

CAMBRIDGESHIRE TIMES

FRIDAY JUNE 8, 1956

VILLAGERS WAVED AT CRASHING JET PLANE

Thought it was just
doing low flying

Villagers at Little Downham Waved as a Vampire jet plane screamed low past their homes on Tuesday afternoon. Their excitement turned to horror as, at the end of a long glide, the jet's port wing dipped and touched the ground in a cornfield near Black Bank station.

Upside down, the aircraft ploughed into the soft earth. There was a roar of flame, and in a moment all that remained was a 15ft deep crater surrounded by blazing, tangled wreckage.

A few minutes before some of the onlookers had seen the pilot - a student officer from RAF Oakington - use his ejector seat to escape from the machine over the washland to the west. A strong wind carried him several miles, and he landed in Camel Road, Littleport. Shortly afterwards, shaken but unhurt, he was looking over what remained of his plane. He was Pilot Officer P. O. S. Agar, from New Zealand.

The Vampire crashed in the corner of a field owned by Mr Herbert Gillett, alongside First Drove, at about 3.30 p.m. Wreckage was strewn over half a dozen fields, a wheel being among the furthest found a quarter of a mile away.

About 200 yards from the crater an empty fuel tank lay almost intact. Another was in a dyke close by, completely shattered by the explosion.

Within a minute of the crash the police were notified by the occupants of a nearby farmhouse, and fire tenders from Ely and Littleport raced to the scene.

Their crews extinguished burning pieces of wreckage - including the turbine, which lay several yards from the lip of the crater- and then turned their attention to dykeside grass and peat which had been

ignited.

Miss Norah Garner, of Blackbank Road, who lives about a quarter of a mile from the crash, was in her garden when it happened. On Tuesday evening she told a reporter from this newspaper "I heard the whine and just thought it was an ordinary plane. I looked up, as I usually do, and it was just above the ground, tipped on one side. Next thing it hit and there was a big sheet of flame. I ran indoors and told mother to ring the police. I went over straight away, arriving in about a minute, but there was just a big hole and some small flames by then."



Also close to the scene was Mr Ken Cornell, who was at work in Mr G. A. Hobbs farm in Second Drove. "I saw it coming towards me at about house top height, and thought it was just doing a bit of low flying," he said. "I watched it circle right round from over the washes. The wing hit and there was a terrific sheet of flame."

Standing in Little Downham as the jet whined close overhead was 15 year old Michael Scott of 13 Lawns Crescent. Michael, wearing a school prefect's badge, gave our reporter a graphic description - "I heard the rumble of an aircraft as if it was trying to attack the sound barrier. It came over at about 500 feet, came right down to the ground, and then began to turn over on its back - it seemed to be taken by the wind - and the port wing dipped. There was a triple flash of flame and then just the smoke. Some of the people in the village waved when it first came over. We all thought we were just being 'shot up.'"

Robin Pearl