

A Century of Fighting Fires

In the early 1800s, there wasn't a Sheffield Fire Brigade. You had to take your chance with Sheffield's three fire insurance agencies - the Liverpool, London and Globe in Norfolk Street, the Royal in Bank Street and the Birmingham Fire Office at Attercliffe.

The agencies had their own private brigades and would turn out to all fires, but if your premises were not insured with them you had to pay. Not only that but rivalry between the different insurance brigades often meant they sabotaged the other teams efforts. Some people insured with all three agencies to be on the safe side.

Things were a little better when the Sheffield Fire Brigade was first formed in 1869. 'Superintendent John Charles' Pound, who founded it, tells of the early days in his Fire Engine Station, Sheffield - three yellowing pages of copperplate script now in the files at brigade headquarters.

Superintendent Pound had to form the Brigade with 15 young police constables as firemen.

For four years the engines had to be dragged to a fire by hand, as no horses could be got out in reasonable time. But then, the superintendent only hints at it, came a big storm.

"I received a call for a fire at Fullwood. We had to wait 45 minutes for horses. Before we started; an alderman and several reporters came to the station and the next day there was a long report in the newspaper. After the next council meeting two horses were purchased"

The horses were also kept busy hauling the prison van and carrying coals to the police stations, as well as dragging the fire engines.

Things, of course are different today:

Automation first started in the 1920s, when horses which drew the engines were specially bred animals. When the fire bell rang, they would of their own accord leave their stables and back into their harness, which hung ready in the harness room.

Sheffield brigade is now one of the most modern in the country. Included in its fighting gear is the 85ft jointed Snorkel ladder. Mounted on a revolving turntable the Snorkel can bend to reach roofs and windows inaccessible to conventional ladders.

The brigade is so, highly organised that it has already fought every big fire in the city - on paper. They have mentally tackled every big fire in the city, and what, to do when it really happens is all laid out in a master-plan at their control room so comprehensive and precise is this blue print that a raw recruit could mobilise the men and equipment to- handle a blaze of any size in the city.

Countdown on a big fire begins with a phone call or a flashing light. The mobilising officer then consults a two-foot high wad of indexed metal sheets. On these are listed every high-risk centre within Sheffield and The prescribed number of appliances to be called out

if they figure in a blaze.

When a call is received it is automatically taped along with an accurate time-check from the GPO's Speaking Clock.

An officer in the control room then throws a switch to alert the appropriate suburban station. This switch sounds the substation's alarm, opens its doors and at night switches its lights on. Control then announces the details over the sub-station's public address system and the engine is off - all in less than 30 seconds.

The new Malin Bridge station is part of this integrated system - built in just over a year at a cost of £68,000, it has two fire tenders and over 20 men.

It will serve an area of eight square miles which includes 16 schools, two hospitals, Hollow Meadow Psychiatric Hospital and two children's homes.

Previously this ' area was served by Division Street, but keeping one step ahead of the ever increasing traffic, two years :ago the brigade put forward plans for a new station at Malin Bridge.

This will he opened today by the Lord Mayer of Sheffield Ald., Dan O'Neil.

Sheffield's seventh fire station, it marks yet another step forward in the century old fight against fire.