

FIRE SERVICE RECOLLECTIONS

These notes were written by my Father Cyril Lawson in 1972.

He joined the Borough of Bury St Edmunds' Fire Service as a volunteer fireman on 3rd March 1927, and continued to serve with them until 1st October 1941, on which date he transferred to the National Fire Service. His service came to an end on 28th February 1946. I think that was the date on which the concept of 'volunteer fireman' came to an end, to be replaced by what is now known as 'retained fireman'. I believe my Father did not agree with this new arrangement, which is why he chose to leave the service.

You will note that he served continually throughout the war years of 1939-1945. He often used to tell me tales of driving the fire engine down to London at night, to assist the London Fire Brigade with their work during the blitz. I remember that when I was a young child, he used to go to bed with his shirt on. Then, if there was an alarm, he would be able to get to the fire station just a few seconds quicker, as, when a call came, he was able to jump out of bed with his shirt already on! That habit continued – he wore a shirt to bed for many years after he left the service!

Another memory I have from around 1950 is of a serving officer in the Fire Service coming to see my father for some assistance in locating the fire bells in the town. Apparently, in years gone by, a number of firemen who lived in the town had fire bells installed in their homes. The fire station had a control unit, which when pressed, rang the bells in these firemen's homes to warn them that there was a fire and a callout was in progress. I myself never heard a fire bell ring in our home – my over-riding memory is of the fire sirens going off!

The two photographs embedded in the text both show my Father.

My Father's notes included the full names of certain people, but here I have abbreviated some of them to initials for obvious reasons. However, it is on the public record that In 1933 Leopold Harris was tried for arson at the Old Bailey, found guilty, and sentenced to 14 years in jail. His activities formed the basis of the 1934 film 'The Fire Raisers'.

*Leonard A. Lawson
June 2018*

Joining the Fire Brigade (Borough of Bury St Edmunds) – 1927

I had a motorcycle garage in St. Andrew Street and I was doing a lot of motorcycling and winning a lot of prizes, and was getting well known as being a 'daredevil', or even crazy according to some people. I had a man come to work for me (part-time at first), and he was a member of the Fire Brigade.

It was in March, and one day he said to me, "We need another driver for the Fire Brigade, we only have Frank Reeve and he often goes out on taxi." He worked for Pullett's garage. These

people used to have livery stables, and run cabs to the station with horses, and when there was a fire, they used to snatch the cab horses from the stables or the railway station or wherever they were, and this was before they had the Motor Tender.

He said he had told the Captain that he knew I could drive anything, and he had given him instructions that if I was willing to join the Brigade, would I go and see him. Well, I went and knocked on his office door. He was an elderly gentleman, and had a solicitor's business. I remember him asking me if I thought I could drive the fire engine.

"Yes." I said, "I drive anything. I have driven motor cars, lorries, steam thrashing engines, tractors, the lot."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty five, Sir", I said.

"Now, I must impress on you that this is very hard work, in fact at times it is extremely hard and you are often up at all hours of the day and night. Can you stick it?"

I replied "I have always been used to hard work, Sir. I think I am pretty tough, I reckon that I could stick it."

He told me that they had drill at the Fire Station on Monday nights at 7.30 pm, and that if I still wanted to join, I was to turn up for drill, which I did.

My first fire call

It was arranged that when there was a fire I would be called, but four or six weeks went by and nothing happened. Then one morning about 11.00 am, I was working in the garage and the phone went. I answered it and a burly Police Sergeant's voice said "Mr. Lawson, there's a fire." I left what I was doing and ran to the station and put on my uniform and helmet. The other men were dressing.

There was no fire engine there, because they were having the Station doorway made wider. The tender and the steam fire engine were housed in a shed in Pullett's meadow in St Andrews Street past Robert Boby's, about 1/3rd of a mile away, so when the others were ready we all marched down there.

Frank Reeve the First Driver was there, and he started up the Daimler Tender (I think it was a 1913 model). I was told to get the watering can and go to the house nearby and get water to fill the Tender radiator. It was a large watering can, and I went to the house 4 times. At last I shouted to him "It's full, Frank!" One thing I shall never forget, when we started to go from the station to Park Meadow where the engine was, I started to run. I was immediately rebuked by the Second Sub-Officer -The First Sub-Officer was not there, neither was the Second Officer (he rarely turned up). The Captain was following on behind. I was told not to run. He said "If we ran on these jobs, the fire would not get a good hold." I never liked him after that (no wonder he was the one who saw the ghost). It was a stack on fire at Ousden, about 8 miles away. I also learned that another reason there was no hurry was that they had not yet got a driver for the

Steam Pump, and there was no-one present who could work it. There were two men who did this, they were called engineers. One was the town's Water Turncock and he was out in the town somewhere, and the other worked for a builder. He would always inform them where he was every day.

He was working at the Sugar Beet Factory, and a police car went for him and took him to the fire. They went by a different route and he was actually there before us, and waiting for the engine to arrive.

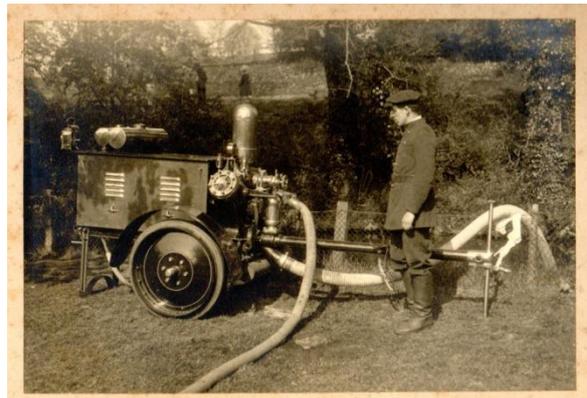
It was interesting how he got steam up. The fire was always laid ready upside down, the coal at the bottom and the sticks on top, with paraffin waste put on top. Then, as soon as you knew that water would be available within 10 minutes, as you got near to a fire a wax Vesta match would be dropped down the chimney while approaching the site. From the time he put the match down the chimney it was 4 minutes before the pressure gauge needle started to rise, then the blower valve was opened and a steam jet was released up the chimney, which had the effect of blowing up the fire.

In 6 minutes, the gauge stood at 15 lbs, the blower was cut off and a pull on the engine fly, which, with the steam valve opened, started it to revolve. The exhaust steam in the chimney further blew up the fire, and in 7 minutes the water started to flow up the canvas hose and out of the jets. I was used to steam boilers and I said to myself 'we shall not be without an engineer if I am here.' It was a lovely bright sunny day, the stack was pulled down and damped and we returned back to the Fire Station about 5.00 pm. I was used to using a pitchfork as a boy on our farm, so that did not come hard to me, but my clothes stank with smoke, something that I had to get used to for the next 30 years.

Fire No. 2

I well remember this, it was another stack, at Hawstead, and we were called out about 3/4 hour before dark. We had to get the Steamer (pump) to a wide ditch or, say, a fast-flowing little river in a meadow and the fire was in a field, the other side of the water. The active or younger firemen had to carry the hose from the Steamer towards the fire and this meant fording the river. Seeing the others do it and wanting to pull my weight, I did the same, and the water came up to my knees and my wellingtons were full.

The night was cold, my legs wet, and my belly was empty. And I was terribly tired, and I thought of all my friends snug asleep in bed. It was torture, but I meant to stick it and I had said I could, and I would if it killed me. I remember them giving me a mug of hot tea in the early hours of the morning, the best I had ever had. As time went on I got used to it, and being out at all hours of the night meant nothing unusual, and I seemed to grow stronger and enjoy it.



I am promoted officially as Second Driver

After about 3 months as a fireman, having attended all fire drills, answering all fire calls, and doing my share of the work, the First Driver took me out one drill night with the Tender and was instructed to see if I could pass my test. We went out to Horringer, and when we came to a pub called the Beehive, he told me to pull into the yard and we would have a pint. He ordered 2 pints of bitter and we sat down and drank them. I was terribly worried in case there was a fire while we were away, as we had the only Tender, and there was nothing else to pull the Steam Pump, so I said to Frank "Suppose there is a fire while we are away?" (we were 4 miles at least from the Station) and his reply was "They will bloody well have to wait, they know where we are, they can come after us." I thought, 'What if they only have cycles.'

I was not used to drinking beer, I only had a glass now and then, but when we had emptied the pint mugs I felt I had to order 2 more pints or he would think I was very mean, and all the time I was scared there might be a fire. But when we got back the other firemen were at drill and everything was peaceful. I really felt relieved. I also felt that it really was time they had a Second Driver.

He reported that I could handle the Daimler Tender quite satisfactorily and I had instructions that I would be allowed to drive it, if the First Driver was not available.

Shortly after this, the Council purchased a Merryweather Trailer motor pump, this had dual ignition with 2 sparking plugs in each cylinder. One plug was for the accumulator and coil, and the other for the magneto. This was quite good, because the engine was too heavy to swing on the starting handle fast enough to start it on magneto. To keep the accumulator in order, it had to be recharged about every four weeks even if it was not used, but as I was only Second Driver I could not interfere.

One day we were called to a stack fire at Hawstead, and as the First Driver was not available I drove the Tender and Trailer Pump. But when we went to start the pump it would not start because the battery was flat, it had not been charged. The other firemen had a go but no-one could swing the engine fast enough to start it on the magneto. Mr. Gerrard, the fireman who also worked for me, got a rope and fixed the middle of it onto the starting handle, and as I swung the engine two men on either side in turn pulled on the rope see-saw fashion and it started up on the mag.

There was not very much delay in getting the water onto the fire but I was glad it was only a stack and it could have been much worse. I thought 'this is a good start for me,' but from now on I did not leave anything to the 1st Driver. I looked after the engine and pump thoroughly.

In 1929 we had a new Morris Commercial Fire Tender and the old Daimler Tender and the Shand Mason Steam Pump were sold for scrap. I was very sorry indeed to see them go, it was like losing old friends and faithful servants. What a shame! About 1931 the First Driver retired and I was then First Driver.

This was a great tie because I could not go too far away from the bell or telephone and had always to report where I was. I called fire the Enemy who would pop into our area and get blazing the very minute your back was turned, and I did not mean to let him catch me out. If you stayed by the bell or the phone for a month and nothing happened, and just went away for

a few minutes, he was sure to come the very time you had relaxed. Things were different now to when I was sitting in the Beehive in Horringer with the First Driver. We had got some more young blood in the Brigade and were turning out much quicker. I did not want the fire to get a good hold, I wanted to get him out of the District. I knew we only had one Motor pump and that was only capable of 250 gallons of water per minute, just a toy, it should have been 500 gallons per minute.

The Westgate Brewery, owned by Greene King & Sons, had their own Brigade. if we ever asked for another Fire Pump or any equipment, we were always told that it was unnecessary because the Brewery Brigade would always come and help us if needed, or cover up for us in case of a second call while we were out at a fire. One reason why I had to be particularly quick on the scene was because the Captain (the elderly gentleman), although he had an office close to the Station, lived a mile away, and should he be at home I had to take the Tender and collect him while the men were dressing. Therefore the quicker I was, the sooner we could turn out.

More Fire Service Notes

I cannot remember dates very well, but after I had been in the Brigade about two years, we had by then a full-time professional Chief Officer (say 1929?). One of the first pieces of new equipment which he managed to obtain after a struggle with the Town Council was oxygen breathing apparatus.

We only got one at first, and I was the Fireman who he chose to use it. We had never seen one before, and I well remember him coming to see me one day, and asking me if I was willing to be trained for the job. I said "Yes, certainly," and I soon got quite used to it. After instructions, I tried it out, and on the first drill night he got one of those smoke bombs which are used for testing drains and let it off in the hose drying tower, which was like a cupboard about 6ft by 6ft, and goes up to the roof like a chimney. When it was black as night, in I went and he shut the door for about 10 or 15 minutes. That was alright as far as breathing was concerned, but the sparks kept jumping onto my socks and shoes as I had not got my long leather boots on.

When at last he opened the big iron door and let me out, I was as black as a chimney sweep and I absolutely stank of smoke. In those days there was no such thing as a shower, just a wash basin and as I was in digs, I was not better off when I went home. I stank of smoke for days, but we were used to it.



My first job with the breathing apparatus

It was not long, perhaps two or three weeks, when we received a call about 8.00 pm one night to a fire victim at Mr. L's drapers shop, in the Buttermarket. It was a very large store, going right through from the Buttermarket to High Baxter Street at the rear. It was next to the Playhouse cinema and the people in the little bar at the side of the foyer could smell smoke through the wood boards at the back of the bar.

I was instructed to don the breathing apparatus and taken into the drapers shop, to the cellar door. All I had was a torch and the first aid water hose to turn on when I discovered the fire. I had never been in the shop or the cellar before, and I had not been told that it was in the Playhouse Bar that the smoke was discovered. I went round the place, up passages and tunnels as if I was blindfolded. No-one could get in to give me a hand, there was volumes of smoke and no sign of any fire.

After some time I could hear my mates shouting from the top of the cellar stairs that I was to come out. I reported to the Chief that I could find nothing, and it was then that he took me into the Playhouse bar (not for a drink!) to show me where the trouble lie. He had forced open a crack through the wood boards and I could see the red light of a smouldering fire. Back I went into the cellar, now I knew exactly where to look. From the main cellar there was a door into a fairly small room, in which there were shelves all round that were full of blankets, and these were alight.

The fire had not got going because a) as soon as the place filled with smoke and had used up the oxygen and there was no draught, or exit for the smoke to get away, and b) the blankets all folded up on the shelves did not burn very well.

I opened up on the first aid hose, put out the fire and came out, ordering all the doors and windows to be opened up to let out the smoke. I went to the chief to report to him. I had been quite contented down there in the smoke and the pitch black darkness all alone, but what I had not realised was that everyone outside (and there was a pretty big crowd) was terribly worried in case anything happened and I could not get out. Anyway, this concern was a help to the Brigade because it enabled the Chief to get permission to buy the second breathing apparatus, so that in future we could work in pairs. There was no sign of Mr. L, he was reported to be away in London.

As soon as I could speak to the Chief alone, I said to him "Sir, this job is in my opinion was set on fire deliberately." He told me to keep my opinions to myself, and warned me how very dangerous it was to say what I did as I could be prosecuted. So I said no more, only to myself, because it is with myself that I have secrets that I believe, and no-one can make me believe otherwise.

After the smoke had got out and we could walk round, I took the Chief to the spot and showed him where the fire was and why I thought the way I did. We both agreed to keep silent as we could prove nothing. Mr. L was a Town Councillor and a very important Gentleman.

Mr. A calls to see me

A year or so before this fire, and some time before the new Chief came, I was in my garage one day and a gentleman came in and asked to see me. He said he wished to talk privately, and would I come and join him for a cup of coffee. He said that he was an Insurance Assessor, and he had heard that I was in the Fire Service. It was his job to get permission from those unfortunate enough to have a fire to assess the cost and damage on behalf of the owners, so that they got the full benefit of any claim from the Insurance Company.

In order that he could act promptly, he must know quickly when property was destroyed. Would I send him a telegram at his private address in Norwich as soon as I could, whenever there was a job for him. If I would do him a good turn, he would make it worth my while. I did not make him any definite promise, but I said that I would see what I could do and we left it at that. I had plenty of time to think it over, as we did not often get those kind of large fires, and some long time after when we did get one I rang him up and told him.

On several occasions as time went on he called and took me for a coffee, and he always said when he left "Now don't forget, when you have a job you must send me a telegram." This I never did, I could not see why a phone call was not good enough for him, it was easier for me, especially at night, and I was not going to put anything in writing. I could not really see any harm in it, but I was a servant of the Borough Council (part-time only). Anyway, he would read all about it in the paper the next day, but I quite understood he wanted to be one jump ahead. One day when called, he gave me a present of some money, perhaps 30/-, and said it was commission and would pay for the phone calls, and the next Christmas I was surprised to receive a turkey.

One day some months later, he called and took me for a coffee and before we left, he said "Have you heard anything?"

I asked, "No, what about?"

"Oh", he said, "you soon will, it will be in the paper before long, the game is up." I was just as bewildered as ever, I could not make anything out of it.

A week or so later, when I had just about forgotten about it, I began to see daylight. The daily papers flashed the headlines 'Leopold Harris, Fire Assessor, arrested for arson.' I never saw or heard what happened to Mr. A, who was one of the assessors, Mr. Harris's employees.

During one of Mr. A's later visits, he had given me a very nice booklet giving all the details of the Fire Assessor Company. I cannot remember its name now. In this booklet was quite a lot of pictures of large fires (or rather, of the burnt-out buildings) where his company had acted as Assessors for the insured. To my surprise there was a picture of a large London drapery shop, and it gave the name of the owner as Mr. L, with the very same initials as our Bury St. Edmunds friend.

Mr. L's shop was sold some years later. He got his typist into trouble and made off with her, and I believe the girl was later killed in a car crash.

All that is a long time ago, but now I will tell you what has prompted me to write these notes. It was last Wednesday, August 16th 1972, that an old lady named Mrs. R came to my shop and asked for me. This poor old lady is nearly bent double with rheumatism, and has great difficulty to get about on two sticks. She asked me to help her, as she wanted to know of a good Solicitor who would help her and her husband to split up their Farm and Property amongst six of their family, as one of the girls had married an American, and he was on the grab. I arranged for my Solicitor friend to go and see them. While we were talking she told me how, when she was in Ireland, she went to work in a drapery shop at 15, then at 16 she came to Bury St Edmunds and worked for a Mr. L in the drapery shop in the Butter Market. She stayed there for many years and was a charge hand, but she did not like him. One day she had to go up to his office and he locked her in and tried it on, but she told him straight she was having none of it.

She went on to say that she never knew what happened to him, but she reckoned that if the Germans had won the war, Mr. L would have been made the Head of this Area. She said she thought that he was a Quisling. I asked her what made her think that, she said that one day when she went to his office unexpectedly, he was using a radio and speaking in German. She told me that at the rear of the shop there was a very large cellar that went under the Playhouse Cinema, and that some of the other girls had heard him in there speaking in a foreign language. She also told me today, August 30th 1972, that after the supposed fire (that I had nipped in the bud) that he had a sale of fire salvaged goods, and he made her sell lots of stock at silly prices. She told him that these goods were not affected by the fire at all, and that he was selling them at below cost as she knew what they had cost.

She was sternly told to do as she was ordered. Well, had he got such a stock (including fur coats that he had never previously sold) especially for the fire? And did he have to raise the money quickly to pay for them?

Well, well. I must try to find out a bit more, but it's a long time ago and so many people are dead who would know. Is it not strange how things leak out after so many years.

When the American Officers club in Westgate Street, Bury St. Edmunds was opened at the early part of the war, it was Councillor L who opened it, and he was a big noise down there also I believe. During the war he was Controller of the Red Cross Ambulance Service, I will have to check up on this. What a fine place to get into to get information. I have since been told that in the early hours of one morning about 4 a.m, he had been seen in his car watching operations from the edge of Stradishall Aerodrome.

More Fire Brigade chat

As I have said before, John Marriott who works for me was in the Fire Service during the war, and we often speak of our experiences. Talking of Whiskey prices, it reminded him of when he was in the raids on London Docks, when almost everything was ablaze. There was a Public House on the dockside, and like all the other places it was being burnt down. The Landlord kept coming to the door with his arms full of bottles, and he was giving one away to everyone that walked past as fast as he could.

The water which the Fire Brigades were pumping onto the buildings, which ran away boiling hot, went into the drains and sewers and this forced out hundreds of rats, great big things as big as cats. He said that there were so many up one cul-de-sac that the Firemen dare not go up there. One of the Barges moored up on the dock was on fire, and it was full of rubber Wellington boots, just what he wanted as his were getting worn up. So he got a pair, but as he came off the Quay there was a Policeman and he made him go back and throw them into the burning barge. Firemen must not steal. Lighted petrol from the large storage tanks ran into the Thames and set everything on fire.

Speaking of Rubber Wellington Boots, it reminds me that when the Part Time Firemen were being disbanded, I had about a dozen spare pairs of these in my office. I was in charge of all Part-Time men (about 150 of them). I noticed that these boots were disappearing, and the next day only one pair was left. I put this pair in a safe place, and thought it was funny that they had not also gone. Later, as they were not wanted, I took them home. Some months later I needed a pair of Wellingtons and then I found out why they had not disappeared from my office - they were both left ones !

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