

GLIMPSES OF HOLT GREAT FIRE

Market Day May 1st 1708



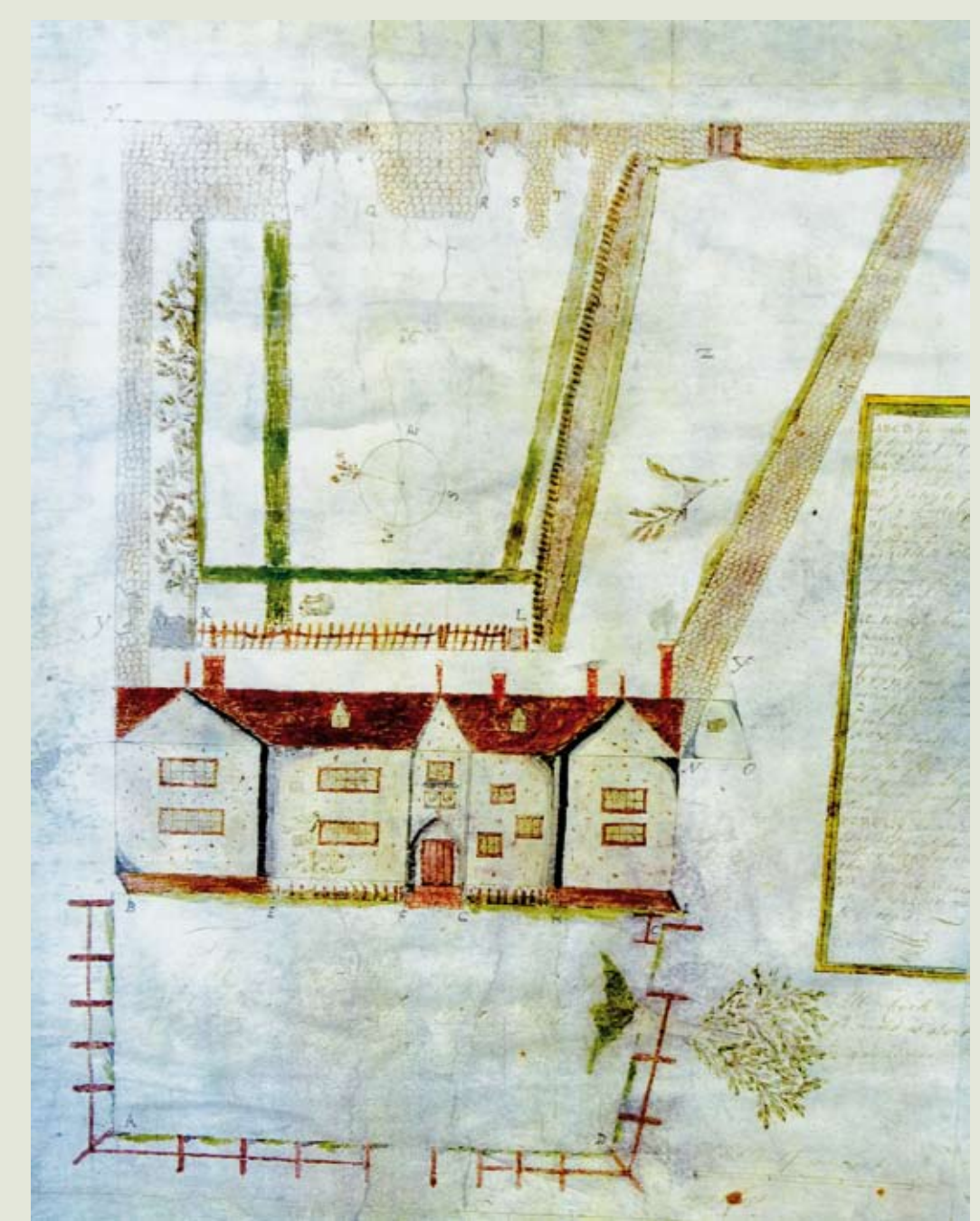
Artist Dot Shreeve's impression of the Great Fire of Holt.

Norwich Gazette 8th May 1708

‘We hear from Holt that last Saturday about 3 o’clock in the afternoon, a dismal fire broke out there, which in a little time burnt 80 houses with the church. It burnt with such vehemence that the shopkeepers in the Market Place had hardly time to save their books and papers of accounts. The damage the inhabitants the inhabitants sustained by it is modestly computed at £20,000. There is no certain account by what accident the fire occurred nor do we hear that any persons were killed by it.’

Don’t believe all you read in the papers

The ‘free school’ on the site of the present Old School House was preserved because it was a brick building with a tiled roof, though a stable block and other wooden huts behind the school were destroyed, causing extensive damage to flint walls as shown in this primitive sketch (*right*) of 1717 by the then Headmaster, David Duncombe.



‘Tradition says that the fire was so swift that the butchers could scarcely save the meat on their stalls.’

From *A History of Holt* by Lewis B. Radford (1908)

Norwich Gazette 8th May 1708

‘We have advice from Holt that on Saturday last a dreadful fire broke out occasioned, it is supposed, by the throwing out of wood ashes, which consumed most of the Market Place, the free school (*but see above*) and the Church.’

Cause of the Fire

The cause may have been accidental but entries in the Norwich Gazette suggest possible, though tantalisingly unproven, arson.

May 15th 1708

‘This week a boy was committed to the castle for attempting to burn the town of North Walsham. It is said he was hired by a stroller in a raree show [a wandering player with a peep or street show] and is supposed to have had a hand in the late dreadful fire in Holt.’

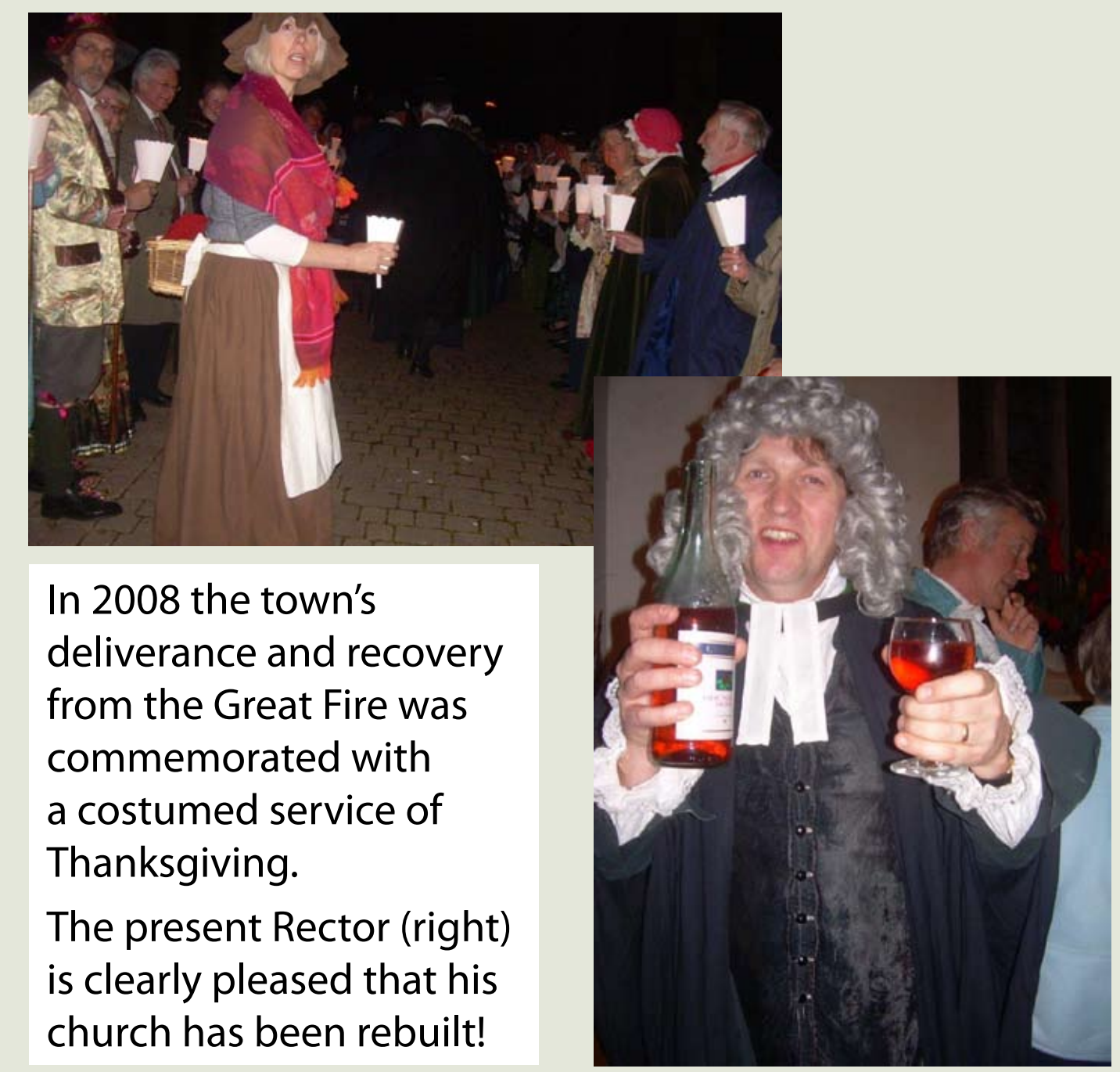
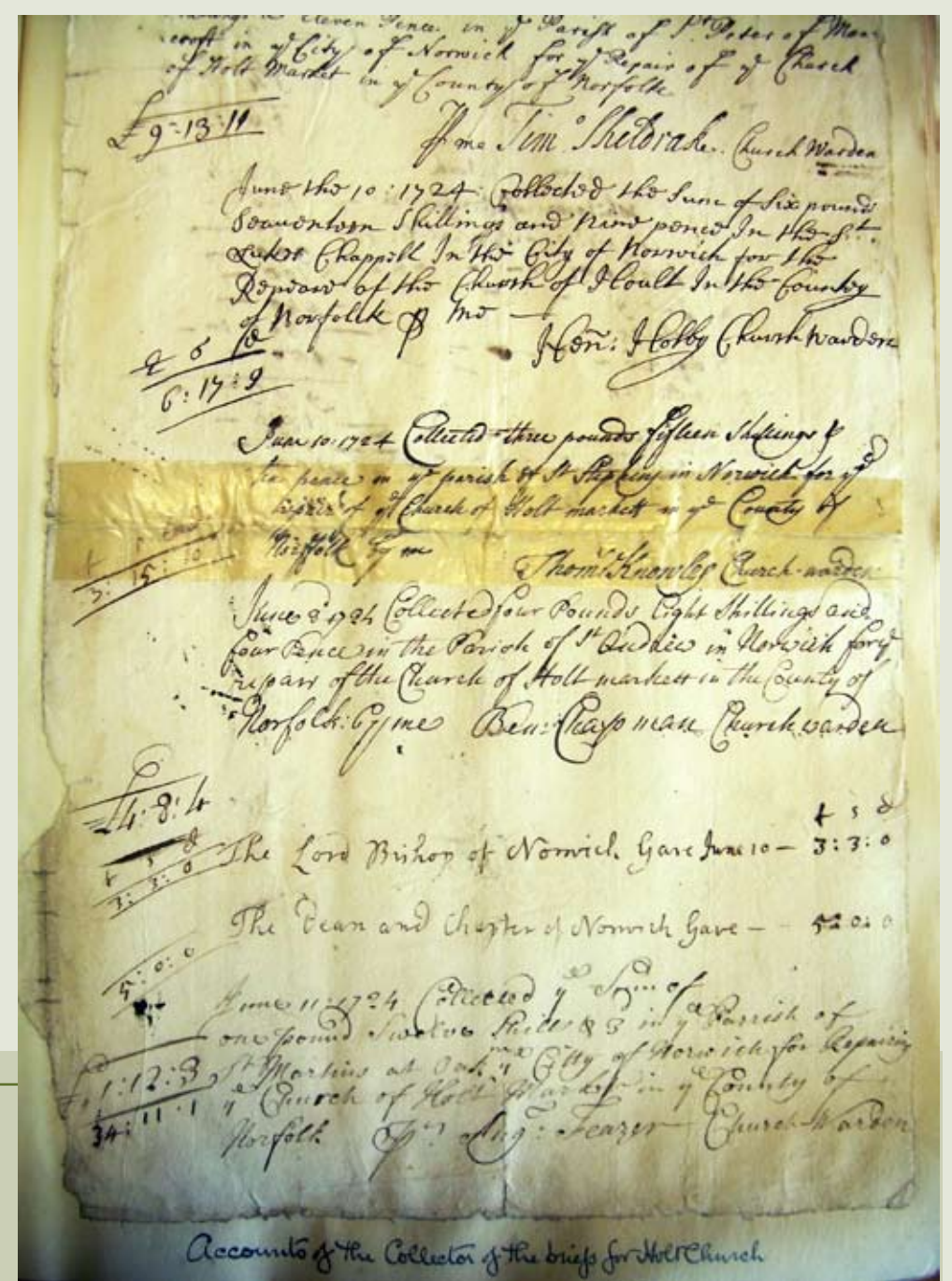
May 22nd 1708

‘The man who employed the boy to set fire to North Walsham is taken and committed to the castle but he positively denies the whole matter’



In cases of a disaster such as this, applications could be made to the King for a **Royal Brief**. This document, urging all office holders, clergy, nobility, and individuals to promise financial support to the stricken community, could be copied and sent to all parts. Such Briefs were granted to Holt in the immediate aftermath (1709) and later (1723) when a concerted effort was made to rebuild and refurbish the parish church.

Accounts showing contributions from the Bishop of Norwich and the Dean and Chapter. Public figures (also Norfolk landowners) who donated were Sir Robert Walpole, first Prime Minister of England, and Viscount ‘Turnip’ Townshend, Secretary of State, each giving a silver communion plate and £50. The prize philanthropist was none other than George, Prince of Wales, soon to become King George II, who gave a large engraved silver flagon for the communion wine, and £100.



In 2008 the town’s deliverance and recovery from the Great Fire was commemorated with a costumed service of Thanksgiving. The present Rector (right) is clearly pleased that his church has been rebuilt!