

LONDON'S FIREFIGHTERS: THEIR ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

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The beginnings of firefighting go back in time as far as the historian decides to place them. One can say that from the moment in prehistory that man discovered how to use fire to warm himself and cook his food he was immediately also faced with the problem of how to deal with its destructive aspect.

In historical terms one can attribute the start of organized firefighting in London to the Roman colonizers. Rome itself was no stranger to disastrous fires whether of the deliberate kind begun by the Emperor Nero (said by some to be an early attempt at slum clearance) or accidental. In the time of the Republic bands of slaves were employed as firefighters. In AD 6 the Emperor Augustus established the rather more professional Corps of Vigiles. They numbered 7,000, an enormous establishment for a city of less than a million. In fact the vigiles doubled up as policemen, pursuers of run-away slaves and attendants to watch over the clothes of bathers in the public baths.

It can be assumed that the vigiles also came to Britain although the only recorded evidence of this is to their presence at Greta Bridge in Yorkshire. With the disintegration of the Roman Empire they, too, disappeared and Britain was not to have anything like them for another thousand years. Firelighting rather than firefighting was the watchword of the marauders from the north - the Vikings, Angles, Saxons and Danes - who came to these shores through the dark ages that followed.

The first new glimmerings of order came under King Alfred who in 872, to protect the wooden houses of his new towns, enacted a law decreeing that all fires in houses had to be extinguished on the ringing of an evening bell.

This idea of a fire safety curfew was much extended by King William after 1066 with his law of couvre feu compelling citizens to extinguish fires by placing a metal lid over household fires at night.

London was a fast growing city in Norman times, its progress only interrupted by fires of great severity. In 1086 the City was ravaged from Aldgate to Ludgate. William Fitzstephen, biographer of St. Thomas a Becket, wrote during the reign of King Henry II that the only plagues of London were the immoderate drinking by idle fellows and the frequency of fires. A great fire in 1133 again destroyed much of the City. An attempt to prevent such disasters came when our first Mayor, Henry FitzAilwyn made an order in 1189 that no house be built in the City but of stone. Thatch was banned and at the wardmotes that year it was decreed that people in great houses should keep a ladder ready to rescue neighbours trapped in fires and a barrellful of water to quench them.

The only firefighting equipment specified at this time was a crook of iron, chains and cords to be used to hook into the gables of a burning house so as to pull it down and create a firebreak.

In 1212 yet another fire disaster claimed the lives of 3,000 citizens, many of them trapped on London Bridge by fires raging at either end.

These were lawless times and arson flourished. Because of the dire effects of fire the punishment for arson was fittingly severe - no less than burning alive. (As the head of today's Arson Prevention Bureau and faced in some parts of the country with not dissimilar problems I tend to look back to those days with a degree of nostalgia!).

In the 15th century newly appointed aldermen and sheriffs were each required to supply twelve buckets made of leather for the quenching of fires. At times of crisis special precautions were ordered. To defend London Bridge from an attack during the Wars of the Roses forty-one ells of canvas soaked in vinegar were hung over the drawbridge for protection against fire.

A century later we read of the first engines on wheels for fighting fires. These comprised wooden cisterns containing water and large squirts or syringes made of brass. In 1642 the proceedings of the Court of Aldermen record the importation of two such engines from Hamburg. There is a reference to their use at a fire in the City but that they were of little benefit being broken at the time. Soon after this King Charles I wrote to the Lord Mayor recommending the value of engines for spouting of water and saying rather pointedly that they should be kept in good working order.

In September 1666 came the greatest calamity, what has ever since been called the Great Fire of London, which in the course of four days destroyed most of the country's greatest city and port.

A baker was held to blame as was recently admitted by the late Lord Mayor (himself of that trade), the fire having started, as is well-known, in a baker's premises in Pudding Lane. The flames soon spread to Thames Street where the wharfingers' storehouses were filled with tallow, oil, spirits, hemp and fodder, and from that moment the City was lost. From Thames Street to the Temple was a trail of destruction in which 87 churches and 13,000 houses were consumed.

Common Council declared that the disaster was due to the hand of God, a great wind and the season so very dry!

The City rose to the occasion and the New Building Act provided our first code of regulations with all buildings having to be of brick or stone construction and with fire-resisting party walls separating them from their neighbours. Trades presenting a fire risk were banned from the principal streets. Common Council required the livery companies to provide buckets, ladders and hand squirts and the great twelve were asked to provide one engine apiece.

The most significant development was that the citizens now turned to insurance against fire as a way to cushion them from further disastrous loss. A year after the Great Fire an insurance office was opened at the back of the Royal Exchange. The men who set it up realised that it was not in their interests to allow the destruction of the property they insured. Soon they were announcing the availability of "servants in livery with badges who are watermen and other lusty persons who are always ready when any sudden fire happens which they are very laborious and dextrous at quenching".

Some 1,200 years after the departure of the Roman legions the City had again something of a rudimentary firefighting force.

Advances were being made in the design of fire engines. In the 1720's Richard Newsham, a button-maker in Cloth Fair, took out his first patent for fire engines. He claimed, somewhat optimistically, that one of his engines had sent a jet of water over the grasshopper on top of the Royal Exchange. London-made engines acquired an international reputation and in 1731 Newsham engines from Cloth Fair were exported to New York. These engines were of course the famous "manuals" operated by men pushing down on the pumping poles situated on either side and forcing water out of the squirt under pressure.

It is interesting to note that Common Council had itself given consideration to raise and operate a fire brigade as part of a civic insurance scheme but decided in the outcome to leave it to private enterprise.

The Fire Office at the Royal Exchange was soon joined by others - the Hand-in-Hand, the Sun and the Globe. They all formed their own brigades, the recruits generally drawn from Thames watermen, dressed in splendid uniforms of yellow plush breeches and tunics of blue cloth with silver buttons.

Each man bore the badge of his company high on his left arm, this being of the same design as the company's fire mark placed on the front of houses insured by the company.

Competition was intense. Each brigade would only tackle a fire on property insured by their own company. When the alarm was raised teams from all the companies would race to the scene as evidenced by contemporary pictures of the horse-drawn engines of this period. If the house on fire did not bear their company's mark they returned to their station or stayed to jeer at the activities of their rivals. By the early 1800's the insurance firemen would in fact deal with any fire if only to prevent it spreading to their own property. But competition led to chaotic scenes and even fighting between the firemen in their attempts to secure the most productive source of water.

It was perhaps to avoid such problems that the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs' Committee accepted an offer from the Norwich Union to provide 18 firemen to ensure the safety of guests at the Lord Mayor's Banquet in 1828.

It was becoming all too apparent that some form of amalgamation was necessary. Success was eventually achieved in 1832 by which time London was also seeing the first steam operated fire engines. That year Charles Ford, Manager of the Sun Fire Office, persuaded other companies to join with the Sun to bring their fire brigades into a single formation. Here was the true origin of London's fire service as we were later to know it.

The decision having been made, the first requirement was to find a suitable man to command the new structure and here the story moves to Edinburgh. That city can lay claim to have been the first municipality in Great Britain to deal seriously with the menace of fire. There in 1824, after a succession of disastrous fires, the magistrates, police commissioners and insurance offices established the Edinburgh Fire Engine Establishment. Eighty firemen were recruited, three engines bought in London and a Master of Fire Engines appointed to run the enterprise. They were singularly fortunate in their choice of the Master.

James Braidwood, a 23 year old surveyor, was the man selected. Within two weeks he was called on to deal with the worse fire in the City's history, a fire which at one stage threatened to destroy the whole of Edinburgh. Young

Braidwood had no chance of initiating effective counter-measures but he learned valuable lessons and the conflagration amply confirmed the wisdom of the city authorities in the steps they had taken.

Braidwood chose his part-time firemen with care. He chose slaters who were adept at climbing over rooves, carpenters and masons familiar with the construction of buildings, and blacksmiths who were accustomed to endure heat and smoke. He drilled them every Wednesday morning at 4 a.m. His men soon gained a reputation for the skill and daring with which they took their hoses and branch pipes into burning buildings, achieving fire stops previously considered impossible. He had no time for firemen standing in the street and throwing water haphazardly into windows.

So back to London. When in 1832 the insurance companies set up their London Fire Engine Establishment in Watling Street it was Braidwood they invited to command it.

He was given 80 whole-time firemen working from 19 stations. A more down-to-earth approach to firefighting was signalled by the issue of sober and practical uniforms. Now that he had full-time men working for him Braidwood preferred to recruit seamen who had been taught unquestioningly to obey orders and whose former work would accustom them to the day and night watches he introduced.

Great fires continued to challenge the new organization. The year 1834 saw the destruction of the Houses of Parliament and although Braidwood and his men could never hope to control such a conflagration their bravery and resourcefulness did at least result in the saving of Westminster Hall.

Following that fire the insurance companies pleaded with the Duke of Wellington, then Prime Minister, to consider some central control over the clearly inadequate system by which it was left to individual London parishes to provide and maintain fire engines, but to no avail.

On a bitterly cold night in 1838 the Royal Exchange was destroyed in a fire begun by a stove in Lloyd's rooms there. Braidwood's men were quickly on the scene but could not get to work because the outlet plugs on the water pipes were frozen up and when at length water was obtained the pumps on the manual engines froze up too. In that fire a large number of records of the Mayor's Court was lost. In 1841 the armoury at the Tower of London was engulfed in fire and much of the magnificent collection of arms and armour of King James II was destroyed.

In response to such fires and to fires in commercial premises particularly in the docks the insurance companies formed salvage corps in London as well as Liverpool and Glasgow. The job of the salvage men was to attend major fires alongside the fire brigade in order to protect goods from water damage by covering them with waterproof sheets, removing what goods they could, cleaning up and securing the premises against theft and looting.

In 1861 came an event which was to signal a turning point in the history of fire-fighting in London. It was occasioned by the most spectacular of fires in London's great riverside warehouses. The Tooley Street fire broke out in stored hemp in a six-storey warehouse at 5 a.m. on a Saturday. Apart from the hemp the contents included saltpetre, cotton, rice, sugar, tea, spices and tallow. Above all, tallow. The fire was soon burning on every floor and Braidwood ordered virtually every man and engine to the scene. With such contents to feed on the fire rapidly spread to neighbouring warehouses including Hay's Wharf and Chamberlain's Wharf filled from basement to roof with sulphur, flour, jute, oils, paint and still more tallow. The inferno raged out of control for two whole days with burning tallow flowing into the river and creating the impression that the Thames itself was on fire. Braidwood, in the thick of the firefighting, was killed when a wall of one of the warehouses collapsed and buried him in the burning rubble.

Relief came from an unexpected quarter, a Lambeth gin distillery, no less, whose owner, Frederick Hodges, had formed a works fire brigade with some quite advanced fire engines. With these forces and a new steamer he was able to borrow, Hodges and his men were able at last to stop further spread, but it was another two weeks before the burning ruins were finally quiescent.

Braidwood had led London's Fire Engine Establishment for 38 years and his contribution to the history of London's firefighters was crucial. (As an aside it is perhaps of interest to record that in 1993 as Chief Commoner I had the opportunity of naming a passageway next to my office in Aldersgate Street, one-time home of the London Salvage Corps, as Braidwood Passage - one of the few examples of a City thoroughfare being named after a person!).

The Tooley Street fire cost the insurance companies £2 million - an enormous sum for those days. Insurance premiums soared and the City merchants petitioned the Lord Mayor for help in opposing the increases. The insurers, for their part, felt that they had for far too long carried the burden of protecting London from fire and wrote to the Home Secretary that it was no more their job to protect the lives and properties of the population from fire than to guard them against thieves and murderers. They threatened to disband their Fire Engine Establishment.

Faced with this ultimatum the Government did what governments do and set up a Select Committee. While it was deliberating the companies appointed Captain Massey Shaw to run their establishment. Shaw, previously Chief Constable and Chief Fire Officer of Belfast, was to become as famous in the history of firefighting as Braidwood before him.

The Select Committee was told that the law requiring London's 100 parishes to provide fire engines and men at the ready was almost entirely ignored.

The insurance companies' establishment numbered only 127 men. It was efficient but far too small and indeed operated largely within a radius of three miles of the Royal Exchange. The Lord Mayor told the Committee they needed a force at least four times as large, that it should be an independent body commanded by a person with powers as despotic as that of a captain of a battleship. The Metropolitan and City Police Commissioners each recommended that the fire brigade should be part of their police forces. Massey Shaw commented that you could not turn police constables into skilled firemen.

In the outcome the Select Committee recommended the formation of a London-wide fire brigade coming within the establishment of the Metropolitan Police. The cost was put at £70,000 a year which the Home Secretary said was absolutely out of the question. The scheme was trimmed and a cheaper option costing £50,000 agreed. Eventually police control was rejected mainly because of opposition from the City which said that if the Metropolitan Police were to run it they would want a separate brigade under the control of the City Police. The final solution was to place the brigade under the direct management of the Metropolitan Board of Works. Thus was London's Metropolitan Fire Brigade established by Act of Parliament in 1865 with Massey Shaw as its first Chief Officer.

These then were the origins of the London Fire Brigade as we know it today. From 1865 to the present time the fire brigade has continued under the control of a London-wide authority. In 1889 when the Metropolitan Board of Works gave way to the London County Council (soon after, for the third time, the City Corporation had declined the Government's invitation to assume responsibility for all London) the fire brigade came under the new L.C.C. There was a brief exception during the last war when all the country's fire brigades were nationalized and placed under the control of the Home Secretary. In 1964 on the creation of the Greater London Council the brigade became a G.L.C. responsibility. Now, of course, it is controlled by an authority comprising representatives of the 32 London Boroughs and the City Corporation.

This account will, I hope, have served to indicate the City's crucial contribution towards the establishment of a fire service that is held in such esteem as one of the largest and most highly professional firefighting bodies in the world. Its strength of just under 7,000 firemen is not much different from the force of 7,000 vigiles who fought the fires in Ancient Rome - such a comparatively small number made possible of course by the rather more sophisticated resources now available to them.