

FIRE FIGHTING IN DURSLEY

The first record of fire fighting in Dursley is to be found in the Vestry Minutes of November 4th 1799 where it is reported that the “fire engine is to be inspected and repaired”. In 1825 the “engine house” was situated on the site of Dursley Almshouses near the Parish Church, Vestry Minutes of that year record a heavy investment in new equipment, three dozen buckets and fifty feet of three inch leather pipe.

A Town Meeting held in September 1873 approved the establishment of an official brigade to replace the volunteers then performing the duties and so the “Dursley Parish Council Fire Brigade” was born under the captaincy of Mr. Priestly. In 1879 the brigade was equipped with a new engine which it was promised would be ready for action within four minutes, a turnout which compares favourably with present Home Office requirements. The new engine was almost certainly the 1865 Shand-Mason Manual sold by the Council to Daniels Board Mills at Cam shortly after the First War, and still preserved there. Most memorable incident of the nineteenth century was the destruction by fire of Rivers Mill on the Uley Road, then used for the manufacture of wool-making equipment by George Lister, father of the more famous Robert Ashton. Despite the attendance of Dursley's two horse-drawn appliances, damage to the tune of £15,395 was caused, a considerable sum in those days.

A street directory of 1907 lists the engine house as being situated in Silver Street and an establishment of fourteen firemen directed by Captain William E. Talboys. Three generations of the Talboys family served successively in the Dursley Brigade between 1867 and 1941. At this time the Brigade was summoned by calls to the Police Station in Parsonage Street, Police then ringing the bell on the Market House. A similar arrangement, latterly with a siren mounted on the Police Station, was used right up to the introduction of radio in the sixties.

Between the wars, the equipment of the Dursley Brigade appears to have regressed. After the sale of the Shand-Mason pump, the “engine” appears to have been a large cart which transported the standpipes, hand pumps, hose etc. Even the method of propulsion was primitive, horses (known locally as “Carter's Poopers”) were available in a field a little way out of town, but frequently it was hauled by the crew to the fireground, a truly manual engine! After the station moved in the twenties from behind “The Hollies” in Parsonage Street to a site at the bottom of Long Street, the crew must have been already exhausted by the strain of hauling their engine up the hill into the centre of town before the rigours of fire fighting began. Dursley's most serious fire of this period, at the premises of R.A. Lister & Co. in March 1930 was not in fact attended by the Dursley Brigade although motor appliances were called in from Stroud, Gloucester and Wotton to supplement the Works Brigade. Lister's had operated their own motor appliance for some time and perhaps the Dursley “engine” was not thought up to the job. Nevertheless, the continued existence of most of Dursley's buildings through the thirties proves that the men of the Parish Brigade were quite capable of protecting their town in spite of their equipment. A rule book dated 1925, in the possession of Maurice Owen who retired as Vice-Captain early in the Second War, throws interesting light on operations at the time. Attendance by firemen at monthly drill was rewarded by the sum of 2/6d and if it was a “wet” drill 4/-. Less pleasing was the attendance at each drill of two Parish Councillors who reported their observations at the next meeting; perhaps D.C.'s visits are not so bad.

The passing of the Fire Brigades Act in 1938 brought new responsibilities to the Parish Council and in June 1939 agreement was reached with R.A. Lister & Co. for their Works Brigade (now running two motor appliances) to provide cover for the town. With the formation of the A.F.S., Dursley firefighters at last obtained their first “motor”, a Ford V8 Car towing a Harland Trailer Pump. New premises were also obtained, a garage attached to the Veterinary Practice of Mr.

Adams situated at the bottom of Bull Pitch. Although the Blitz hardly touched Dursley (it is claimed that German pilots were unable to locate valuable targets in the narrow valley) her doughty A.F.S. men did see the thick of the action in Bristol, Avonmouth, Bath and Exeter and would have been more than ready to serve their hometown if Luftwaffe navigation had improved. The formation of the National Fire Service brought a major change to fire cover in the town for it now became impracticable for R.A. Lister's Brigade to carry out their dual role and the 1939 agreement was terminated in July 1942. Dursley became Station 39 CX in the Stroud sub-area of the N.F.S. with sub-stations at Cam, Coaley and Uley. Dursley Station remained in Bull Pitch but now improved equipment was obtained, firstly an elderly Dennis "Pneumonia Wagon" (i.e. Braidwood) of unknown origins and later two standard wartime appliances, a 400 gallon Mobile Dam Unit and an ATV (GLE 119) with trailer pump.

The N.F.S. continued in existence for a short while after hostilities, control being returned to local authorities in 1947. Dursley became Station 23 in the new Gloucestershire Fire Service but still with unsatisfactory premises and its two wartime appliances. First Officer-in-charge was Sub Officer Len Frost, father of the present "sub" who had been fire fighting in Dursley since the A.F.S. days.

The Bull Pitch Station was to remain for another eighteen years, initially with a variety of second-hand and obscure appliances seeing service there. A photograph exists of a curious hybrid on the run in the late forties, the front appears to be an ordinary Bedford or Austin lorry but the rear is very attractive coachwork with a sloping rear and handrails for the benefit of crew riding on the pump platform. A hose reel is perched incongruously on the cab roof.

In the mid-fifties the Station was allocated its very first new appliance, Commer/Miles Water Tender UDF 890. This vehicle differed from its sisters, having been modified with a much lower ladder gantry for service at Dursley, this to prevent premature removal of the ladder by the door-lintel on turning out. The most spectacular incident of this period occurred at the Victoria Cinema early one winter Sunday morning. A smouldering fire in the roof space ignited celluloid film stored there (no F.P. inspections then!), the fire bursting through the roof with explosive ferocity. Prompt action by the Brigade saved the auditorium and although the attendance of four pumps would not make this a notable fire by today's standards, the torch-like appearance on the Dursley sky-line lives in the memories of those who witnessed it. Rather funnier calls recollected by ex Station Officer Frost and ex Sub-Officer Harnden include a "Boy stuck in Porthole" at Purton and "Bathroom Wall on Fire" in Dursley. In the latter case faulty lead-covered electric cable was arcing to a gas pipe and literally burning away adjacent breeze blocks.

The sixties saw great changes in the Dursley Area, two in different ways significantly affecting the Brigade's work. The opening of Britain's first Nuclear Power Station at Berkeley has added a frightening and very special risk to the Station's responsibilities. There have been many incidents at the Station over the years, some serious as fires but never involving the spectre of massive radiation leaks. The opening of the Severn Bridge and the M5 motorway if anything led to a significant reduction in ESS calls firstly because due to access provision motorway incidents nominally in Dursley's area are usually dealt with by Stroud and Thornbury Stations, secondly by this time the A38 ("England's longest lane") had become a notorious provider of RTA calls. The most horrific incident ever on Dursley's ground occurred in October 18th 1962 on the A38 at Hornshill, a mini-bus was in collision in the infamous centre lane and eleven members of the sixteen strong Young Ladies Choir travelling to Cheltenham in the mini-bus were killed outright.

April 1st 1965 was a day of rejoicing for Dursley firemen as they moved into their new purpose-built Station in Castle Street. The main building consists of a two bay appliance room with

adjoining stores, lecture room, offices etc. and the plans show room for an extension on the west side. The spacious drill yard contains a smoke chamber and substantial brick-built drill tower, the latter a welcome innovation for the crews who hitherto had had to carry out ladder drills against trees on Stinchcombe Hill. The existing Commer Water Tender was moved from the Bull Pitch Station and joined by a brand new machine (DAD 717C) from the same manufacturers and of a type new to the County, the Water-Tender-Ladder. This carried the now universal 45ft (13.5m) Lacon ladder, 10ft. longer than the ordinary Ajax ladder and really designed as a replacement for the 50 foot Escape. Dursley Station was given the task of developing drills for use of this new ladder and demonstrated these all over the County. In keeping with its new status as a two pump station, the O-I-C, Len Frost, now with over twenty years service, was promoted to Station Officer. The most protracted, if not spectacular incident of this period concerned a deep seated fire in the Russian Timber Ship "Guilia" at Sharpness Docks. Over a period of several days, crews from all over the County took turns to shift the cargo and try to reach the seat of the fire, but eventually it was decided that the only remedy was to flood the vessel by deliberately scuttling it. It was later towed away for scrap.

1973 witnessed another major change when Station Officer Frost retired leaving his two sons to carry on the family's firefighting tradition. His successor was at that time the deputy and still the present O.I.C, Station Officer Basil Allen. A year previously the two Commer machines had been replaced by new Ford/HCB vehicles WDF 804J (WrL) and EAD 953L (WrT). Most notable fire of the seventies was probably that at Rednock School in August 1973 when the timber and corrugated iron Drama Hall was totally destroyed in a brief, but fierce fire. Although only a five pump job it certainly provided local excitement and a demonstration of good fire fighting in restricting the blaze to the one building. As with all stations the drought year of 1976 will be remembered as an extremely busy one.

Of recent years, 1983 stands out in the annals of Dursley fire fighting (and indeed the County) as a year of memorable incidents. There was a serious ship fire (M.V. Falstria) at Sharpness in March involving 10 pumps and considerable use of BA while in September both appliances were called across the Severn Bridge as reliefs at a 10 pump farm fire on Lydney's ground. Overshadowing these however was Dursley's biggest ever blaze (and arguably the biggest ever in the County - see footnote) which occurred at the premises of R.A. Lister & Co. on July 27th. The full story is told in the Brigade publication "Fireground 10" (Dursley had become Station 10 in the smaller County Brigade resulting from the 1974 local government re-organisation) and so only brief details are required here. Dursley's two machines were called to assist the Works Brigade at 12:49 and as the rapidly spreading fire continued to outflank the firefighters, they were progressively joined by fifteen further pumps (including four from the County of Avon) and three specials (HP, TL, CU). C.F.O. Wilson gave the stop message at 16:38 – "a range of buildings of 1, 2, 3 and 4 floors, 300 metres x 80 metres, used as engineering works; 50% of buildings and contents severely damaged by fire; 30 jets, 1 HP and a TL monitor, 6 Breathing Apparatus in use". Later that year (although the events appear unconnected), the stations two stalwart Ford Tenders were replaced by Bedford Automatic/CFB appliances (DDF 940/1T) previously on the run at Cheltenham and Gloucester respectively. It remains to record that on January 1st 1986 Station Officer Allen was awarded the M.B.E. for his services to firefighting and the community, an honour not only to Basil personally, but also to his colleagues at Station 10 and to the fire service in this County and beyond. Dursley's men will continue to handle their 200 odd calls a year with the high standards set over the years, only wondering when the bells go down whether it will be a call to another cow strayed into a slurry pit or a major radiation leak.

FOOT NOTE

As this history was being written, the disastrous fire at the Britannia Warehouse in Gloucester's dockland occurred (April 1st 1987). Arguments will no doubt continue for many years as to whether this fire displaces the Lister's claim to being the County's biggest. Although probably a more spectacular fire than Lister's, I suggest the Dursley claim still stands based on the following facts:

- 1) At its height, the Lister's incident had one more pump on the fireground (not including the Works Brigade), although four of the seventeen came from over the border.
- 2) The weight of attack at Dursley (30 jets) was considerably more than that at Gloucester (12 jets).
- 3) Initial estimates of damage at Gloucester (£1M) does not compare with that which occurred at Lister's (£6M+).

T.W. Larkham - April 1st 1987

ADDITIONAL HISTORY

Following Len Frost's retirement in 1973, Basil Allen took over as Station Officer until 1991. Len Frost (son) then served in that post from 1991 to 1997, Roger Woodward from 1997 until 2000 and Graham Ponting from 2000 until 2011. Neil Bridges is currently (2012) holding the position of Station Commander.

Andrew Barton - August 28th 2012

GLOSSARY

AFS	Auxiliary Fire Service
BA	Breathing Apparatus
CFO	Chief Fire Officer
CU	Control Unit
DC	Divisional Commander
HP	Hydraulic Platform
NFS	National Fire Service
OIC	Officer in Charge
Pump	Fire Appliance
RTA	Road Traffic Accident
TL	Turntable Ladder
WrL	Water Tender Ladder
WrT	Water Tender