

Account of Purley on Thames

Fire and Rescue Services

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Acts of God

At one time a fire was regarded as an Act of God and as recompense the person who suffered loss could appeal to the people of God, ie the church, by means of a brief. This was issued at first by bishops but later by the King and entitled the sufferer to have a brief read in church on a Sunday so that people could subscribe to compensate him for his loss. He rarely got more than a fraction of the money subscribed as there were plenty of middle men all of whom wanted their cut. (ref a)

The idea that anything could be done about fires was however a bit too far fetched. Most buildings were made of wood,thatched and contained open fires so it was hardly surprising that they often caught fire and burned too fiercely for a few bucketfuls of water thrown on to make much difference.

Early Protection

Many large houses had their own system of fire protection, often a reciprocating manual engine with a hose long enough to reach an ornamental pond which was as utilitarian as it was decorative. (ref e)

By an Act of 1707 each parish was required to have and maintain a 'large engine on wheels' this would be trundled to the fire, usually by horses and generally had two ash poles on either side of a tank so that when the poles were pressed down alternately this rocking movement worked a pump which pressurised the hose. The engines were surprising efficient and could provide quite a jet of water. The engine's tank would usually contain only a small amount of water and this would have to be replenished with buckets from the village pond. Any bystanders could be impressed into service on the spot and would be issued with a metal token which could be redeemed later for beer money. Englefield Parish has a very nice example of an engine which has survived, although this is steam driven, and probably was associated with Englefield House. We can assume that Purley had one but so far as we are aware there is no record of it.

Insurance

By the 17th century however it became possible to insure ones buildings against fire. This in turn caused the insurance companies to do something about the problems so as to minimise their losses. Their approach was to set up or pay an honorarium to local fire services which would only attend if the building bore the correct 'fire mark' This was a metal plaque which would be affixed to the outside of the house to confirm that a policy was in force and which company was responsible. Surviving examples can be seen at Westbury farm which has two of them and at Sulham Farm today. The Sulham one is from the Sun Insurance Co and the Westbury Farm ones are inscribed 'protector', one is round and the other square shaped. For the parish brigades there was quite an incentive to deal with a fire at an insured building as the Insurance Company would often make a substantial ex gratia payment if a substantial part could be saved. (ref a)

By the late 18th century the Insurance companies were taking matters more seriously and three of them had their own private fire brigades in Reading, the Phoenix Insurance Company (1790), the

Berkshire, Gloucester and Provincial Fire Office (1825) and The County Fire Office (1827) These supplemented the parish brigades, but only in the town area, and it is doubtful if any of these private brigades ever came out as far as Purley. The situation was far from satisfactory as rival companies used to cut their competitors hoses or generally impede the attempt to put out the fires. (ref a)

The Pangbourne Fire Brigade

The Pangbourne and District Fire Brigade was established as a result of the Parish Fire Engines Act 1898 and this enabled the parish to subcontract their responsibilities to what was then a private concern. When the Parish Council was formed in 1927 they renegotiated the arrangement and entered into a new contract which is dated 9th October 1928.

In this the parish agreed to pay the brigade £25 per year, in return for which the brigade would attend to fires in the parish of Purley provided due notice was delivered to the Fire Chief at their Offices at Reading Road in Pangbourne.

However the fire brigade was entitled to any ex gratia payments made by the insurance company. Also the Parish had one representative on the management committee of the brigade. The brigade was managed for many years by Horace Turner who as well as being a solicitor's clerk in Pangbourne was also clerk to both Purley and Pangbourne Parish Councils and had an office just across the road from the first fire-station. Until it acquired its first motorised vehicle the engine was horse drawn, the horses being kept at Marsh Barn, just over the Purley boundary. (ref 282, d, f)

The Berkshire Fire Service

The Pangbourne Brigade was taken over by the Berkshire Fire Brigade sometime in the 1930s and the whole concern was run by the County Council. In 1941 the Fire Service was nationalised as a war time measure as the National Fire Service.

During the war many of the able-bodied men were called up to serve in the armed forces and many of the functions of the fire brigade were carried out by the local civil defence volunteers. In particular they were concerned to ensure that there were adequate supplies of sand and water available to douse fires started by aerial bombing and that there were plenty of fire-buckets and stirrup pumps available for people to help themselves.

After the war in 1948 the Berkshire and Reading Fire Services (combination) order was made and this returned it to local control with Reading Borough and Berkshire County Council having equal representation on the Board of Management. Bradfield came under A division which served central Berks and the Pangbourne station was known as 'No 7'. It did not seem to have a lot to do as in 1950/51 there were only 33 reported call outs for fires of which 3 call outs were for the pump and the remaining 30 for the water tender only. (ref b)

In 1959 the Fire Services Act set much higher standards of fire cover and the Central area was reorganised as B Division. The Annual Reports give a few glimpses of the fires that the Pangbourne brigade attended, the report for 1959/60 included:-

15/5/59 - A fire at Pierces Farm, Goodboys Lane Grazeley Green. Two appliances from Reading and one each from Pangbourne and Mortimer were called out.

4/9/59 - There was a woodland fire at College Piece Mortimer and the Pangbourne water tender was called out to attend.

14/10/59 - The Pangbourne brigade were called out to assist at a fire at Newports Furniture Store, 128 Caversham Road, Reading.

24/3/1960 - There was a fire at Mayridge Farm, Englefield and both the Reading and Pangbourne brigades were called out. En route they spotted another major fire and appliances from Mortimer, Goring and Newbury were also called out.

The only local fire noted in the annual reports was one at Uplands, Riverview Road in Pangbourne

on 5/12/62.

Call Out

The local firemen have almost all been part timers and had to be called out to attend a fire. This was usually done by means of a siren or bells, but Pangbourne had a system of rocket launched maroons which were released from Pangbourne Recreation Ground by a Mr Johnson who was phoned by the officer on duty. In 1970 however they were issued with pocket call out receiver radios which greatly increased the effectiveness. (ref b, d)

The telephone was always the chief means of calling out the brigade, despite the letter of the contract which required notice to be given in person. Pangbourne had its local number until 1966 when the Pangbourne exchange was automated and it was possible for the 999 facility to connect direct to the station. The next year in June 1967 all 999 calls were directed to the Reading control when Pangbourne came onto a central communications multiplexor. (ref b)

Locations

Originally the fire station had been adjacent to the Breedon School (later Percy Stones). They had a long narrow building to accommodate the engine and a second vehicle to carry the firemen. This site was abandoned on the outbreak of war in 1940 and the brigade took over the scout hut which was about 100 yards further east along the Reading Road. In 1970 this site was no longer considered suitable so in November a tender was accepted for a new station in Horsehoe Road.

This became operational in August 1971 and the old site was used by the County Council as the site for the present library.

Fire and Rescue Service

In 1974 the brigade was renamed the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service and came entirely under the control of the County Council as Reading lost its Fire Protection powers.

It has greatly extended its role and has a considerable responsibility for fire inspections, safety and rescue as well as putting out fires. It often puts in appearances at village and school fetes with an engine on display, it is usually on standby and frequently has to dash off to a call.

The Recreation Ground in Danger

The summer of 1989 was very hot and dry and the danger of fires was always present. On the evening of Monday August 7th straw lying on the field to the west of the Beech Recreation Ground caught alight and flames spread rapidly

The Brigade were called out and arrived with a pumper and crew. They were just getting it under control assisted by men from Sulham Farm Estates when the engine ran out of water and had to return to Pangbourne to refill. While it was away the wind changed and freshened suddenly and flames swept towards the recreation ground. Despite the efforts of the firemen it spread under the fence and burned most of the long dried grass on the western edge of the ground and spreading out across the cricket pitch.

Several by-standers tried to assist the firemen by carrying buckets of water from the pavilion (or in firemen's helmets) and by paddling the flames, but it was not till the engine returned and could begin to damp the ground down that the fire was finally got under control. Luckily only a few trees were scorched and none of the buildings were affected.

Bibliography

282 - Contract between Purley Parish Council and the Pangbourne and District Fire Brigade (1928)

- a - Fire Fighting in Days of Old (R J M Barker 1974)
- b - Annual Reports of the Berkshire and Reading Fire Brigade.(1948-73)
- c - Conversations with Reg Marshall
- d - Correspondence with Ken Mercer
- e - Conversations with Percy Stone

