

THE GREATER MANCHESTER FIRE SERVICE MUSEUM

Robert F. Bonner

If there is any one occurrence which is guaranteed to hold the attention of every passer-by — even momentarily — it is the sight of a fire engine hurtling down the street to some unknown destination on its errand of mercy. That observation is as true today in this age of turbocharged, fully-automatic “appliances” as it was in the romantic era of the liveried, horse-drawn “manuals” 150 years ago. The traditional aspirations of every small boy of becoming either a train driver or a fireman are very much alive so far as the latter goes, although nowadays his sister will probably have equal chance of being a “firefighter”.

It is against this background of perpetual public fascination that one of Greater Manchester’s most unusual, though perhaps least well-known, museums has thrived for the past six years. Fire stations throughout the world are renowned for their hospitality and willingness to throw open their doors to visitors in a way that few other public services ever do, but in this region it is possible to go one step further and explore the history of firefighting in every fascinating detail. The Greater Manchester Fire Service Museum at Rochdale is one of only a handful of similar establishments in the country though such museums do tend to be more numerous on the Continent, and in the USA where they often glory in such fanciful names as “Hall of Flame”!

Most fire brigades seem to accumulate mementoes and relics from the past, and it was from the collective souvenirs of the ten constituent brigades which went to make up the GMC Fire Service, crammed into a small room, that the collection has grown. In 1978 a preservation society was formed from interested members of the Brigade and only five years later their dream of a new Brigade Museum, with all exhibits under one roof, materialised at Rochdale. Today the Museum, situated in its own building next to the town’s fire station, houses over a dozen fire appliances, dating from as far back as 1760, together with a large and varied assortment of photographs, uniforms, insignia and all manner of firefighting equipment and memorabilia.

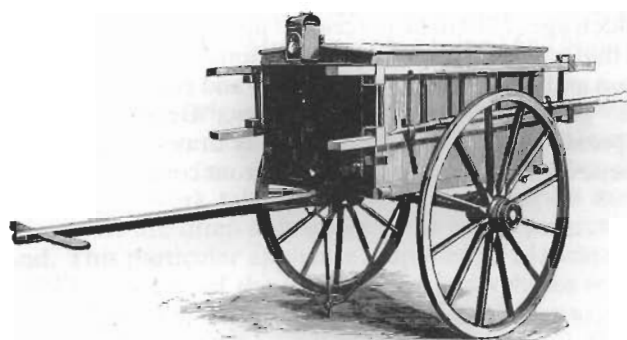


SHAND, MASON & CO'S LONDON BRIGADE MANUAL FIRE ENGINE,
(of which 58 supplied by them are now in use by the Metropolitan (London) Fire Brigade.)

Shand Mason 'London Brigade' horse-drawn manual fire engine, from an 1890 catalogue.

WILLIAM ROSE & CO. METROPOLITAN WORKS, MANCHESTER

THE “MANCHESTER” IMPROVED HOSE AND IMPLEMENT CART.



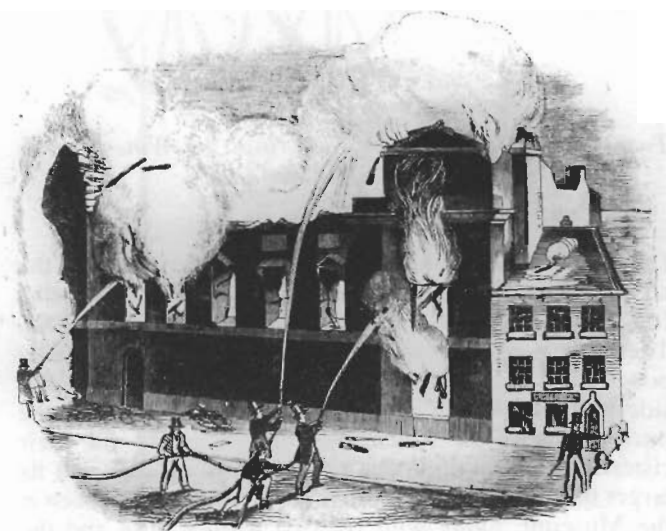
Two-wheeled horse-cart, c.1885, built by Wm. Rose & Co., of Salford.

Discounting some rather primitive inventions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the first noteworthy fire engines in this country appeared in the early 1700s. These appliances were hand-propelled, manually-powered pumps, operated by wooden handles on either side, and delivering only a little more water than the bucket chains on which they depended to fill their cisterns. Examples of this type of appliance — and its larger brother, the horse-drawn manual — can be seen in the Museum, along with rivetted leather hose and the long copper “branchpipes” which were attached to the end to produce a jet. Manual engines of this kind were used by the insurance offices, whose privately-run fire brigades grew up after the Great Fire of London. Tales of the rivalry between company brigades, whose colourful engines and men existed solely to protect buildings insured by *their* office, are legendary. In the window of the Museum’s “insurance agent’s office”, part of a period street set, can be seen policies and proposals from different companies. The Museum also displays an eye-catching selection of firemarks, embossed metal plaques featuring the company’s trademark which were affixed to buildings as an indication to insurance firemen whether they should put out the blaze, or leave it to the relevant rival office!

Local insurance brigades included the Royal Exchange, the West of England and the Norwich Union, which enjoyed an excellent reputation as a professional, disciplined outfit long before many of the town council fire brigades. The company operations gradually gave way to local authority fire brigades — in varying degrees of efficiency — and by the mid-nineteenth century had all but disappeared. Edinburgh formed the earliest creditable municipal fire brigade in 1824, followed two years later by Manchester, the first in England. A Greater Manchester location for a fire service museum is thus particularly appropriate.

These early municipal brigades were often referred to as "fire police" and indeed the two forces do share a certain common history. Right up to the last war the majority of County Boroughs and Cities, including most of the authorities in the Manchester area, placed their Chief Constable in charge of the firemen, who were duly "sworn in", and in some towns the policemen doubled as auxiliary firefighters.

Simultaneous with improvements in organisation were developments in water supplies and, more importantly, fire engine technology; in the latter half of the last century steam power reigned supreme in the best fire brigades. The Museum's pride and joy is its horse-drawn steamer "George V" built by Shand Mason and Co. of London. Although somewhat younger than steamers from the golden age (1910 to be precise), it nevertheless epitomises all that was great about such fiery monsters. The gleaming brass and copper-work of the boiler and engine parts, and the gold-lined paintwork make "George V" an impressive exhibit, and it invariably draws large crowds whenever it is taken out. (See our front cover).



THE BURNING OF THE THEATRE ROYAL, FOUNTAIN STREET, MANCHESTER, 7TH MAY, 1844

Before a steam fire engine could even begin to extinguish a fire it was necessary to light one in the firebox of the engine itself. A good head of steam would soon be raised on the way to the scene and, to save time, the fire was usually ready laid before the turn-out. Sometimes a small gas ring in the engine house kept the boiler warm.

It is reputed that when fire destroyed the tower of Rochdale's great Town Hall in 1883, the brigade — housed inside the building itself — was unable to get its steamer to work, as there was barely 100 yards in which to raise steam. Without further ado, the men galloped off around the town centre, and on their return a short while later — so the story goes — found the crew from Oldham already at work on the flames!

"George V" is one of only a few steam fire engines in the country still in full working order, and has held an almost continuous boiler certificate. Its two-cylinder "double vertical" engine is still capable of sending two powerful jets of water to the height of Rochdale fire station tower. To display "George" more effectively, the Museum has provided a turn-of-the-century style fire station set, complete with a host of period features such as brass sliding pole, uniform and equipment racks, folding doors and a cobbled forecourt.

Contemporary with the steamers were the street fire escape stations. In 1836 the Society (later Royal Society) for the Protection of Life from Fire first began to install wheeled escape ladders, provided by public subscription, on the streets of London, for use by persons in case of fire. At that time fire brigades generally did not perceive rescue from burning buildings to be a part of their duties — they usually arrived too late anyway — and the Society's escapes were very often the only life-saving equipment around. The idea extended to other places and street escape stations, by now provided and staffed round-the-clock by the local fire service, became commonplace in the larger towns in the late nineteenth century.

A splendid escape of this sort, dating from around 1900, can be seen in the Museum, complete with equipment box and canvas chute down which trapped persons could slide to safety. Although of a similar design to the typical "street escape", the example at Rochdale is in fact from a private country estate. In the days before fire brigades were as dependable or as professional as they are now, it was not uncommon for such estates, asylums, colleges and the larger industrial concerns to operate their own fire appliances and firemen, and these were often quite elaborate affairs. The limitations of available communication systems (which often resulted in very slow turnouts by today's standards) and the comparatively lengthy arrival times in those pre-motorised days, meant that in the more remote districts, a fire could take serious hold by the time the nearest horse-drawn steamer galloped through the gate.

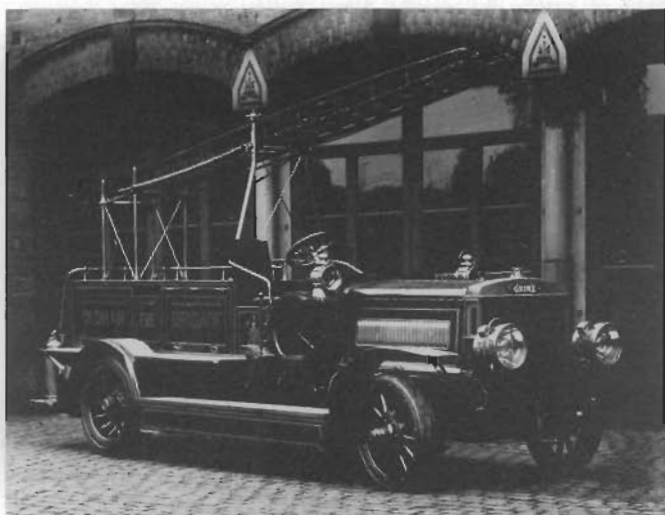
Many of the private fire brigades were as well-organised and experienced as those of the smaller towns. Through their various organisations, they often took part in competitions and rallies and were frequently called upon to assist the town fire brigades at large incidents.

The Museum has many interesting relics from these brigades, including light hose-carts, manual pumps and items of uniform. Also on display are medals awarded to officers from private brigades together with trophies and certificates won in the numerous competitive events attended. A 1902 two-wheeled hose-cart, used by the Manchester Dock Police to deal with cotton fires and similar outbreaks on the quayside, has been fully restored by the Museum after being "rescued" in a near-derelict condition from Pomona Docks. Outbreaks of fire amongst cargoes of imported cotton were fairly frequent and throughout the history of Greater Manchester's fire services the largest and most difficult incidents have always been in premises associated with the textile trade. The flammability of cotton fibres, the hazardous processes involved in spinning and the design of the mills and warehouses have all contributed to the brigade's problems and ensured that the region's firemen are among the busiest and most experienced anywhere.

The principal reasons for the decline of both the street stations and some of the private brigades were, firstly, improved communications (notably the street fire alarm) and secondly, the motorisation of fire brigades.

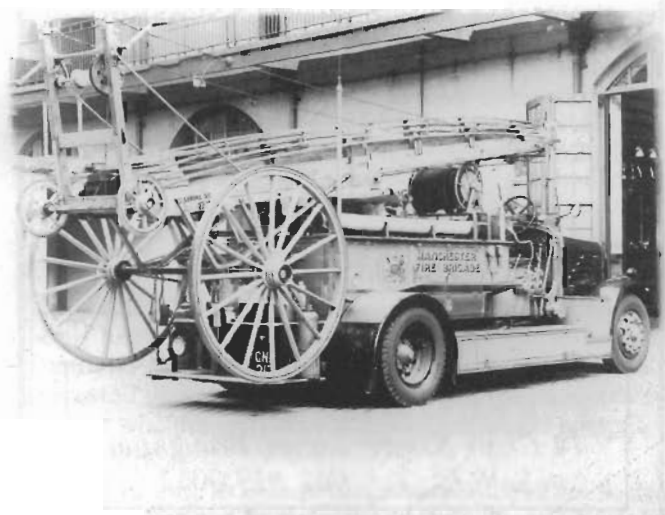
Street alarms, which were introduced from the United States, provided a ready made means of turning out fire engines, literally from the street corner. The typical design featured a clockwork mechanism which was kept wound up ready for action until a caller actuated the box usually by means of a handle behind glass. Once "turned in" a coded signal was sent along wires to the central fire station, where a sophisticated reception apparatus was

located. This reproduced the number of the box by either a bell code or punch tape and it was a simple job to check off the number against a displayed list of box numbers and addresses. The code wheel device and intricate clockwork parts can be clearly seen in the Museum's alarm box which stands on a pillar in the Victorian street. With the greater introduction of telephone kiosks, and an unacceptable rise in malicious false alarms in the post-war years, most brigades abandoned their systems with reluctance and today none remain in the United Kingdom.



1910 motor fire engine 'Grime' of Oldham Fire Brigade based on a Scottish-built Argyll chassis.

The turn of the century brought with it the advent of the motorised fire engine and — although not particularly successful — the credit for the first such appliance must go to Eccles Fire Brigade. In September 1901, this small Greater Manchester borough took delivery of a locally-built Protector motor car, adapted to convey firemen and apparatus. The vehicle had a relatively short life, being returned to the manufacturer after a number of accidents. Of course this machine no longer survives, but the Museum does have on display a photograph and a wooden plaque, bearing the Borough's arms which is believed to be from the vehicle.



A 1940 Dennis escape-carrying appliance with Braidwood-style bodywork, currently undergoing restoration.

The first generation of motor fire engines, up to the outbreak of World War II, were built to a universal design known as the "Braidwood" pattern, the essential feature of which was that the crew rode on the outside of the vehicle, just as they did in the horse-drawn days. James Braidwood, whose death predates the introduction of fire engines named in his honour by over forty years, was probably Britain's first fire chief celebrity. He was the man who organised the Edinburgh Fire Engine Establishment in 1824, before moving to London eight years later. It was whilst directing operations at the great Tooley Street fire of 1861, in London's dockland, that Braidwood was killed when a warehouse collapsed. Today in Tooley Street, a little-known sculptured plaque marks the spot, and a framed miniature of this plaque — together with a button cut from his tunic at the time of his death — is one of the Museum's most valued and historic exhibits.

Members of the Brigade's Museum Society are at present undertaking the complete restoration of a Dennis Braidwood-type fire engine from the chassis upwards. Preservation work takes place inside the Museum itself and visitors are often able to see some of the projects in hand. This particular appliance, supplied to Manchester in 1940, was one of the last open-bodied vehicles to be delivered and was still "new" when the Blitz began to rage across the city.



Leyland-Metz Turntable Ladder, damaged following a 'direct hit' on the building it was attending, Manchester Blitz, Dec. 1940.

The Second World War was one of the most significant periods in the history of the British fire service. Auxiliary and regular firemen worked against impossible odds in atrocious conditions night after night to save our major towns from the ravages of the Luftwaffe, and many were to lose their lives in the fight. As fire brigades were mobilised from region to region to deal with the major conflagrations it was soon realised that there were serious problems with the compatibility of equipment from different areas, also rank structures and communications, all of which hindered operations. These lessons, and the experience of a nationalised fire service (from 1941-1948) laid the foundations for the modern fire brigade. Several items from the wartime period are exhibited in the Museum including auxiliary fire pumps, uniforms and an incendiary bomb. A realistic tableau containing many of these, attempts to portray some of the conditions endured by firemen in dealing with Blitz fires.



"The correct method". A street fire alarm in operation, Manchester, c.1950.

The Museum does not consist only of fire engines and other firefighting hardware. Many historically significant photographs, prints and models are on show, and there are fascinating displays such as a selection of enamelled hydrant indicator plates from various locations. Students of medals and insignia can see many interesting examples including the rare "Quiver" medal and Manchester Watch Committee Silver Medal for Bravery. There is a wealth of material concerning most of the Greater Manchester brigades, the various fire equipment manufacturers in the area and local fire service personalities from the past such as Superintendent Alfred Tozer. Nevertheless the Museum is constantly on the lookout for new items and will be pleased to hear from readers who have information on the whereabouts of relevant artefacts.

Behind the scenes is a rapidly-growing archives collection containing occurrence and log books, personnel records, technical literature and periodicals, together with photographs, plates and cine films showing the work of the fire service locally. Although this side of the collection is not yet open to the public, the Museum will endeavour to help with any specific research enquiries.

Several interesting publications on local fire service history have been produced by Museum Society members or other enthusiasts and can be obtained from the Museum. These include *Manchester Fire Brigade*, *The History of Mossley Fire Brigade*, *Fire Appliances of Lancashire County Fire Brigade* and a history of London Road Fire Station, Manchester. Two books featuring the Manchester and Salford blitz also describe the work of local firemen.

The Museum is very much a "working" museum too. During the summer months members of the Museum Society frequently attend shows and rallies with the exhibits as far afield as the Midlands and the North East and of course many local events. Appliances from the Museum are a regular sight in the Manchester Parade, the Trans-Pennine Run for historic commercial vehicles, and at almost all local fire station "open days".

The Annual Museum Open Day is a major event with working demonstrations, visiting preserved appliances and other special attractions. Occasional "mini-open days" are also held which are usually publicised. At other times the Museum is open by prior arrangement. Unlike many museums, there is no paid curator; instead, all the staff are volunteers who carry out restoration projects, take care of the building and exhibits, and deal with visitors in their spare time. There is no charge for admission and interested groups or individuals should either write to the Museum or telephone for further details. A guided tour is normally provided (if required) and the Museum is particularly suitable for the disabled thanks to the single-storey design and wide gangways. Buses and trains from Bury, Oldham and Manchester stop close by and there is ample car parking.

The Greater Manchester Fire Service Museum, c/o Fire Station, Maclure Road, Rochdale, OL11 1DN. (Tel. Rochdale 341221).

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