

Our Nextdoor Neighbour

As you will know, the Museum is in part of Warblington UDC's former Town Hall built in 1900 to accommodate local council offices and the fire brigade. It was the terrible fire in the stately home of Mr. George Wilder at Stansted, on the last evening of Goodwood races, destroying everything in the main building, excluding the servants' quarters, stable block and chapel, which highlighted the shortcomings of the Emsworth Fire Brigade at that time. Up until then the brigade had made do, like so many other small towns, with a pump handle fire engine pulled by horse power.

The Stansted fire illustrated just how essential the purchase of a new, more up-to-date engine was. Debate had been going on in the council about the possibility of buying a steam engine for some two or three years before the fire, strengthened by a request from the Emsworth Brigade captain as early as January 1898 for both an engine and new premises, but purchase had been shelved on grounds of cost. Other local brigades at Fareham and Havant had already taken the plunge to acquire one, and after considering the relative merits and costs between Merryweather and Shand Mason fire engines, Warblington Council purchased a Shand Mason for £435. This had the capacity to deliver 260-300 gallons of water per minute and throw a 15/16" inch jet to a height of 150 feet. Shand Mason engines had a proven record for reliability, earlier models having been used by several English fire brigades since 1858. A fireman with local knowledge could time it so that the boiler was hot and the pump working within seconds of arriving at a fire, without the need to refuel *en route*, a great stride forward in timing and efficiency. From the beginning of the twentieth century the concept of employing the combined effectiveness of a petrol-driven engine to both transport and to furnish power for the pump proved to be a great step forward. It cut both the brigade's arrival time and provided increased water power. The Emsworth Brigade christened their new engine "Edward VII" to commemorate the new King who, as Prince of Wales, had taken a great interest in the work of the fire service.

Emsworth's Volunteer Fire Brigade was first mustered in 1843 and came under aegis of St. James's vestry for the next fifty years. They purchased an engine which required three men on each side handle to pump up the water, obtained from local streams or ponds, whilst others directed the hose nozzle. (Mains water came to the town some forty years later). Additional help was often performed by townsfolk amply rewarded by generous supplies of beer. The Brigade was also supported by local donors and subscribers, holding annual meetings in The Black Dog (now the Spice Village) in the Square. They provided essentials such as replacement hoses and extensions, fire axes, crowbars, ladders, ropes and other ancillary equipment.

During the nineteenth century many fires were caused by overturned or unattended tallow candles. Fire risks in all types of factory or workshop multiplied with the introduction of steam power and the flammable properties inherent in flour and sawmills, of which Emsworth had several. Straw and hay barns on one of the many neighbouring farms were other high-risk features in the area.

Insurance companies to which premiums had been paid to cover houses and other premises paid for the men to attend their fires. On 5 April 1872 the Sun Fire Insurance Co. paid out the following to attend an Emsworth fire: 1s.9d. to 60 men = £5.5s.0d; 1s.6d. to one man

(over an hour) = 2s.6d.; 1s. each to 11 boys =11s.0d., Mr. R. Kelsey for self and men = £1. 1s. 6d., and an engine bill of £4. 10.0d. plus refreshments = £5.17s.9d.

Even some thirty years after the brigade's inauguration it seemed to have a very hand-to-mouth existence. In more formal terms it stated:

Notice

If the Vestry of our Parish, where there is no Town Council, Local Board or other Authority competent to provide the sums, after due notice, shall resolve that the Overseers shall provide any Fire Engine, Ladder, or Fire Escape for general use out of the Poor Rate the cost thereof, and of procuring a proper place wherein to keep the same, and on maintaining it, as well as any such Engine, Ladder, or Escape required by the Parish in any other manner for such Use, in a fit state of repair, and the charges of such Persons as may be necessary for the Use thereof and the cost of such suitable implements and accoutrements.

William Pink — Churchwarden

2 December 1876.

Notice that there was no mention in Mr. Pink's statement about training pay for the men, essential for keep up morale and efficiency. So for just under sixty years Emsworth Brigade had no headquarters, and engine and equipment had to be stored somewhere around the town, the men mustered and a horse caught and harnessed, no easy task to assemble everyone and everything speedily and efficiently. Should a fire occur close at hand willing helpers would often drag the engine out into position. The crew held regular drills and practices in a nearby field, and it says a lot about the men, coping what we would now consider primitive conditions, that they were held in great local esteem. At that time the status and prestige associated with fire brigade uniforms was held in similar stead to that of railwaymen and policemen and their lack until the 1880s was clearly a deeply felt grievance. Protection for the firemen themselves came very late in the day and it was due to the determination and energy of their newly-appointed captain, Mr Alfred Blackmore, of Queen Street, that they finally achieved better uniforms and improved pay in the 1890s. The Council, who had by now taken over control from the Vestry, resolved to pay £10. 8s. for the men's helmets and £15. 15s. for a complete outfit for the captain. He had had to draw the Council's attention to the fact that he had been paying the crew's monthly fees out of his own pocket. His work was clearly valued by the Council as he later secured a pay rise for himself (from £4 to £6 p.a.), his second officer, Henry Lowton, receiving £2 p.a. rise. The fees were paid and in addition he was given a "float" for small expenses. It was also agreed that the men should receive 2s. 6d. per practice, 4 practices to take place each year.

Although we may smile at early photographs of the Emsworth Fire Brigade with their bugler on one side and quaint uniforms, today our next door neighbour not only responds promptly to any emergencies but still maintains a strong bond with our local community.

Margaret Rogers