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By the Way Rival Brigades

On the walls of a few Sheffield buildings are what at a cursory glance appear to be small coats of arms.

They are in fact, "fire marks," last traces of a colourful but questionable period in the history of fire brigades and insurance companies.

Up to 60 or 70 years ago companies identified buildings insured with them by nailing their fire mark on a wall.

Fire brigades at that time were owned by the insurance companies. When a building caught fire, each brigade in the vicinity raced to get there first, so that people would see how smart they were and take out a policy with them rather than with their competitors.

But if the first brigade to reach the fire saw by the mark on the building that it was insured with another company it often turned back - in some cases helping the fire along before leaving!

This fire brigade brigandage was explained to us by Mr. C. J. Macdonald, insurance broker, of Norfolk Row, Sheffield, in whose office is a collection of fire marks.

It was the Great Fire of London which began the idea of fire insurance and in 1684 a Dr. Nicholas Barbon and some cronies formed "The Fire Office," which adopted a phoenix as its fire mark.

Later, other companies were formed, each with its own fire mark, usually made of lead or copper.