

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2001

Berkshire Fire Brigade

In January, Geoff Brooks came to tell us about the *Berkshire Fire Brigade*. Geoff was born at Crazies Hill, and lived there or in Wargrave since, and had been a member of the local fire service for some 30 years, including 5 as officer in charge of the Wargrave Fire Station.

He began by tracing the history of fire services in general. Fire is a 'good servant', but a 'bad enemy'. The first to think about fire protection were the Romans, who - following a fire in Rome in 2BC - formed groups to deal with them. The slaves who did the work were not very effective and after a large fire in 6AD when 25% of the city burnt, the elders organised groups of vigiles to look after fire fighting. They were quite forward thinking, and the provision of pumps spread throughout the empire - remains of one such pump having been found at Silchester. However, as the Roman empire faded so the knowledge of fire fighting was lost.

Despite several large fires, in Britain little happened until 1198, when the Lord Mayor of London decided that all new buildings should be of stone, with a slate roof, rather than of wood, to minimise the fire risk. Even so, the First Great Fire of London in 1212 claimed 3000 lives. The Second Great Fire, of 1666 lasted for 4 days and nights, covering an area 1 mile long and ½ mile wide, leaving 100,000 people homeless.

The insurance companies began to set up their own fire brigades - but would only put out the fire for a property insured by their company - and otherwise just stand and watch. Eventually, they managed to work together to provide better cover. Outside of London, parish authorities were responsible for providing protection. Some were well equipped, but others could only manage a couple of water buckets. To work the pumps, any man around would be grabbed - and paid in beer - if it did not arrive, they stopped pumping!

Fire protection began to change with the ideas of James Braidwood, appointed firemaster of Edinburgh in 1824. He provided - with the help of insurance companies - fire stations across the city, manned by full time trained firemen, and suitable water supplies. London started to copy this system, and Braidwood moved to take charge there. Following his death in a large fire at Tooley Street, Braidwood was succeeded by Massey Shaw - the 'Father of the Fire Brigade'. He upgraded the equipment, the provision of water mains, improved the recruitment and training etc., and to help with the rescue, as well as fire fighting, tasks, 50ft wheeled escape ladders were introduced.

A serious fire at the Theatre Royal, Exeter in 1887, led to legislation on fire safety for theatres. Geoff commented that virtually all safety legislation has come about as the result of a disaster of some kind.

The first world war did not present the Fire Service with too many problems. In the inter-war era motor vehicles were introduced to replace those pulled by horses. In the 1930s, Chief Fire

Officers - planning 'in case it happened again' looked at air raid precautions. Volunteer auxiliary firemen were recruited, with an initial 60 hours training, and following the outbreak of war, these became the National Fire Service. After the war, the Fire Services Act was passed, setting up the system as we know it to day, with local authorities having responsibility for fire protection, provision of water supplies etc. The equipment was also standardised, so that any brigade could connect their hoses or pumps etc to those of any other - a problem hitherto.

In Wargrave, the first provision recorded is in 1905, when a manual pump was purchased by Mr Hannen, and looked after by the Scouts. This, together with steam pumps from Henley and Wokingham attended the church fire in 1914. Mr Easterling became chairman of the fire committee, and many of his staff were in the brigade - which practice continued until the builders yard closed a few years ago. In 1930 a house-to- house collection in the village raised the funds to purchase a new Morris Commercial fire engine. Housed in a fire station (the present one) built by the firemen with materials provided by the parish council. Wokingham District Council took it over in 1938, and the engine was replaced by a Dennis in 1942.

Apart from the pictures used to illustrate his talk, Geoff brought along a brass fire helmet that had belonged to a Wargrave fireman, Alf Parrott.
