

Our Gallant Firemen Sheffield's Splendid Brigade An Interior View (“Yorkshire Telegraph and Star” Special)

The man in the street, as he sees the picturesque yet eminently practical motor fire-escape flash by with its resonant gong heralding its approach and clearing its course, has little or no idea of the inner working of a fire brigade conducted and administered on such up-to-date lines as is the Sheffield organisation, and it was with a view to placing readers of the “Telegraph and Star” in possession of some interesting and useful facts in the direction that I recently paid a most instructive, accompanied by the staff photographer, to the Rockingham Street, where the brigade headquarters are located. We met with a warm welcome from the chief officer, Mr. Frost, who along with his men spared no pains to afford insight in the working of his band. It seems a far cry from the early days of the Sheffield Fire Brigade when Superintendent Pound, the first chief officer, had to summon his force by the blowing of a whistle, to the present day, when calls are automatically recorded at the central station, and the men are out and off with their splendid fire-fighting appliances within seconds, and the brigade to-day stands as a model of what efficient administration and enterprising development can accomplish.

Expedition's the Thing

To take one example in passing of what the brigade can achieve in the way of alacrity. On March 26th 1898, a call was received at 9.22 p.m. to an outbreak at the corner of West Street and Bailey Lane. Within three minutes the men were playing on the flames! Six minutes later the brigade had extinguished the outbreak, which had threatened to be of serious character, and were back in their headquarters! In this direction an important innovation for which Mr. Frost was responsible in the first year of his appointment to Sheffield i.e., 1895, has to be noted. This was the introduction of the swinging snap harness for the horses, and the training of the latter to answer a call of their own accord. Thus, the second the summoning alarm goes the horses standing ready in their stalls dash out on their own, and take up their places in front of the tender, one action securing the harness and enabling the brigade to set out. The modernisation of the Sheffield brigade is coincident with Mr. Frost's association with it, and among many improvements which have been effected are the provision of horsed escapes with huge extension ladders operated by engines actuated by carbonic acid gas, the utilisation of oil fuel for the steamers, the adoption of the efficacious chemical extinguisher, and lastly and most important of all, the acquisition of the motor tender, which has already justified its attendant outlay over and over again. One desideratum which it is hoped will not be delayed is the provision of street alarms, the urgency for which is obvious when consideration is made of the amount of property for the safety of which the brigade is responsible. The present staff of the brigade is forty all told, and these two score men have in their keeping the protection of property of a rateable value of £1,721,619.

An Energetic Life

The firemen lead a busy existence. As will be seen in reference to the photographs on our magazine page, they are responsible for the whole of the necessary repairs to appliances and stock. They shoe all of their own horses, and those for the mounted police, they build the ambulances in use, and they also erected some of their own tenders. Indeed the brigade is made up of men versed in every craft incidental to the conduct of a thoroughly smart brigade.

In connection with the ambulance work, people perhaps hardly realise the amount of work this section of the brigade duties involves. For instance last year alone the ambulance calls amounted to no less than 2,691, and there were only two days of the whole 365 when the ambulance vans were not required. Saturday is usually the busiest day in this department, and last year 526 calls were answered, the smallest number being on Sundays, viz, 232. In addition, the firemen undertake the removal of the bodies of persons fatally injured, suicides, etc., 184 cases being removed to the city mortuary last year.

Personnel of the Brigade

In 1900, the imposing quarters of Westbar were opened. This very fine block of buildings contains Police and Fire Offices, cells, and stabling for sixteen Fire Brigade and Mounted Police horses. Here Second Officer Hadwick maintains a high standard of efficiency and, as at Rockingham Street; everything is conducted on most up-to-date lines.

References to the officers of the brigade brings one to the information that all have been trained under Mr. Frost himself – a feature which applies alike to the rank and file, and a circumstance which contributes entirely to the harmonious working of the methods employed. The Third and Fourth Officers both joined the brigade from the ranks of the Police Force, whilst Sergeant Corlett, a typical and good humoured Manxman who knows every bolt and screw of the motor-tender joined the brigade in 1901. Of the men themselves Chief Officer Frost speaks in terms of the highest praise. Keen, and with a thorough love of their work it is a pleasure to see them go about their duties, and Mr. Frost pays them the tribute that there is no better set of men in any city in the kingdom.

The Fireman's Life

Mr. Frost himself has practically spent his life in brigade work. He has been present at big conflagrations in Leicestershire, in the boot factories of Northamptonshire, and among the huge cotton mills of Lancashire. He has had many hair-raising escapes from death, one of the most notable being on February 16th 1895. On that day he was in charge of the Northampton Brigade at the burning Maidwell Hall, a magnificent residence near Lamport, where damage was caused to the extent of over £20,000. In the course of the conflagration the whole structure collapsed, and Mr. Frost was carried out from the debris. Yet he lived to endure many more escapes, notably one in Sheffield on April 5th, 1901, when the tender overturned in St Mary's Road, and no fewer than seven members of the brigade had to be conveyed to the Royal Hospital in their own ambulance. Mr. Frost on that occasion sustained fractured ribs and sternum, and for several weeks he hovered between life and death. He was again injured more recently by a fall through a floor in West Street, but the possession of an iron constitution has enabled him to emerge physically triumphant from these alarming experiences. The recent presentation of medals and merit awards to the Chief Officer and other members

of the Brigade for gallantry is well within memory, and one of the Chief's most treasured possessions is the handsome timepiece presented to him by the Duke and Duchess of Portland subsequent to the Wellbeck fire of 1900. That fire involved what is perhaps the longest run accomplished by the same horses to any fire. The call was received at 5.12 a.m. and No. 3 steam fire engine and other machines drawn by eight of the splendid animals owned by the Brigade, did the journey in record time, enabling the Sheffield contingent to effect excellent work in assisting to save the Abbey.

A Peep into History

It is of more than a passing interest to refer to big Sheffield conflagrations and incidents concerning the dates of which as our "Queries" department can testify, are often the subject of keen debate. The fire at Hovey's on December 21st, 1894, and the call to which was received at 4.5 a.m., was a tragic episode, whilst another grim page in the history of the brigade is that furnished by the Highfield fire on March 9th 1897, when three persons lost their lives. Many lives have been saved by the gallantry of the brigade, notably in an outbreak on Jessop Street on September 30th, 1901, at the dwelling-house fire in Calver Street on October, 24th, 1902; again at the Albany Hotel fire on July 12th, 1903, when four people were carried down the escape to safety. Other big outbreaks which have been tackled are the Holmes wood yard fire on September 14th, 1907; the Birley Colliery Co.'s outbreak on January 25th, 1904 (a most exiting fire, as the flames ran down the greased sides of the shaft gear), the fire at Price's flour mill on July 12th, 1903, and the outbreaks at Rawson's Brewery and Flowerday's wood yard in 1900.

The Value of Co-Operation

Taken in every aspect the record of the Sheffield Fire Brigade is a gallant one, and much of the success of their manifold operations is due to the splendid good feeling which exists between the Chief and his men. Mr. Frost speaks in terms of high praise of the co-operation of the Watch Committee and the Chief Constable of the city, Commander Scott. In the ranks of the brigade itself the most perfect discipline prevails and nothing is wanting to ensure the complete efficiency of the very important services which it falls to their lot to perform.