WEST OF PETERSFIELD NEWS

EAST MEON

Residents tell of fire horror

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AT ABOUT 6.45pm on Good Friday, customers in the busy Izaak Walton pub were having an Easter drink or waiting while their takeaway fish and chips were cooked, but they noticed a smell of burning each time the pub door opened.

Customers immediately alerted the fire brigade, and soon after the Petersfield fire tender arrived, but within minutes it was clear the fire in the roof of 1 Brook Cottages, the central one of the three, was beyond the control of the crew.

A witness said: "It was very windy and the speed at which it spread was unbelievable."

A stream of fire engines converged on the High Street, and soon five engines from Dronfield, Horndean, Cosham, Waterlooville, Southsea, Havant, Hayling Island and Liphook, manned by more than 130 fire fighters, were jammed into the narrow High Street.

From Camberley, Eastleigh, Fareham and Bordon fire stations came four water tankers, an aerial ladder, special equipment unit and a fire control vehicle.

The street was closed at Church Road and along the Clanfield Road.

Medics set up first aid stations in Temple Lane and on a green near the fire.

As the fire raged through Brook Cottages, it jumped across a path dividing them from Hockley Cottage, whose owners were away.

A neighbour said: "The alley has a thatched roof and flames just shot across it."

Soon after the fire was noticed, friends had opened up Hockley Cottage, moved the family car to safety, and checked to ensure the house was empty.

As it went up, the Izaak Walton just inches from it, was evacuated at about 9.30pm.

Hampshire Fire Service spokesman Dave Graham said: "This was due to smoke – no other properties were affected."

There were also fears that a chimney on Hockley Cottage could fall onto the pub. Firefighters dismantled it and at about midnight the pub was declared safe.

Meanwhile water was being poured on to the fire and nearby thatched roofs owned blown sparks didn't start another blaze, and supplies were running dry.

Water from the stream in the High Street was used, but as its level dropped a pipeline was laid from the High Street up Temple Lane to outside East Meon Primary School, while another ran into Church Road, and both were connected to the water main.

Firemen on an aerial platform ripped aside smouldering thatch, and local farmers took it to a layby on the Clanfield road.

One firefighter said: "Tens of thousands of gallons of water from five main pumps were pumped into the fire."

At about 11.15pm the blaze was coming under control, and by Saturday morning it was virtually out, with only smouldering wood and thatch smoking inside the shell of the grade II listed terrace.

Through the weekend, diminishing numbers of firemen worked to damp down hot spots in the 300-year-old buildings.

The last fire engine left around mid-afternoon on Sunday, about 44 hours after the fire began.

Then at about 8.30am Easter Monday morning, fire engines returned with blue lights flashing.

More hot spots had been detected, and after damping them down the fire crews left an hour later.

Firefighters tackle the blazing roof of one of the thatched cottages at East Meon.

An investigation into the fire isn't expected to reveal anything other than it being an accident. Inspector Ben Taylor, of Hampshire Constabulary, said: "At this early stage there is no information to suggest a crime was committed."