

“Ye Deluge” Was Not at the Fire of London

BUT IT HAD SOME LIVELY ESCAPADES IN CHRISTCHURCH

By David English

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Top: Ye Deluge with local man Tom McArdle c1930

In a shed belonging to the Christchurch Council rests a battered old fire engine. Any youngster looking at it today wouldn't know what it was. Dirt and Rust corrodes its side but still visible are the words “Ye Deluge Attended the Great Fire of London.”

Into the “Christchurch Times” office last week walked a visitor, “Did you know that you must have one of the oldest fire engines in existence in your town?” he asked. “I'm sure the British Museum would be interested,” he suggested.

My mind echoed his words when I saw the old “Deluge” on Monday morning. Judging from the date it was 300 years old and in a remarkable state of preservation. I decided to trace the history of the engine and with it the history of the Christchurch Fire Brigade. I did, and a lot of

people are going to be disappointed. The reason the “Deluge” was so remarkably preserved was because it never attended any fire in London---it wasn't even built in the 17th century. Few people know that those words were painted on the side of the engine by a humorous captain of the Christchurch Fire Brigade after a session in the old King's Arms Hotel!

Fewer still know that Christchurch had one of the oldest fire brigades in the country and its history is about as turbulent as any of the Ruritanian states.

Kept In The Porch

Before the old “Deluge” was thought of, the town's fire-fighting appliance was a small hand pump. It used to be kept in the porch of the Priory Church and the fireman was summoned by the tolling of the bells. Sometimes they used to turn up at funerals by mistake. The “Deluge” came mid-way through the last century and the whole town was very proud of its new engine. It was drawn by two horses and used to go to fires at Ringwood, Bournemouth and Lymington. When it became too old for active service the town obtained another manual pump of the latest design. That pump was the fire engine of Christchurch for over 40 years. One of the few men alive today who can remember that pump coming is Mr. Jesse London, of Bargates. He joined the Brigade as a young man and rose to be the captain. There were no horses for the engines at that time and whenever there was a fire horses were taken from the stable of the King's Arms. The station in Millhams Street is a very old building and used to be a workshop for making fuse chains for watches before the brigade took it over.

Burnt To The Ground

One of the biggest fires Mr. London could remember was a pair of old thatched cottages in Bargates. “They were burnt practically to the ground in spite of all we could do,” he said, “but afterwards Christchurch had its first cinema built on that spot.” Relations between the Council and the Brigade were not always of the friendliest. The council wishing to keep its budget low is said to have begrudged new equipment to the fire force. “There had to be a special council meeting every time we wanted another length of hose,” said Mr. London. Relations went from bad to worse. After the First World War the Council promised to buy a motor engine, but they never did. At that time there was a big fire at Lord Manners' estate. The Bournemouth engine, called out after Christchurch, passed them on the way.

“The horses were white with foam; it was a cruel sight,” declared Mr. London grimly. “After that I told them I was finished. I left and most of the Brigade went with me. We were all disgusted.”

During the time the engine was a horse-drawn vehicle there was often trouble in finding the drivers, as there was no proper call system.

Well-known Christchurch Councillor, Mr. T. McArdle, tells an amusing story about the fire engine. In the middle of his tea the Mayor and a police sergeant burst into his house. "Come quickly," they said, "there's a fire at Plaish House and we can't find the driver."

Spoilt His Tea.

Forgetting about his tea, "Mac" raced round to the station and was off in no time. So fast did he move that half the firemen were left behind.

Tearing along the road towards Winkton he nearly sent a donkey cart into a ditch, and after the fire he arrived home to find a policeman waiting for him with the greeting: "You have been reported to me for furious driving."

"I went to the police station, but they didn't take any action against me." said Coun. McArdle.

With the mass resignation of 1918, Christchurch was without a Fire Brigade, but it was not long before another was formed. In 1922 Mr. W. J. Bryant became chief officer of the Christchurch Fire Brigade, which was still using a horse-drawn manual pump.

"Things became very difficult at this time." said Mr. Bryant. "There were no horses."

The situation became worse and worse and finally Mr. Bryant used his own lorry to draw the engine. When they got to a fire, however, the Brigade had to work like fury. Twelve men had to pump continuously to keep up the pressure.

Had To Keep It Balanced.



Christchurch Firemen posed for this picture when they received their first motor engine and then went to fight a fire at Sir Stuart Fraser's residence at Mudeford.

The Brigade also owned a hand-operated fire escape. "That was a difficult thing to pull around," laughed Mr. Bryant. "We had to have two men on it to keep it balanced."

The uniforms of the Brigade were in a disgraceful state: they were nearly twenty years old and all patches. The Council refused to buy new ones so the Brigade decided to get their own by running a raffle.

"We persuaded the Mayor to buy some tickets, and late one

night he came running round to the station asking for his money back. He said the police had found out about it and were going to stop it," said Mr. Bryant. "He got his money back but nobody else wanted it, so we carried on. We made enough to buy two complete sets of uniform for each man."

By the end of the twenties everyone began to realise that the Brigade was hopelessly out of date, and a public meeting was called. It was decided that the town must have a proper fire engine and they went to the Town Hall to ask for it.

It was brought up in Council and passed by one vote, but the Mayor vetoed it. With that, all the firemen resigned. Immediately the Council tried to recruit another force. They found it impossible and so they had to give way and buy a new engine. "It was a beautiful job," smiled Mr. Bryant.

Best In England.

Although previous to that time the Brigade was sadly lacking in equipment it was not lacking in efficiency. It went in for the National Competition the year it received its new engine and was adjudged the most efficient team in all England. "That was a real feather in our cap." remarked Mr. Bryant.

During the happy inter-war years the Brigade did a lot for charities, and Mr. Bryant reckoned they must have raised thousands of pounds. "We were always the star turn of the Carnival," he smiled.

The early days of the last war, before the fire service was nationalised, were some of the brightest in the long history of the Brigade. Britain was being blitzed and the firemen never had a night's rest.

"We went to Portsmouth, Southampton, Bristol, Bath and Weymouth." recalled Mr. Bryant.

" We were the first outside engine on the scene at Southampton one night and when we got back to Christchurch I found a letter from the Southampton Chief Officer offering his sincere thanks."

"Those twenty-five years that I was Chief Officer of the Christchurch Fire Brigade were worth living," said Mr. Bryant; and after listening to him for two hours I couldn't agree more.