

Object(s): Fire Engine and Photograph of Stowmarket Fire Service.

Object Number(s): STMEA:2008-173 and STMEA:2008-174

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Fire Engine and Photograph of Stowmarket Fire Service (STMEA:2008-173 and STMEA2008-174).

An interesting part of Stowmarket's history is contained in these two objects presented to the Museum in 2009 by Assistant Divisional Officer, Francis of Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service.



Image: - Wooden Fire Engine¹

The Fire Engine or Pump (STMEA2008-173), is made of wood with four wooden wheels with iron tyres and a metal (possibly lead or zinc lined) cistern which would have contained water for fire-fighting. Water is pumped from the holding tank via a lift pump into a hose which can be directed as needed by the other Firefighters.

The pump is manually operated by two Firefighters pumping alternatively using the lever bars on either side of the appliance. The water is forced by the pumping action through a simple non-return (or one way) valve into the hose.

Unlike later examples, this would have been pushed or pulled along, as shown in the image above, by at least two Firefighters when fully laden with water.

¹ Fire Engine [Internet]. 2020 [cited 24 March 2020]. Available from: <https://my.ehive.com/accounts/3978/objects/390920/fire-engine>.

The photograph (STMEA:2008-174) is of Stowmarket Firefighters aboard their new, horse drawn fire pump, which dates from the mid-19th Century.



Image: Stowmarket Firefighters²

Durrant and Double³ assert that this photograph was taken in the early 1900's. It is interesting to note that this photograph also shows the Fire Pump (STMEA:2008-173) in the foreground. This indicates Stowmarket's Firefighters were then fully equipped with two appliances. Saward⁴ however, states that the former Fire Engine was withdrawn from service in 1885. Nevertheless, it is clearly evident that the newer model was faster and had greater water capacity than the original although it still required pumping by hand!

It is impossible to say exactly when the towns Firefighters took delivery of their new Fire engine. However, Malster⁵ describes how a 'catastrophic fire destroyed 18 houses and a beer house called the Carpenters Arms in Bury Street on a Sunday morning in July 1868, making 81 people homeless.' He displays two photographs from the Ivan Codd Collection depicting the devastation with the towns Fire Engine in the picture. The Engine was emblazoned with 'the Hundred of Stowmarket', to show that it belonged to the town.

A short history of Firefighting in Stowmarket.

² Photograph [Internet]. 2020 [cited 24 March 2020]. Available from:

<https://my.ehive.com/accounts/3978/objects/391052/photograph>

³ Double H, Durrant M. Stowmarket - A Pageant in Pictures. 2nd ed. Capella Press; 2002. Plate 31.

⁴ Sayward G. Firefighting in Suffolk, an illustrated history. Vol 1. 1996.

⁵ Malster R. Stowmarket. Stroud: History; 1995. Page 15.

Until the 17th Century, firefighting was a purely domestic matter, left to the property owner to manage. Whilst there may have been more formal 'volunteer' arrangements in larger cities, in much of the country, if you had a fire, you either had to extinguish it yourself, perhaps with support from neighbours, or else the fire was left to burn itself out.

In the early 17th Century, parishes began to take matters into their own hands to at least provide some basic firefighting equipment for local volunteers to use. MacCulloch,⁶ describes how the parish church of St Mary the Virgin, Haughley, there hung 'a number of leather fire buckets with the dates 1725 or 1728.' He goes on to say that 'until the last war, there was a large pole with an iron hook, used to pull off burning thatch from the roofs of houses....' Similar items could be found in other parts of the country, especially in towns and villages where numbers of homes were clustered together.

In Stowmarket, it was recognised that volunteer firefighters should be provided with equipment to assist them and premises in which to house it. Census records suggest that the population of the town had reached 2006 by 1732⁷. In 1743, the town was presented with its first Fire Engine (STMEA:2008-173) by Nathaniel Gordon. Saward⁸ states that it remained in service until 1885. It would therefore have seen active service at the time of the Patent Safety Gun-Cotton Company explosion on Friday 11th August 1871, which devastated the town with the loss of 28 lives and over 70 injured. The explosions left a crater 100 across and 10 feet deep. Smoke from the explosion was seen as far away as Ipswich 13 miles away. The Bury Post⁹ newspaper provides a vivid account of both the explosions and their aftermath. The Museum also has in its collection, a number of items and photographs from the Gun Cotton Factory which serve to illustrate the work of the factory as well as the devastation caused by the explosions.

At that time, the Stowmarket fire service would have occupied premises in Milton Road, at what is today, the entrance to the B&M car park. It would have taken some time for the service to respond to a fire at the Gun Cotton works, which is why the factory also had its own firefighting arrangements. The fire service later occupied premises in Union Street until 1960 when they moved again to their current premises in Lockington Road, on land formerly part of the Abbots Hall estate.

After the original wooden pump (STMEA:2008-173), and the Fire engine in our photograph (STMEA:2008-174), Stowmarket was to have two further Fire engines whilst under the auspices of the Urban District Council (Later Stowmarket Town Council). The first was a horse pulled steam operated pump in 1920 which was followed in 1935, by a mechanically powered Fire Tender complete with ladder.

Firefighting and the spread of Fake News

⁶MacCulloch R. Haughley Past and Present. Brockenborough Publications; 1983. Page 16.

⁷ 1983. Double H. Stowmarket, A Book of Records. Capella Publications.

⁸ Sayward G. Double H. Stowmarket - a book of records. Stowmarket: Capella Publications; 1983. Firefighting in Suffolk, an illustrated history. Vol 1. 1996.

⁹ Bury Post. 1871;.

People often gathered at the site of a major fire or conflagration as much as they seemed to whenever a camera was being used!

In Stowmarket, firefighters were called to action by the sound of a hooter, which could be heard throughout the town. Their turnout was always an excuse for people to gather to watch them set out to tackle a blaze.

Evidence also suggests great gatherings of people wherever there was a major incident, whether to watch the firefighters in action or simply to wonder at the devastation caused and, out of morbid curiosity to speculate on the reasons for it. In their book, 'Stowmarket a Pageant in Pictures', Durrant and Double¹⁰ show two photographs of the Bury Street fire in 1868, with several on-lookers in attendance in the aftermath of the fire.

It is possible to imagine the speculation of townsfolk into the causes of the Gun Cotton factory explosions. The Police investigation into the incident, suspected foul play having established that 'a person or persons unknown' had added sulphuric acid to the gun cotton after it had previously passed Government tests. An unprecedented reward of £100 (nearly £12,000 in today's money) for information offered to apprehend the culprits. Alas, no one was ever charged in connection with the incident but that of course, is another story...

¹⁰ Double H, Durrant M. Stowmarket - A Pageant in Pictures. 2nd ed. Capella Press; 2002. Plates 6 and 7.