics. Tony Boorer was in charge of the construction and design of the main tableaux, helped by the construction team of Brian Waddingham, Gordon Potter, Frank Jenner and Bill Coombes. Many other volunteers helped to make the Bonfire Night a great success.

The last Lingfield Bonfire Night was held in 1989, attended by over 8,000 people. The cost of staging the event had become prohibitive and the Lingfield Bonfire Society was finally wound up in 1991.

Over the 100 years that the Lingfield Bonfire Night existed a great deal of money was raised for local charities. Before the war - and pre-National Health Service - all money raised went to local hospitals. When it started up again after the war donations were made to many local charities and by the end over £50,000 had been raised.

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### Sources:

East Grinstead Observer Archives

Lingfield Bonfire Society records

*Those Were the Days* by Bill Coombes