

THE FIRE ENGINE WAS KEPT IN CHURCH!

By "BEORCHAM"

Showing some visitors round St. Peter's Church a few weeks ago, I casually mentioned that until mid-Victorian times the fire engine was housed in a corner of the church. I was rather severely advised to choose another place and time for "leg-pulls"; but the statement is perfectly correct, and can be confirmed by consulting the late Mr. R. A. Norris's admirable history of the Church.

It is possible that a few old parishioners can remember seeing the ancient manual fire engine in church. Only a few years ago a member of the old parish brigade—the late Mr. William Fisher, of Gossoms End—told me on his 90th birthday that he had often helped to trundle the engine in and out of the parish church. Equipment was primitive, he freely admitted, and proved absolutely inadequate for coping with such disasters of the 'fifties and 'sixties as the burning of the market house, the King's Arms stables, and a group of dilapidated straw-thatched cottages in Water Lane. "But we always did our best and practised hard," Mr. Fisher added. "We were very proud of our uniforms, which consisted of white smocks, heavy brown leather belts, and billy-cock hats displaying our numbers." Each brigade had its own colour scheme at that period; Hemel Hempstead firemen wore red coats and caps, Leighton Buzzard favoured dark green, and Dunstable brigade was a rhapsody in blue.

A new home for the fire engine had to be found in 1870. Previously, at the southern end of the church, was a small chamber which may have served as a sacristy in early times. In the Civil War it was a prison for Royalists captured at Colchester; later the chamber housed the fire engine and was used as a general lumber room until structural alterations were made about 70 years ago.

Fire-Watching—in Stuart Times!

That Berkhamsted possessed fire-fighting equipment nearly 300 years ago is proved by this entry in the churchwarden's accounts for 1648: "Spent on beer for the men that brought the engine back from the Leatherland fire, 5s. 4d." Beer was often provided in lieu of cash; for instance, the churchwardens "treated" the bellringers to 7s. 6d. worth of beer when George III was proclaimed king.

As the first manual fire engine was not made until 1672, it may be assumed that the equipment used at the Leatherland fire in 1648 consisted of ladders, leather buckets, and long poles with hooks at the end for removing burning thatch. They were "engines" in the old sense of the word.

For at least 250 years the maintenance of a fire fighting service was the responsibility of the parish. In 1749, we learn, 24 leather buckets were bought for the Berkhamsted brigade, and 12 years later a guinea was spent on new leather pipes. Another

entry in the parish accounts tells us that two men were awarded half-a-crown for watching a building throughout the night following a fire.

We have an earlier and even more interesting record of fire-watching. In the 1660's incendiarism was rife, and at Hertford parties of six townspeople had to assist the constable by night and four by day, "with no intermission or cessation", to watch for and report outbreaks of fire. That duties were compulsory for both men and women is proved by the prosecution of "Mary Berry ye elder, widdow", for refusing to fire-watch.

But this early form of national service was short-lived. In Berkhamsted, as in most other towns, the reporting of fires was a responsibility of the night-watchman, who regularly patrolled the streets calling out the hour and state of the weather. His vigilance averted many serious fires, particularly at the time when straw-thatch was the vogue.

The 1788 Fire Engine

It is not known when Berkhamsted first possessed a manual fire engine. In 1788, however, the churchwardens decided that the parish needed a new engine, and voluntary subscriptions were invited with so satisfactory a result that the cost, £58 15s., was over-subscribed by £6. Berkhamsted residents contributed £28 15s., Northchurch £15, the Sun Fire Office 10 guineas, the Phoenix Fire Office 5 guineas, and the Royal Exchange Fire Office 5 guineas.

Mention of fire offices recalls the curious old "fire-marks" once seen on the walls of many houses in the town. They were badges of lead, iron or brass bearing the name and emblem of the fire office with which the properties were insured. One company, the Herts and Cambs County Fire Office, adorned its fire-marks with the coats of arms of the two counties.

The first fire-mark was issued in 1682, and for many years it was a definite and inseparable part of the contract that property owners taking out fire insurance policies had to fix fire-marks on their houses, removing them whenever policies were allowed to lapse. The reason was that in big towns the fire offices maintained their own brigades, confining their services to properties insured with them. If a brigade sallied forth to a fire and found that the building concerned bore the mark of another office, the men did not intervene unless there was a danger of the fire spreading to premises insured with their company. Not until the end of the 18th century did the brigades of the various companies begin to attend fires generally; even then fire-marks continued to be issued, presumably as advertisements.

In small towns such as Berkhamsted it was, of course, impossible for the fire offices to maintain their own brigades, and they did the next best thing contributing to the cost of equipping parish brigades.

Phone: BERKHAMSTED 43

WATTS' STORES

Proprietor: — H. A. RATCLIFF

For

CHINA, GLASS &
HARDWARE
BULB BOWLS
OVEN GLASS

NOW OPEN:

FURNITURE RENOVATING
DEPARTMENT

ENQUIRIES SOLICITED

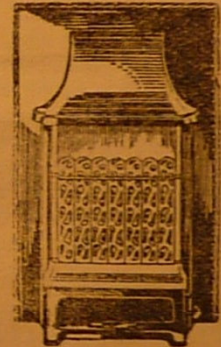
127 HIGH STREET,
BERKHAMSTED

COSY—

but never stuffy

"BEAM" GAS FIRES

In attractive colour finishes



Berkhamstead Gas Co.

PHONE 90

The Best Value for Coupons

Your Coupons will go
further if you

**BUY
GOOD SHOES**

OUR REPAIRS ARE
NOTED FOR
SMARTNESS AND
DURABILITY

WHITE & SON

THE FOOTWEAR SPECIALISTS

High St., Berkhamsted

Phone 68

Also at Hemel Hempstead
& Chorley Wood