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WHITE SMOCKS FOR FIREMEN!

When the Fire Engine was kept in Church

By
'BEORCHAM'

★

A PARISHIONER has had the good fortune to find among some old papers a photograph of St. Peter's Church, taken five years before the restoration of 1870. It will surprise those who imagine that the church looks much the same today as it did centuries ago. Even within the lifetime of old inhabitants, great alterations have been made to the interior and exterior of the church, notably on the south side.

For instance, there was no south door for our great-grandparents. To enter the churchyard and west door they passed through gates which faced the High-street, opposite Dean Incent's House. It was not until 1870 that the main gateway faced the little carriage-way between the High-street and Back-lane, thereby creating some awkward traffic problems.

The "Engine Room"

On the right-hand side of the west door, the photograph shows a smaller door, blocked up in 1870. This was the entrance to one of two chambers, or strong-rooms, which formerly occupied the western ends of the aisles. Above the smaller door one can just decipher the words "ENGINE ROOM."

In this corner of our parish church the fire engine was stored. Desecration? Not at all! Pikes and swords of the parish were customarily kept in church, so why not fire-fighting implements? Here the town's property was safe, central, and easily accessible at any hour of the day or night.

The early history of fire-fighting is obscure. Some of the implements and

methods used centuries ago may seem primitive, but our ancestors were not fools. They quickly learnt the value of a 20-ft. pole with an iron hook on the end for pulling burning thatch off roofs. They knew, too, that prompt demolition was an effective way of preventing fires from spreading to neighbouring property. Every town and village had at least one fire-hook, and hundreds were used in the Great Fire of London. Usually they were stored in the parish church, and a very fine specimen may still be seen in Ivinghoe churchyard, partnered by a more gruesome relic—a man-trap. Another fire-hook has been preserved on the wall of the old post office at Welwyn (the old town, not the garden city).

Payment in Beer

That Berkhamsted possessed fire-fighting equipment over 300 years ago is proved by this entry in the churchwardens' 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 consisted of ladders, leather buckets, and fire-hooks—"engines" in the old sense of the word.

But how ineffective those implements must have been when fire broke out at Berkhamsted Place in 1661! Nearly two-thirds of the mansion was destroyed, and it was left to our old friend John Sayer, of almshouse fame, to transform a smoking ruin into a stately home.

Leather Buckets and Pipes

For at least 250 years the maintenance of a fire-fighting service was the responsibility of the parish. Entries in the churchwardens' accounts tell us that new equipment was bought from time to time. In 1749, twenty-four leather buckets were purchased for the Berkhamsted brigade; twelve years later, a guinea was spent on new leather pipes. Another item records the payment of half-a-crown to two men for watching a building throughout the night following a fire.

In the 1660s, when incendiarism was rife, a form of fire-watching was introduced. 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. Duties were compulsory for men and women; indeed, a widow was prosecuted for refusing to fire-watch!

But as a rule it was the night-watchman who gave the alarm. In Berkhamsted, as in most other towns, a man was regularly employed to patrol the streets, carrying a horn lantern and armed with a cudgel to deal with unwelcome strangers. Sometimes the old fellow had a less peaceful call than "Two o'clock and all's well!" He discovered many an outbreak of fire and saved many a life. The risk of fire was much greater in days when roofs were straw-thatched and the staple fuel was furze or wood.

£58 for a Fire Engine

When did Berkhamsted have its first manual fire engine? The date is not known, but it must have been many years before 1788, for in that year the churchwardens decided that it was time to have a new engine. Voluntary subscriptions were invited, with so satisfactory a result that the cost, £58 15s., was over-subscribed by £5. Berkhamsted residents contributed £28 15s., North-church £15, the Sun Fire Office 10 guineas and the Phoenix and Royal Exchange Fire Offices 5 guineas each.

Mention of fire offices recalls the curious old "fire-marks" seen on the walls of a few old houses. There is one just below the eaves of a half-timbered cottage in Castle-street, another on a cottage in Highfield-road. If there are others in Berkhamsted, I would like to have details.

No Intervention!

Fire-marks are badges of metal bearing the name and emblem of the fire office with which the properties have been insured. The first 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 to their houses. 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 own company. Not until the end of the 18th century did the brigades of the various companies begin to attend fires generally; fire-marks were then issued as advertisements.

In small towns such as Berkhamsted it was impossible for fire offices to maintain their own brigades, and they did the next best thing by contributing to the cost of equipping parish brigades—hence the donations made to the manual engine bought for Berkhamsted in 1788.

Alice, Where Art Thou?

In the 19th century, fire-fighting was revolutionised by steam pumps; but in many parishes the old manuals were in

vogue until quite recent times. I am not sure of the date when Berkhamsted had its first "steamer," but with hundreds of townspeople I have fond memories of "Alice," drawn by two sturdy horses and still in use in the late 'twenties, at a time when almost every town of Berkhamsted's size had acquired motor vehicles. But visitors who scoffed and thought us old-fashioned were forced to admit that we had a first-class brigade. "They were off almost before the hooter stopped!" was a common saying. The brigade literally had a great following; until twenty years ago hundreds of people attended fires at any hour of the day or night.

White Smocks, Billycock Hats

Finally, let us return to the "Engine Room" of St. Peter's Church. A dozen years ago I had the pleasure of chatting with a man who had actually helped to trundle the old manual engine in and out of church. He was the late Mr. William Fisher, of Gossoms End, who, on his ninetieth birthday, spoke with pride of the days when he and his comrades of the Berkhamsted brigade wore white smocks, brown leather belts, and billycock hats adorned with large metal numbers. It was the age of rugged individualism; while Berkhamsted firemen sported white smocks, their opposite numbers at Hemel Hempstead wore red coats and caps. Leighton Buzzard firemen favoured dark green, and the Dunstable brigade was a rhapsody in blue.

Well Done!

Mr. Fisher served with veterans who had fought a losing battle when our market house was destroyed by fire in 1854, and in the 'sixties he had helped to save many a cottage from destruction. The equipment was primitive, but, in his own words, "we practised hard and always did our best." That is precisely what present and past firemen have always done.

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