

Moon-mad arsonist foiled in seventh attack

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An arsonist terrorising two Essex villages has been foiled in his seventh attempt to set a home alight.

A man escaped across fields at Hempstead in the early hours of Saturday after stuffing straw under the eaves of a house.

This was the fifth time an arson incident had coincided with a full or new moon, and Saffron Walden police are not now discounting the theory that the firebug is moon-mad.

Gate banged

Six thatched houses in Hempstead and neighbouring Great Sampford have been badly damaged or destroyed since the arsonist first struck last August.

The latest attempt was at Green Acres, Wychtree Lane, a four-bedroom house with a tiled roof.

It is the home of a drug company area manager, Mr John Edlington, aged 33, his wife Elizabeth and children Jaqueline, seven, and Crawford, five.

A dog barking in the distance aroused Mr Edlington at 3 am.

He said: "I was restless and heard a dog, and then our own dog started. I got up and put the lights on and let the dog out.

"I couldn't see anything but I was aware there was someone there. I ran with the dog towards the field and heard the gate bang and the chain rattle as it was pulled off."

Police patrolling the village as part of the arsonist precautions were at the scene within two minutes.

A tracker dog followed the man's scent for 200 yards as it doubled back across the field and crossed the Hempstead to Haverhill road. Then the trail was lost in Hall Lane.

Later a bundle of straw was found stuffed under the eaves of a flat-roofed extension at the back of the house, and some straw was scattered on the roof.

Insp John Kennet said there was a possibility that the intruder was not the arsonist but a thief. The straw, from a field at the back of the house, could have been left by nesting birds.

"We believe it may have been an attempted burglary but of course we cannot discount the theory that it may have been the arsonist," he said.

But Mr Edlington said: "The amount of straw was excessive for birds. It was under the eaves. If you are going to set fire to a house that's where you would shove it."

The catalogue of moon coincidences reads:

- August 15, 1977 (new moon)—Long Corner Cottage, Hempstead, destroyed by fire.
- October 6, 1977 (new moon)—High Banks Cottage, Hempstead, badly damaged, 79-year-old widow rescued.
- January 11, 1978 (new moon)—unoccupied building at rear of Hempstead village stores, badly damaged.
- March 22 (full moon)—arsonist destroys one cottage at Great Sampford and seriously damages a second in same night.
- April 22 (eve of full moon)—attempted arson at Green Acres, Hempstead.