

The great gale of 1741

We are buffeted by sou'westers every winter, but there was one devastating blast in the past that wreaked havoc across our region – Bridget Flanagan from the Great Ouse Valley Trust tells the tale of the gale.

'It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good' is a somewhat complicated way of saying that it's rare for something to be totally bad - even the worst situations can have unexpected outcomes that will benefit someone. And a ferocious wind that hit parts of Huntingdonshire in the 18th century did just that.

On the afternoon of September 8th 1741 a storm came from the south west, *bringing with it a mist, seeming not 30 yards from the ground, and rolled along at the rate of a mile-and-a-half in a minute with a noise like thunder. It lasted about 13 minutes, eight of them in full violence.* Was this a tornado?

The path of the wind was relatively narrow as it tracked across the Fens to Kings Lynn. But within that area the damage was extensive. Scarcely a windmill was left standing, straw and haystacks were shredded, trees uprooted, barns (reputedly 60 in Bluntisham alone) and roofs were ripped apart. The churches too, despite being built of stone, succumbed to the violent force. The tower at Papworth was blown down, and the spires of St Ives and Hemingford Grey were wrecked.

In the aftermath of this natural disaster, people started rebuilding their homes, livelihoods and churches. The spire of Kings Lynn Minster had crashed into the nave, and the cost of repair was a colossal £8,000. But here, at Hemingford Grey, the churchwardens took the bold decision that the spire would not be rebuilt. The remaining stump of the octagonal spire – less than a quarter of its original height - was levelled off and roofed. Ball finials were placed at each of the eight corners, and then larger ball finials mounted on the four corners of the parapet walls of the tower. This was an interesting and elegant solution to an expensive problem. And, as it has turned out, it has made the building unique. When it had a spire, the Church was similar to the many medieval parish churches situated along the River Great Ouse, for example, its neighbours at Houghton, St Ives and Hemingford Abbots (the river had enabled the transportation of their building stone). But with the stump of a spire Hemingford Grey Church is quite distinct. It is instantly recognisable and, along with St Ives Bridge and Chapel, and Houghton Mill, it has – accidentally - become one of the iconic landmarks of Huntingdonshire.



George Mackley's stunning wood engraving of 1953 clearly shows the ball finials rounding off the repair to the truncated spire, a casualty of the 1741 gale. The old Giddins' boathouse is alongside (now demolished).

The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley in the county of Cambridgeshire. For more information about the Trust please visit www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk

