

Bridge Fire Brigade

One organisation of vital importance was the Bridge Volunteer Fire Brigade, whose equipment in 1915 included a Merry-Weather manual engine and about 1,200 feet of hose. The Fire engine was horse-drawn being pulled by the same horses as were used for funerals and for delivering coal. The firemen were mostly local tradesmen and at one time included two grocers, the cycle agent, a publican, the draper, two gardeners, the coal merchant and the blacksmith. The men were summoned by a maroon flare, and one was killed in 1926 when looking over the flare, supposing it to have gone out. There were twelve sets of helmets, tunics and axes, and if a tall man left the force to be replaced by a short man, the latter had to endure an ill-fitting uniform. The force entered the motorised age when Count Zborowski donated a motor appliance, registration number CE 1037. It was kept running largely through the donations from insurance companies, whose outgoings would have soared but for the Volunteer Brigade's existence and devotion to duty. The Brigade would resent the presence at small fires of the Canterbury or Sturry Brigades, who would be soaked on arrival. The Bridge Brigade had no ladders until shortly before the last war, while early hoses were made of leather and thick rubber. The Fire Brigade remained independent up until the Second World War.

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Bridge fire Brigade: engine house, Plough & Harrow P.H.; consists of a motor engine & trailer & about 1,200 feet of hose; Charles Eills, lt. & sec; number of men 10.

Kelly's

An interesting interlude whilst the Count was at Higham concerns the local fire brigade. In 1920 its chief had complained that their horse-drawn appliance could not reach fires in outlying districts in time to be effective. The Count, hearing of this, presented them with a car along the lines of the Chittys. Blythe Bros. adapted the body to accommodate 10 men and a mile of hose. With a rating of 75 h.p. and a speed of 60 m.p.h. this was probably the fastest of its kind in the country at that time. For his generosity the Count was made Honorary Captain of the Brigade.

The Fire Maroon Tragedy at Bridge

One of the most momentous events in Edwardian Bridge, at least, to judge from the coverage it received in The Kentish Gazette, was the early death of young Mr John Fenn, of 6 Albert Terrace, second engineer of the Bridge Fire Brigade, on 31st March 1910.

It appears from the inquest that a fire had broken out at Pett Bottom. It was the job of Mr Fenn Junior to light the maroon to call together the Fire Brigade. On the fatal afternoon at about 12.30 he left the 'Plough and Harrow' and asked his brother for a match. This, his brother provided and then went off 'round the corner'. Almost immediately there were two simultaneous explosions and Mr Fenn's cap was seen by a witness to 'go right up in the air'. The witness hurried to the scene and found Mr Fenn lying outside on a pile of straw. Details of his injuries are graphic: "profuse hamorrhage (Kentish Gazette's spelling), left eye completely gone...." Mr Fenn lived for only twenty minutes after the explosion.

It emerged during the inquest that second engineer Fenn had not fired a maroon before, and that instead of lying down to fire it, he had stood over it and hence received the fatal blow to the face. There seems to be some uncertainty as to whether the maroons were faulty, and in order to satisfy himself on this issue, a representative of Messrs Brocks "took train to Bridge" and inspected the scene of the accident. He subsequently declared that the maroons were of the best quality, similar to those fired at Crystal Palace since 1865, and asked permission to fire the remaining five. He later contended that the maroons were not defective, thus clearing the name and reputation of Brocks.

Mr Fenn's funeral was a stirring occasion. According to the Gazette: " Never before had the village of Bridge felt a disaster so keenly... April 3rd will stand out in the history of the village as a day never to be forgotten...."

5000 people thronged the narrow street, overflowing into the surrounding fields. Most of the gentry were present at the graveside, though the Conynghams were not mentioned, presumably because they worshipped at Patricbourne. The dead man was given a military funeral with a firing party from the East Kent Yeomanry. The coffin was borne by six foremen and followed by 65 members of other Fire Brigades. "It was a mournful procession indeed as it wended its way up the hillside and... there were but few dry eyes...." The grave had been prepared under the shadow of some tall trees bordering the road and "sympathetic hands had lined it with primroses and ivy.

At evensong after the funeral the Rector of Bridge Rev. H Knight referring to the tragic death of Mr Fenn said that God took us out of this world for two reasons. Either we were well ready for entry to the heavenly Kingdom or else we were 'so hardened' that it would be futile to give us any more chances. It was clear that the former case applied to Mr Fenn and that the finger of God had singled him out to lay down his life for his friends. It is to be hoped that such fatalism afforded some comfort to his relatives and young widow.