



**The Evolution of Buckinghamshire Village and Town Fire Brigades Into The Buckinghamshire Fire Brigade**

Early fire pumps were acquired for some villages in the 1700s and were purchased by the administrative body of the time, the Board of Vestry (the church), which is why many early engine houses were found in churches.

In 1830 an act to provide for the lighting and watching of parishes was introduced then replaced by the **Lighting and Watching Act 1833** which made churchwardens responsible to provide fire pumps and equipment, a suitable place for storage and to employ someone from the parish, for a small remuneration, to maintain and ensure the pump was kept in good working order.

When a fire broke out and a good supply of water was near to hand the villagers collected the pump from the church, hauled it to the scene and set about extinguishing the fire.

While the pump was being collected, neighbours would assist the homeowner in removing the contents from the premises to a place of safety. However, the newspapers reported that on some occasions the salvaged goods disappeared from the scene.

Although this act applied to all the parishes in England and Wales, very few complied with it, some waiting until the 1900s before acquiring equipment.

In the early 1800s fire brigades started to become established and by 1934, 36 fire brigades are known to have operated in Buckinghamshire in the following parishes:

Amersham, Aylesbury, Beaconsfield, Bletchley, Brill, Buckingham, Burnham, Chalfont St Peter, Chesham, Claydon, Datchet, Dinton, Eton, Fenny Stratford, Gerrards Cross, Great Missenden, Haddenham, High Wycombe, Lane End, Langley, Maids Moreton, Marlow, Newport Pagnell, Newton Longville, Olney, Princes Risborough, Slough, Stokenchurch, Stony Stratford, Waddesdon, Wendover, Winchendon, Winslow, Woburn Sands, Wolverton, Wooburn Green.

There were 38 brigades, but information on the Fingest and Lane End Fire Brigade and the Halton Brigade is proving difficult to track down.

The fire brigades of Claydon and Waddesdon were unusual in that they were established as private brigades by the Lord of the respective Manors, then both came under the authority of the local council with the engine houses remaining on the estate.

The Wolverton Fire Brigade was owned crewed and managed by the London and North Western Railway and was on constant call to fires in the town and surrounding area.

Gerrards Cross and Chalfont St Peter Fire Brigade was also slightly different to the other local authority brigades as it was run by a joint Fire Brigade committee, appointed jointly by both the parish councils. Although one fire brigade they operated from two separate fire stations.

At this time many brigades were run on a volunteer basis with no financial burden on the rates. They were funded by annual subscription from the parish council, residents of the parish and neighbouring parishes if the brigade was contracted to supply fire cover there.

Following their attendance at a fire, the brigade treasurer would bill the insurance companies for the use of the pump, the firemen and payment for the pumpers.

Replacement of equipment and purchase of new pumps was achieved by subscription and fund-raising events organised over a period of time.

With regard to the Datchet, Eton, Langley and Slough brigades, until 1 April 1974 these parishes were situated in Buckinghamshire. Then under the Local Government Act 1972 they were transferred to Berkshire along with the parishes of Britwell, Chalvey, Cippenham, Ditton, Eton Wick, Horton, Huntercombe, Salt Hill, Upton, Wraysbury and parts of the parishes of Wexham and Burnham.

In December 1937 the **Air Raid Precautions Act** was issued. This act required County Councils to prepare and submit Air Raid Precaution schemes for their areas. The schemes required arrangements for volunteers as Air Raid Wardens, members of Rescue Parties, Decontamination Squads, First-Aiders, Auxiliary Firemen and Fire Brigade Reserve Volunteers.

In January 1938 recruitment of fit men over 25 with firefighting experience and fit men over 25 for administration duties was under way to form additional fire cover in the form of an Auxiliary Fire Service to serve alongside the local authority brigades.

On 1 April 1939 under the **Fire Brigade Act 1938**, responsibility for fire brigades was removed from the Parish Councils and passed to the Rural District or Borough Councils. In Buckinghamshire that was the seven Rural District Councils: Amersham, Aylesbury, Buckingham, Eton, Newport Pagnell, Winslow and Wycombe

All the Parish Council fire brigade equipment and responsibilities were automatically transferred to the District Councils, who were now responsible for maintaining adequate fire cover within their districts.

This act was introduced to make further provisions for fire services by making the council a fire authority with a statutory duty to provide adequate fire brigades and equipment to deal effectively with fires within the council's jurisdiction.

They had to consider entering into mutual assistance agreements with brigades in neighbouring districts and counties for the attendance of the nearest pumps to outlying villages or in times of protracted incidents.

There was also a responsibility for the provision and maintenance of hydrants and water supplies.

While these changes would greatly improve fire cover, there was also a negative side - the news that under this scheme the insurance companies would no longer be liable to pay for the attendance and work of the fire brigade as all costs would now be borne by the District Council which would inevitably mean a rise on the rates. This revelation did not sit well with the councils or the public.

On **1 September 1939** the Home Office sent out a telegram to all fire authorities requiring them to mobilise their Auxiliary Fire Service personnel to work alongside the local authority brigades.

From 1 July 1941 the Exchequer assumed responsibility for Fire Brigade expenditure and on **18 August 1941** both brigades were amalgamated to form the National Fire Service.

Before this scheme there were 1,400 local authority Fire Brigades in England and Wales. Under this new scheme there was one Fire Brigade, originally split into 33 Fire Force areas which at its peak increased to 43 Fire Force areas.

Buckinghamshire was assigned to Fire Force Area 15 which also covered the counties of Berkshire and Oxfordshire with the headquarters at Taplow.

There were now 66 Buckinghamshire fire stations under this scheme.

#### **Whole-time cover**

Aylesbury, Beaconsfield, Bletchley, Buckingham, Chesham, Denham, Eton, Gerrards Cross, High Wycombe (two stations), Slough (four stations), Wolverton.

#### **Part-time cover on call 24 hours**

Amersham, Burnham, Datchet, Great Missenden, Newport Pagnell, Olney, Princes Risborough, Woburn Sands.

#### **Part-time cover not always on call**

High Wycombe.

#### **Action Stations**

Ashley Green, Aston Clinton, Bierton, Bradwell, Brill, Chalfont St Giles, Chalfont St Peter, Cholesbury, Eton Wick, Farnham Royal, Flackwell Heath, Haddenham, Hambleden, Hanslope, Holmer Green, Iver, Lane End, Langley, Lee, Linslade, Long Crendon, Marsh Gibbon, Naphill, Old Amersham, Prestwood, Quainton, Radnage, Sherington, Stewkley, Stokenchurch, Stoke Poges, Stony Stratford, Turville Heath, Tylers Green, Waddesdon, Wendover, Weston Turville, Whitchurch, Wing, Winslow, Wraysbury, Wooburn Green.

During the war stations are known to have closed, been relocated or amalgamated with their neighbours so the list above should be treated as a snapshot reference of stations.

For example, High Wycombe Fire Station has a photograph of Loudwater NFS dated 1942. To date I have been unable to find any information on this station or its location and it does not appear on this Fire Force map, nor the fire station at New Bradwell.

At the beginning of 1945 four options were under review for the future of the post-war fire service, the Home Secretary suggesting;

- The return of the fire brigades to the Rural District and Borough Councils under the 1938 act.
- County or County Borough Brigades.
- Making joint local authority amalgamated brigades.
- Continuing with the National Fire Service.

After the end of World War Two, it took until March 1946 for the news to break that when the National Fire Service demobilised the fire brigades would come under the authority of the County Councils. This was an unpopular decision.

At the National Fire Brigades Association Conference in October 1946 a resolution was passed that "the conference of local authorities did not agree with the proposal to make the fire service the responsibility of the County Councils".

The conference deemed that the Borough and Rural District Councils were capable of this duty as they did under the 1938 act.

The government pressed ahead with the idea of County Brigades, working on a Fire Services Bill which had its first reading on 1 February 1947, a further reading on 27 March, then came in to being on 31 July when it received royal assent.

The act was known as the **1947 Fire Services Act** which was due to come into force on 1 April 1948. This gave the County Councils eight months to work through and implement the 39 sections and six schedules within the act.

Chief Fire Officers were expected to be interviewed, selected and in post by 31 October 1947 as their experience and expertise would be required to prepare and complete the Brigade establishment scheme which had to be submitted to the Secretary of State by January 1948.

Mr Edward George Hobbs was successful and appointed as Chief Fire Officer. He was Assistant Fire Force Officer Commander of No 6 Fire Force at Hull.

Mr. J.B. Vickery was appointed Deputy Chief Officer and officer in charge of the Northern Division. During the war he was staff officer at regional headquarters, Reading.

Mr T. W. Johnson appointed Divisional Officer and officer in charge of the Southern Division and Mr W. R. Cross senior administrative and staff officer.

With these officers and an interim Fire Brigade Committee selected, work began on the Draft Establishment Scheme.

Fire risk categories were assigned to areas throughout the county:

**Class C Risk:** Areas of factory estates, extensive shopping centres of three or more storeys in height, smaller industrial centres and older timber properties in medium sized towns.

High Wycombe and Slough were assessed to be in this category.

**Class D Risk:** Ranges of buildings as in a market town, suburban terraced property or blocks of flats and small industrial communities where the operatives' dwellings are closely grouped together mainly in terraces and rows and practically devoid of fire breaks.

Aylesbury, Bletchley, Eton, Stony Stratford, Woburn Sands and Wolverton were assessed in this category.

**Class E Risk:** Towns normally exceeding population of 5,000, devoid of serious industrial risks and detached or semi-detached housing property in suburban areas.

Amersham, Beaconsfield, Buckingham, Chesham, Linslade, Marlow, Newport Pagnell and Winslow were assessed in this category.

**Class F Risk:** All risks not falling into classes A to E except remote rural areas.

Brill, Burnham, Chalfont St Peter and Gerrards Cross, Datchet, Great Missenden, Haddenham, Olney, Princes Risborough, Stokenchurch, Waddesdon, Wendover, Whitchurch and Wooburn Green were assessed in this category.

With the risks quantified, the crewing of the stations could be calculated.

The County Brigade was made up of 30 fire stations, 26 to be crewed by retained/part-time firemen and four crewed by wholetime firemen.

The November establishment spreadsheet for Brigade Headquarters, included two senior officers, the fire prevention officer, 14 control staff and 10 in workshops with a total of 40 personnel in all.

The revised establishment spreadsheet for the fire stations, dated 30 December 1947, showed the total of wholetime personnel as 167 and the retained at 390.

There was also provision in the draft scheme for an additional 11 temporary wholetime personnel who would be replaced by part-timers at a later date and for 32 paid volunteers.

The Brigade was split into two divisions each with its own HQ.

### **Northern Division, 14 stations**

Aylesbury, Cambridge Street; Brigade and Northern Divisional Headquarters.

Bletchley, Brill, Buckingham, Haddenham, Newport Pagnell, Olney, Stony Stratford, Waddesdon, Wendover, Whitchurch, Winslow, Woburn Sands, Wolverton.

### **Southern Division, 16 stations**

Slough, McKenzie Street; Divisional Headquarters.

Amersham (On The Hill and Old Amersham), Beaconsfield, Burnham, Chesham, Chalfont St Peter, Datchet, Gerrards Cross, Great Missenden, High Wycombe, (London Road and Priory Road), Marlow, Princes Risborough, Stokenchurch, Wooburn Green.

Under the scheme there was provision for the nearest appliance to a fire to attend regardless of county boundaries, so mutual reciprocal agreements were set up between adjoining counties.

**At midnight on 31 March 1948, the National Fire Service was disbanded.**

**On 1 April 1948, Buckinghamshire Fire Brigade came into service.**

The new brigade was referred to in the press as the county's "£100,000 a year brigade" due to the cost of new equipment, the number of personnel and the wage bill.

Councillors in rural villages where their fire station had a crew of 12 personnel were upset at having to contribute the same as someone in Slough, where they had a station with 40 personnel.

Before the war, village fire brigades cost around £50 a year to run and the increase in costs did not sit well with the parish councillors and their villagers.

To celebrate the handing over the Brigade to the County an inaugural dinner was held at Hazell's Club in Aylesbury on 1 April with all the stations being represented.

In November 1948 the County coat of arms and station name were being fitted on the appliances.



The Auxiliary Fire Service reformed in 1948 when the Cold War began. There were 101 members in Buckinghamshire who were finally disbanded on 31 March 1968.

### **Buckinghamshire Fire Brigade Committee**

An interim committee was set up to assist in establishing the Brigade.

In section 20 of the act was a requirement to appoint an elected Fire Brigade Committee. In order to do this a scheme had to be drawn up and forwarded to the Secretary of State for approval. On 22 July the Brigade's Fire Brigade Committee scheme was approved and a committee elected.

It consisted of 29 members comprising the Chairmen of the County Council and the Finance Committee, 16 appointed from the County Council, two from the Borough Council of Slough, two from the Borough Council of High Wycombe, one appointed by Aylesbury Borough Council, three appointed by the eight Urban District Councils and the Buckingham Borough Council, and three from the eight Rural District Councils.

On 1 April 1997 the Borough of Milton Keynes became a unitary authority, and the Fire Authority was renamed the Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority.

The Fire Authority consists of 17 members – 11 from Buckinghamshire County Council and six from Milton Keynes Council.

### **Chief Fire Officers**

Edward George Hobbs, 1 April 1948 to 17 April 1965; T. W. Johnson (Acting), May 1965 to 31 August 1965; W.M. Ward, 1 September 1965 to 31 August 1976; Alan Archer, 1 October 1976 to 28 February 1985; Brian Goodwin, 1 March 1985 to October 1987; Jeffrey Goddard, October 1987 to October 2004; Damian Smith, October 2004 to 20 June 2009 ; Bill Feeley (Interim), 29 June 2009 to 31 December 2009; Mark Jones, 1 January 2010 to 13 February 2015; Jason Thelwell, 13 February 2015.

### **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks are due to the old Aylesbury Borough Council (Aylesbury Vale District Council), who had the foresight to deposit copies of the Establishment Scheme at the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies. Without this deposit, Buckinghamshire Fire Brigade's history would have been lost for all time.

Thanks are also due to:

- The wonderful staff at the Buckinghamshire Study Centre for their assistance, perseverance and knowledge, along with the uncanny knack of being able to decipher even the most illegible scribble.

- NCA History for access to a Fire Force map.
- The newspaper reporters who recorded what they saw, heard and experienced at council and village meetings, fires and special events which are a fantastic source of information for researchers.
- Finally and most importantly the management at the Bucks Free Press and Bucks Herald newspapers who kindly permitted the use of details from their reporters' articles to help produce this item.

2018

© John Bull