

# Our Neighbour Downstairs

by Trevor Davies



*Fig. 1. Emsworth firemen in 1885 dressed in their wool uniforms*

As many of you will know, the building the Museum occupies was originally built as the offices of the Warblington Urban District Council (WUDC). At the time, WUDC were responsible for firefighting in the community, so they decided to include the fire station on the ground floor. Even though the Council left the first floor in 1932 when they merged with Havant and Waterlooville, the fire station remained – making it one of the oldest fire stations in the country.

Although the Museum has always been on good terms with our neighbours downstairs (the fire alarm system is shared), we have not previously considered their contribution to Emsworth's history – until now. Our firemen, current and retired, have a real passion for the history of the fire brigade. Furthermore, they are happy to share their deep knowledge with others (like myself) who are ignorant of the process through which the fire brigade developed. Some of the change has been driven by legislation responding to the events of the 20th century. In researching this year's exhibition, I have been struck by three thoughts in particular.

First, firemen's uniforms provide surprising continuity. There are noticeable similarities

in firemen's uniforms from 1885 (Fig. 1 the earliest image we have in our fire brigade collection) until the 1970s. This was because wool was the least combustible material then known – so, for almost 100 years, all firemen's uniforms were made from black wool. Firemen have collected these uniforms and willingly agreed to lend us examples for our recent exhibition.

In the 1960s motor racing saw a number of tragic losses of life due to fire after a collision. Equally tragic was the fire that swept through Apollo 1 on the launch pad killing the three astronauts inside. Together, these incidents provided the impetus for DuPont to launch Nomex as the first genuine fireproof material. Following this development, firemen's uniforms changed rapidly to embrace the new technology, initially coloured black and subsequently the yellow high visibility variant we see today.

Second, when addressing the local firefighting issues, the WUDC took some brave and farsighted decisions. When the WUDC was constituted on 1st January 1895 as the result of new legislation, one of the first items on their agenda was the provision of firefighting resources in the community.

There was clearly some debate, but on 11th January 1898 a letter from the captain of the fire brigade was laid before the Council asking it to consider the purchase of a steam fire engine and lifesaving apparatus.

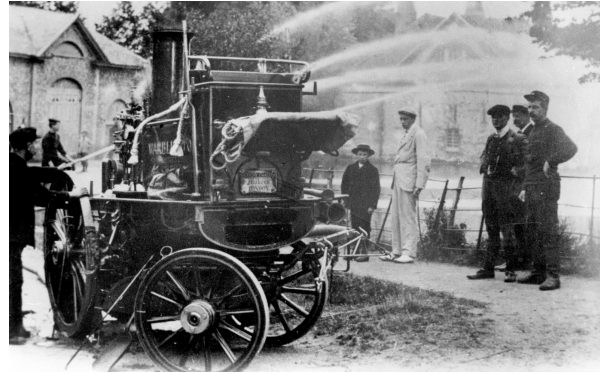
There was more debate about this relatively expensive, state of the art, investment. Nevertheless, on 29th August 1898, a special meeting of the Council to consider tenders for a steam fire engine and escape was called. Eleven Councillors attended. After considerable discussion and the defeat of a group who favoured a less expensively specified fire engine, a tender from Shand Mason at £435 (over £70,000 today) for a horse drawn steam fire engine and London Brigade escape (i.e. a light lattice escape ladder that stands by itself) was accepted. Not only did this fire engine serve Emsworth for the next 25 years, its ability to pump water long distances at pressure was not matched until WWII (Fig. 2).

The operation of this fire engine must have been quite challenging. When the fire brigade was summoned, the fire which had already been laid with kindling in the firebox was lit; the horses were harnessed and the fire engine driven to the fire, pausing to be stoked along the way. Hopefully, by the time it reached the fire, there was sufficient steam pressure to work the pump.

Sadly, the new fire engine was delivered too late to help fight the fire that broke out in the roof of Stansted House on 10th August 1900. Emsworth and Havant fire brigades



*Fig. 3. Emsworth's Merryweather fire engine leading a procession along Record Road in the 1930s*



*Fig. 2. Shand Mason horse drawn steam fire engine pumping during a practice at Lumley Mill*

attended, fighting the fire with two hand-pumped appliances. They were completely inadequate for the task at hand, and the main part of Stansted House was destroyed.

Third, because the fire brigade was manned by local volunteers and funded by local taxes, there was a close relationship between the fire brigade and the community. This is demonstrated by the participation of the smartly turned-out fire brigade with their polished brass helmets, on an open-topped fire engine marching down Record Road on their way to a local function (Fig. 3).

Because Emsworth fire station is mainly staffed by retained firefighters who work locally, but report for firefighting duty when required, the principle of community involvement is still present. For this reason, membership of the local fire brigade was (and still is) often a family affair.

More broadly, the support the community gave to local institutions is a fascinating part of our local history. In addition to the fire

brigade, the Museum holds evidence of how the hospital was supported by the community, and how provision was made for those in need before the creation of the welfare state. Residents gave what they could afford. We have evidence of local land owners voluntarily contributing large sums. While it is difficult to translate these ideas into a cohesive display, they are important in understanding how society worked in earlier times.