

# *Account of Purley on Thames*

## Fire Protection

R200478 15/1/2018

*An Article originally published in two parts in Purley Parish News - by John Chapman*

### PUBLIC SERVICES OVER THE YEARS - PART 8

This month we start a two-part history of fire protection.

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, i.e. 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 the Brief read out 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.

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 buckets of water thrown on to make much difference.

By the 17th century, however, things began to change and it became possible to insure one's buildings against fire. 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 and generally had two beams on either side of a tank so that when the beams were pressed down alternately, this rocking movement worked a pump which pressurised the hose. 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. We can assume that Purley had one but so far as we are aware there is no record of it.

By the late 18th Century the Insurance Companies had to do something about the problems so as to minimise their losses. Their approach was to set up local private fire services which would attend a fire only 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. 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).

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