

Village Echoes

The first "fire fighting appliance" recorded in Goudhurst was a hand pump type. It was kept in a wooden shed in North Road and it needed 8 or 10 men either side of the pump to work it. This didn't appear to cause any problems because people always gathered when a fire broke out and the "volunteers" were paid an hourly rate for their efforts. Putting out a fire, or at least trying to put it out, must have been an expensive business for the Fire Captain.

The Weald of Kent Fire Brigade made its Headquarters in Goudhurst. It is said that the reason for this was the ability to see over the whole of the Weald of Kent from the top of St Mary's Church tower, a distinct advantage to the Brigade because it existed to cover Goudhurst, Brenchley, Horsmonden, Marden and Lamberhurst.

In August 1874 the Weald of Kent Brigade took delivery of a new steam fire engine built by Messrs Shand Mason of London at a cost of £320. It was capable of throwing 134 gallons of water per minute and to a height of 130 feet. It would need 30 men to man the engine, but again this presented no problem because "40 sturdy Kentish men" had volunteered their services whenever and wherever they were needed

The arrival of the new engine was quite an event in the local area. It was brought by train to Paddock Wood station. From there, the fully manned engine was escorted on its journey by 'C' troop of the West Kent Yeomanry under the command of Lord George Pratt and Viscount Nevill, stopping en route at Brenchley for refreshments. The procession then moved on to Mr T Manwaring's residence, Cowden, and stopped at the nearby pond where the crew demonstrated the new engine's capability. The spectators were astonished when the engine "threw immense volumes of water from the pond over the adjacent meadows".

The engine continued on its route to Horsmonden where large numbers of spectators had gathered to see its capability once again demonstrated. People in carriages and on horseback had joined the procession along the route and by now it was quite long. When it reached Goudhurst a huge crowd cheered as the procession made its way up the hill.

When tested, the engine took water from the pond on The Plain and the jet reached a house near the church some 620 feet up the hill. The crowd did not begin to disperse until the engine had completed three further demonstrations of its capability. In the evening at 6 o'clock, a large number of people from Goudhurst, Brenchley and Horsmonden sat down to a dinner at The Vine with the leading figures in the procession. "An excellent dinner" was provided by the landlord of The Vine, Mr James Thurgood. Several toasts were proposed, among them one to the success of the Weald of Kent Brigade with a special mention for Mr B S Wilmot, the originator of the scheme for raising funds to procure the new engine.

The new engine was stored in the wooden shed in North Road. It is recorded

that special care was to be taken to ensure that the leather hose was stored in such a way as to prevent damage and therefore that it was ready for use "at the shortest notice" rather than having to be repaired before it could be used. Previously, leaks in hoses had needed to be mended with handkerchiefs, bandages and such like before they were able to be used effectively. In November 1875 the old wooden shed was itself the victim of a fire. The new engine was rescued and soon put into action putting out the fire, but the Brigade lost 3 lengths of hose, their full harness and their building. Fortunately there was no loss of life and the adjoining buildings were saved. It was intended that a new shed be erected specially for the new engine on The Plain, but that was not completed until 1878 at a cost of £120. In the meantime, the engine was temporarily stored at Mr Jarvis Lambert's in Church Road. At the time the shed was completed, only half the cost had been raised, and most of that by subscribers in Goudhurst.

The steam engine was finally retired in 1930 after 56 years of good and faithful service. A more powerful replacement, named Victoria, was purchased from Sittingbourne Fire Brigade. It had been built by Messrs Shand Mason and had been supplied to Sittingbourne Brigade in June 1898. Victoria remained in service at Goudhurst until 1940.

Local History Society