THE FIRE SERVICE

THE BEGINNING

*“The several insurance officers . . . have each of them a certain set of men, who they keep in constant pay . . . these men make it their business to be ready at call, all hours, and night and day, to assist in case of fire . . . These they call fire-men, but with an odd kind of contradiction in the title, for they are really most of them water-men.*

*--*Daniel Defoe, 1724.

THE INSURANCE OFFICE FIRE BRIGADES

The earliest known reference to insurance fire brigades is taken from the minutes of the Hand in Hand Fire Office dated 15th August 1699. Formed in 1696, the Hand in Hand was the third fire insurance company in Britain. It was preceded by The Friendly Society (1683) and The Fire Office (1680). We know that both these earlier offices had set up their own primitive fire brigades from a reference written by Daniel Defoe the year prior to the Hand in Hand minute.

The decision to employ men to form the basis of the early Fire Office brigades seems to have been made for a variety of reasons, but they were in the vicinity of some of London’s major fires. These regularly occurred on the banks of the river, the docks being packed with wooden ships and the warehouses full of highly combustible stock.

The firemen were, Defoe stated, ‘lusty fellows’, used to hard work and not afraid of danger.

Once the decision had been taken it was quite natural that the companies should clothe their firemen in colourful uniforms and give them an arm badge to be worn on the upper part of the left sleeve.

Press-gangs were bodies of men who used to roam the streets to catch the unwary and conscript them into the navy. Firemen were not exempt and a number of them had been conscripted by these press-gangs. Following an Act of Parliament in 1707, firemen belonging to the insurance companies were given exemption from the press-gangs providing that a list of men with their name, place of abode and place of employment was lodged with the Lords of the Admiralty. This exemption was subject to a limit if thirty firemen per Insurance Company.

It became common practice for the insurance offices to instruct their firemen to ‘wear their badges and have their certificate always about them to distinguish them; and if happened to be pressed for want thereof, the charge that shall thereby be occasioned, such fireman shall bear.’

Despite this instruction, it is recorded that when the crew of the *Bounty* mutinied and settled on Pitcairn Island in 1789, a uniformed fireman was on board. The uniform was later used for many years by the island chief as a ceremonial dress. It seems quite probable that the unfortunate fireman had been pressed but whether he had his badge and certificate with him we shall never know. So it was that it became standard practice for the insurance companies to employ their own firemen, who were organised into brigades, initially in London and later in the provinces. The practise outlined above was to last for no less than 200 years.

As a general rule the total number of firemen to make up the Insurance Office brigade was specified in a Deed of Settlement (dated1707) but was not to exceed 30 men. Usually this number was built up gradually, as the portfolio of businesses underwritten by the insurance office expanded. In the case of the Hand in Hand Fire Office, it was 11 years before they reached their full complement of thirty men.

BRIGADES IN OPERATION

In the early years the fire brigades were under the control of a foreman. Later, in the latter half of the eighteenth century, as the numbers, size and efficiency of the fire engines employed by the insurance offices increased, engineers were appointed to take charge of the fire engines.

Instructions were given to the firemen that their fire-fighting tools with which they were issued were to be kept with them at all times. These tools consisted mainly of axes or pole axes and also ‘preventers’ which were large hooks on a long staff used to pull burning material from the roofs of buildings.

It became abundantly clear to the insurance offices that not only were their firemen of great benefit in the extinguishment of a fire, but they also served as a useful advertisement for the company by whom they were employed. From the earliest days, therefore, they dressed their firemen in brightly coloured uniforms which helped distinguish them from the firemen of other insurance offices, but which were hardly practical when it came to fighting fire.

Upon the alarm being given, the firemen were summoned by the watchman or messengers and were expected to proceed with all speed to the scene of the fire. The records show that the smaller fires were attended by no more than a handful of firemen. Unfortunately for the insurer, however, the large fire was a regular feature of eighteenth century life in London and these fires, which sometimes burnt for several days, were often attended by the full complement of thirty men.

One of the primary functions of the insurance company firemen was to salvage goods from the burning or threatened buildings, but only those that bore the fire mark of the company they represented. By the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century, special salvage teams, usually referred to as porters, were being set up, thus leaving the firemen to attend to the job of fighting the fire.

Towards the latter part of the eighteenth century insurance office fire brigades could be found in most of the major towns and cities in Britain.

As the years passed, the efficiency of the fire brigades increased and, with the formation of more insurance companies, so did their numbers. It was, however, a comparatively expensive business to equip and maintain fire brigades at strategic points around the country. By the first decade of the nineteenth century considerable efforts were being made to reduce costs and, at the same time, increase efficiency. Inevitably there was only one way this could be achieved and by 1833 many of the insurance offices had merged their fire brigades.

The merging of the fire brigades spelled the end of individual insurance office brigades. In Sheffield this occurred in 1869 when Sheffield Council took over responsibility for the fire cover, although a few insurance brigades were maintained in other parts of the country until the early part of the twentieth century.

THE FOUNDING OF THE SHEFFIELD FIRE BRIGADE

In 1869, the Sheffield Council, after much negotiation, took over responsibility for the fire cover from the Insurance Brigades. The decision of the Corporation to take over and run the Fire Brigades was probably because Sheffield had experienced a series of large fires, namely:

25th March 1865, at The Surrey Theatre, West Bar,

3rd March 1867, at Mr Burrells, Draper, Snig Hill,

11th May 1869, at The Ragged School, and 2 days later,

13th May 1869,at Mudfords Rope Works, Exchange Green.

The Council advertised for a Chief Fire Officer and by June of that year, thirty-seven applications had been received. From these, six were selected for the short list, who were:

Thomas Wingfield – Metropolitan Fire Brigade

John Charles Pound – Nottingham Fire Brigade

Thomas Austin – Blackburn

Thomas J Holmes – Royal Fire Brigade, Sheffield

E Clements – Birkenhead, and

Henry Millward – Alliance Fire Office, Sheffield.

After they had been interviewed Mr John Pound was appointed Superintendent of the Brigade as from 15th July 1869, at a salary of £100 per year, a house with coal and gas to be provided for his use.

The first Fire Station was in Norfolk Street, opposite Milk Street. Mr Pound had to form the new Brigade with fifteen young police constables and for eleven months living quarters were a problem as many of them lived as far away as Spital Hill. When a fire occurred at night the men were called off their beats by whistle, and in the daytime Mr Pound had to pick up any Police Constable he could find.

The first fire attended by the new Brigade occurred on 30th July 1869 at a cabinet makers in Arundel Street. It took fifty minutes to obtain water because the fire happened to be on the day before the Corporation required the Water Company to provide a constant supply.

Towards the end of the year water was again turned off at night and so Mr Pound insisted on a turncock being in attendance at the fire station to turn on the water in case of fire.

In 1870 the Corporation took a lease on 17 houses in Hill Street and Balm Green and the firemen were installed in them, electric bells being connected to the houses. On 24th June, 1870. The fire fighting appliances were moved from Norfolk Street to a new Fire Station at Barker’s Pool, which had formerly been the Weights and Measures Office. Mr John Charles Pound continued to be the superintendent of the Sheffield Fire Brigade until his retirement in 1895.

THE SHEFFIELD FIRE BRIGADE HORSES

From the inception of the Sheffield Fire Brigade on 15th July 1869 the firemen had to manually push, pull or carry the equipment they required to fight fire, including the fire engine. Two horses were available but they were stabled in Angel Yard in Angel Street but it was not possible to obtain horses from there in any reasonable time. The Fire Station at this time was in Barkers Pool.

On 20th September 1873 a call was received to a fire at Fulwood and the brigade had to wait 45 minutes for the horses to arrive at the Fire Station. Before the firemen were able to attend the fire an Alderman and several reporters came to the Fire Station and the next day there was a long report in the newspapers. After the next Council meeting two horses were purchased, but as there were no stabling facilities at the Fire Station it was necessary for the horses to stand in the yard of the Angel Inn at Moorhead. Eventually a 10 years’ lease of a stable and coach house in Backfields was obtained.

On 25th December 1883 the Brigade moved to a new Fire Station in Rockingham Street which had been erected at cost of £16,318. When a fire call was received at Rockingham Street the horses, being stabled opposite the engine house, had only to trot across the yard and turn round before being harnessed.

In 1900 a new Fire Station at West Bar was opened. The new building was an improvement on Rockingham Street because the turning by the horses was done away with. Accommodation at West Bar was for three fire engines, and behind each engine were two stalls with horses continually ready, although a change of horses took place periodically. Upon receiving a fire call a cord was pulled opening both the street and stable doors.

The horses then ran along each side of the fire engine and into position for the harness. This was suspended from the ceiling to enable it to be lowered onto the horses. There were no straps or buckles and firemen simply locked the snap collars into position. At the rear of the station was stabling for twelve horses.

In 1907 the motor engine was purchased and was an unqualified success. The Chief Fire Officer in his Annual Report stated that its superiority over horses was very marked. The steep gradients were easily negotiated and the scene of the fire reached in half the time. It was clear that the use of horses would be phased out, but they did continue to give faithful service until 1922.

Two Horses of Note

BULLER was purchased on 29th January from Mr. Beulah who was a manager at Boots Ltd. The amount paid was £50. He is described as being light chestnut in colour and aged 7 years. This horse was a handsome animal with a silver mane and tail and was a familiar sight in the city. The horse served 12 years and 7months and then on 13th November 1913 he collapsed and died on Waingate when returning from a fire at Vickers Ltd, Brightside Lane. It is believed that the cause of death was a burst blood vessel. The fire Brigade received £1 for his carcase from Messrs. J. Young & Son.

GRETIE was purchased on 18th March 1912 from Mr. G.W.Needham of Carterknowle Road. The amount paid was £55. She is described as being a Roan Mare. The horse served for 10 years and 1 month. She was transferred to the Mounted Police Department on 1st May 1922. The Fire Brigade received £25 from the police.

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