

TWENTY-ONE YEARS A FIREMAN

The Story of the Christchurch Fire Brigade

C.T. October 4, 1941

'Something attempted—'

By "M."

SEATED in a small square room lined on three sides with all the charts, maps and specially designed indicators that keep a Chief Officer in touch with every movement of every piece of equipment of an important and highly-efficient station in the National Fire Service, I chatted this week with the man who has seen the Christchurch Brigade grow — so far as equipment is concerned, at any rate — from the ridiculous to the sublime.

If you wanted to know the secret of the Brigade — and it has been a very successful brigade in every aspect—I would say, without hesitation — the intense interest the Chief has always taken in what he himself called his life's hobby and the way he always sees the funny side of things. Chief Officer W. J. Bryant (Capt. Bryant to the public, or the Chief to his men) has an almost inexhaustible fund of yarns about our Fire Brigade.

Christchurch had a Fire Brigade before the last war, and in its early days the Chiefs included Mr. Charlie Burry and Mr. J. London. In 1916 its members were: Capt. J. London and Messrs. F. G. Barnes, C. Bagshot, C. London, F. Dixon, J. Horlock, C. Tilley, T. Stride, R. Martin, J. Mudford and H. Brewer: the first three named members serving on the Joint Committee with eight members of the Council, led by the Mayor, Alderman H. Harding.

Brigade Disbanded.

Then there was a break. The Brigade was disbanded and we paid Bournemouth a retaining fee for the use of their brigade; but in November, 1920, Major Howe reformed the Christchurch Fire Brigade with Mr. R. Pope, 2nd officer, Mr. Bryant, 3rd officer, and Fireman Ford. Fireman Ford, incidentally, shares with Capt. Bryant the honour of still serving right from the earliest days of the reformed Brigade.

Their fire fighting equipment included one manual fire pump, a man-handled fire escape and an old barrel-shaped "Deluge" fire engine, with leather buckets, leather hose and a 6-foot branch and nozzle. A four-wheel dog-cart transported the "equipment" to the scene of the fire (when horses could be borrowed for the purpose). The "Deluge" actually had painted on the side, "Attended the Great Fire of London. 1666." This, said Capt. Bryant, had been done by "some wag or other!"

Fun With The Fire Escape.

The fire escape, part of the original equipment, hardly ever went out, apparently because it was such a job to load it on in such a way as to be reasonably sure that it would still be there on arrival. Also it needed an extra man on the dog-cart when the escape was aboard to sit on the other end of the ladder to hold it down! One of the few times it was taken out, however, happened to be Capt. Bryant's very first fire, one Saturday afternoon. There was grand excitement in the town that afternoon! Traffic was held up in the High Street as the horses came clattering out: a policeman at Purewell Cross frantically waved the outfit down

Stanpit to Rushford Warren where, complete with fire escape, they discovered they had been called to put out a gorse fire! That was Capt. Bryant's first.

"Fire Watching."

One of his rather bigger fires was in the hayricks at Dudmoor Farm (up beyond St. Catherine's Hill). The Bournemouth Brigade had been called in the previous day; but their engine had become bogged and could not reach the outbreak. Mr. Joe Taylor at the farm, wondering what more to do, decided he would ask the Christchurch Brigade to come along. Capt. Bryant agreed; but on condition that Mr. Taylor sent his own horses down. That fire, said Capt. Bryant, lasted from a Friday afternoon until Sunday morning. At night-time the firemen played cards in the farm house, just popping out now and again to check up that the fire was still burning. There wasn't much they could do about putting it out in the dark, said Capt. Bryant.

It was a nuisance having to borrow horses, said Capt. Bryant, when there was a serious fire to be put out, so after about a year the Corporation purchased an old Army lorry. It was a big high old "A.A." (Associated Automobiles)—an American job—with solid tyres, of course. This was converted into a motor tender and a tow-bar fitted to the old "manual." (Note, historians, Christchurch invented the trailer pump!)

"Excuse Me, Is This Yours?"

The idea of the new motor tender was to carry the hose, etc.; but invariably, when they pulled up at a fire some private car or other vehicle, having been chasing along behind at a nifty twenty miles an hour, pulled up too and handed over all the bits that had dropped off en route from the Millhams Street Fire Station.

Major Howe had passed on leadership of the Brigade to Mr. W. A. Wimbleton after two or three years, and by 1928 Mr. Bryant had become Chief Officer.

1928 marked a milestone in the Brigade's history. The firemen wanted a motor fire engine; but the Council did not want to provide it. The firemen won!

When the Brigade, anxious to increase its efficiency, asked for the new engine, some members of the Council, stated Capt. Bryant, said the firemen would not know how to use it. Incidentally, the very first year they had it they won the cup for motor fire engine drill, beating Winchester by one-fifth of a second. But this is how the Brigade got their engine.

Taken For A Ride.

After a public meeting had been organised, the Council condescended to debate the matter and decided to instruct Councillor Bellairs (a man with mechanical knowledge) to investigate the Brigade's claim that the old "A.A." was unsafe to drive. The Fire Brigade, having had "notice of the question," carried out a little judicious "overhauling" beforehand. Then they took Councillor Bellairs for a ride! Mr. F. Sibley was the driver and a very good driver too. He knew just how far he could go with the old iron and, added Capt. Bryant, he certainly went that far! Councillor Bellairs reported back to the Council that the "A.A." was nothing more than a "man trap."

Even after that, the Council only passed by one vote the decision to purchase a new engine. Capt. Bryant was elated, only to discover later that the Mayor, Mr. Martin, had stopped the Town Clerk from ordering it as he said the resolution was not properly formed. A few days later Capt. Bryant met the Mayor in the High Street. The whole Brigade sent in their resignations; but volunteered to carry on until a new Brigade was formed. The

Corporation made an attempt to man the new Brigade, but without success. Instead they bought Capt. Bryant's men their new fire engine.

Alderman Miss Robinson's Support.

One of the most ardent supporters of the Fire Brigade on the Council was Alderman Miss M. B. Robinson, whose efforts were very largely responsible for the Brigade's success in getting the new engine. The firemen, wishing to commemorate her tireless enthusiasm in this and all Fire Brigade matters, proposed to have the new engine called the Robinson engine. The authorities refused to allow it; but the men subscribed to a fund and, after the engine had been dedicated, presented Miss Robinson with a silver key to the Millhams Street Fire Station.

Alderman Miss Robinson was Chairman of the Fire Brigade Committee for a number of years.

Competition Successes.

One of the most remarkable features of the Christchurch Fire Brigade has been their success in district and national competitions; reflection of the unbounded enthusiasm with which they tackled everything. When they acquired their Salvus breathing apparatus they entered for the rescue competitions, and for five successive years won the district competitions for the Siebe-Gorman trophy. After that time, no other brigades would compete as they said that Christchurch always won it. The trophy was therefore presented to the Christchurch Brigade "for keeps."

Ever since Capt. Bryant joined the Brigade he has not, until the outbreak of war, spent a single Whit-Monday free from competitions. In most years the Brigade has come back with 3, 4 or 5 of the district cups. In addition, they have come out top in the national motor pump competitions on two occasions, the national rescue competitions two occasions, apart from various second and third prizes.

Uniforms Under Their Arms.

I asked Capt. Bryant when the Brigade started its social and money-raising activities.

One of the earliest instances, said the Chief, was when the firemen wanted new uniforms. The old ones were so old that the men were ashamed to wear them in the street and used to carry them under their arms. The Brigade therefore organised a raffle and raised more than £60, which was used to provide each man with two suits of uniform.

The Brigade has always lent a very welcome helping hand with Carnivals. In 1928, when Mr. Hope was chairman, Mr. Wimbleton secretary, and Mr. Armstrong treasurer of the Carnival Association, more than £100 was collected: and as there was no gate money in those days, it all had to be collected too. That year the Brigade gave a display of fire fighting on the Quay, when they set fire to a full size "Slip Inn", putting it out with the old manual pump.

A Couple Of Champions.

In money-raising, too, the Christchurch Fire Brigade has reached the superlative. It has produced the greatest beggar of all time — Fireman Mortimer. In addition, it has produced the most expert climber (of the "cat-burglar" type).

It was one summer when the firemen took a 12-foot high home-made elephant to help with the Bournemouth Carnival that Capt. Bryant suddenly discovered the agility of Mr.

Oliver—now second in command. Various members dressed up as Indians and Fireman Oliver was disguised as a monkey. Capt. Bryant was in the procession outside the Lansdowne Hotel and following the gaze of the crowd was horrified to see Mr. Oliver standing on his head on the hotel coping. He had scaled the face of the building, making use of such footholds as he could find. "I didn't know what to do," said Capt. Bryant. I'd no idea he was going to do it and it fairly put the wind up me." The Brigade later had offers from cinemas in all parts of England wanting to borrow the elephant for publicity purposes.

The Firemen's Dinner.

No story of the Christchurch Fire Brigade would be complete without a mention of the annual dinner. Being the first public function attended by the Borough's new Mayor, it corresponded to the Lord Mayor's Banquet in London, and was always expected to produce a comprehensive review of the past civic year, an outline of policy for the future and a lot of good fun.

It was started in Mr. Wimbleton's time at the George Inn, then it went to the Ship, the Fountain, the King's Arms and finally, the Town Hall, where special gas cookers used to be installed for the occasion. Another well-known annual event was the whist drive and dance on Armistice Night, by which a considerable sum of money was handed over to Earl Haig's Poppy Day Fund.

Long Service Records.

Capt. Bryant and Fireman Ford are the only two "old originals" still left; but several other members have long service to their credit. Deputy Chief Officer Oliver has served for 12 years, during which time he spent the years 1933-1938 with the Sutton Brigade. Fireman E. Hodges has his 10-year service medal and is due for his five-year bar. Sub-Officer L. Bagshot has his ten-year medal and has served for 13 years. Capt. Bryant's son, Mr. R. Bryant, joined the Brigade seven years ago and is now Station Officer.

I asked Capt. Bryant what was his biggest fire. "Undoubtedly," he replied, "the forest fire at Hurn in 1934." The Christchurch Brigade was called out to it one Sunday afternoon and did not leave it until the following Thursday or Friday. Brigades were there from Bournemouth, Wimborne and Ringwood as well. That was a very bad patch, said Capt. Bryant. There were fires all over the place, Burley, Dudmoor, Matchams—there never was such a time.

"A Wonderful Lot."

Before I left, Capt. Bryant paid a tribute to his men "We couldn't have done what we have done," he said, "without having such a good lot of men. Whatever they tackled," he went on, "whether putting out fires, winning competitions, begging, entertaining or what not, they've been a wonderful lot."

As I closed the door of the little square room and left the Chief with his charts, his maps and his control boards, I decided that the story of Capt. Bryant and the Christchurch Fire Brigade might well be entitled, "Something attempted—something done.

Good luck to them.