

Women in the Fire Service in Essex between 1918 and 2018

Understanding the role of women in the fire service in Essex requires an understanding of how fire brigades were conducted historically. In 1918 fire brigades operated at local levels and were governed by boroughs, urban districts, rural districts and in some cases, parishes and totalled well in excess of 2000 fire brigades in the UK. Essex more than likely had at least 30 brigades at this time. Most of these were small independent brigades, many manned by volunteers.

Prior to 1918 there is anecdotal evidence of women assisting men in putting fires out however records of these unofficial 'firewomen' are very rare. There are examples of 'firewomen' that appear to show women taking on a more operational role at businesses, munitions factories and small villages especially during WWI when there was a shortage of men to do the work.

It is more plausible that women made an entree to work as support staff in administrative roles but at this point roles such as control operators were still very much reserved for men only.

In 1918 the Representation of the People Act was introduced and followed by the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act in 1928. Neither of these acts would have any real effect on the role of women in the fire service.

It was the 1937 Air Raid Precautions Act which was the greater catalyst for change, creating the Auxiliary Fire Service. The threat of a second World War meant that the Union had been considering allowing women to join the Auxiliary Fire Service. However there was strong opposition and controversy surrounding this. Article from May 1939 edition of 'Fire' – Women Banned from Leyton Auxiliary Fire Service by Fire Chief.

The 1938 Fire Brigades Act place the governance of fire brigades in the hands of local authorities

In 1939 at the annual Conference, the Fire Brigade Union voted to allow women into the Auxiliary Fire. On the 1st September 1939 the Auxiliary Fire Service was mobilised and nationally consisted of 89,000 men and 6,000 women. There are no records that reflect the proportion of women who were based in Essex.

Subsequent inquiries by the Home Office after the National Fire Service was created suggests that the majority of those 6000 Auxiliary Fire Service women were based in main urban areas – the majority of the which were stationed with the London Fire Brigade. It seems clear that the Auxiliary Fire Service intended to utilise women in communications and admin roles.

There is very limited evidence of some getting operational training – most of it from outside the boroughs. The Chief Fire Officer of Barnes Fire Brigade in South West London trained 100 Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) women as driver/pump operators but on the day war was declared says he received a directive from the Home Office that no Auxiliary Fire Service women should be in the open during air raid alerts, so he set about training 100 men to take on the role.

Women who could drive were allowed to drive staff cars, canteen vans and other ancillary vehicles, and staff car drivers would have been very much in the "open" once the bombing started. Auxiliary Fire Service women got basic training in firefighting to deal with fires in the stations when all appliances might be out dealing with air raid fires, but Auxiliary Fire Service women were recruited essentially for communications and admin work. There is limited evidence of some being trained for operational work – the Barnes example, but none from Essex. There is no evidence of any attending "Blitz" fires and those with such training were deployed to communications, admin and catering roles before the NFS was set up. That Auxiliary Fire Service women were in the "open" during air raids is evidenced by the award of a George Medal to London Firewoman Gillian Tanner for delivering petrol to firegrounds during air raids, and by numerous acts, and gallantry awards to individual Auxiliary Fire Service women for acts of operational assistance – driving appliances, assisting with hoses, on firegrounds. But these were all "heat of the moment" acts, not something for which they'd been trained and no examples from Essex.

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When the Auxiliary Fire Service was absorbed, together with the “peacetime” fire service, into the National Fire Service in 1941 a great effort was made to utilise firewomen more effectively. The scope of work for firewomen was broadened – e.g. fire prevention, but still remained restricted to communications, admin and catering essentially. There was a flirtation with operational female fire crews – not in Essex alas, but this never got very far and then man, and woman, power in the National Fire Service started to reduce as it was clear that further large scale air raids were unlikely and that Allied victory was assured.

All the major histories of the wartime fire service, including that by “Essex man” Cyril Demarne, who served with West Ham Fire Brigade, which was part of Essex at that time, and became its CFO post-war, who was so keen to see the female role in the wartime fire service acknowledged, that he wrote a book, “Our Girls”, make the point that women weren’t operational firefighters. There was a huge movement of NFS personnel in early 1944 from the north to the south of England to provide enhanced fire cover for troops and material assembling for the Normandy Landings. A lot of firewomen were included in this. There are (brief) accounts of firewomen moving from Leicestershire and Hertfordshire to Essex.

Between 1941 to 1948 the Auxiliary Fire Service becomes the National Fire Service and in 1942 has 30,000 whole time firewomen and 50,000 part time women. Mostly, these women filled roles working in the Control Room, in kitchens, as drivers, clerks or dispatch riders which was a very perilous job! There are anecdotal references to women putting fires out alongside male colleagues. Women were paid less, had an inferior injury compensation scheme and received no replacement uniform.

In 1943 the Fire Brigades Union had 8,000 female members. And the fire Woman’s Charter comes out in 1943. At the National Women’s Conference that year women fight for equal pay, improvements to conditions of service, discrimination against motherhood, as women were often discharged when they became pregnant. The Home Office did not consider these complaints to have enough substance to require some, if any improvement.

The role of operational firefighters were broadly accepted to be a job for men only. In so far as the Ministry of Labour issued a booklet on Fire Service Employment entitled ‘A Man’s Job’.

From 1945 onwards women accounted for less than 4% of Whole time Strength nationally. Women were still mainly employed in support roles where, training was infrequent and shift work was obligatory and advancement limited, this in turn created an environment where turn over of female staff was very high.

Up to 1948 the Fire Service was a National Operation, this year sees the introduction of County based services. The number of fire brigades is reduced to 157 larger brigades. In Essex at least sixty brigades were combined to form a county wide brigade with 66 stations (Bunn, Fire Fighting in Essex, 2016)

During the post war period women predominantly work in control and as support staff.

Equal pay for women working in control was introduced on the 1st January 1972. The Sex Discrimination Act came into effect in 1975 however there is still little changes in the role of women in the fire service.

Figures show that during the post war era there had not been much change in the perception that the role of fire fighting is not suitable for women. In 1986 there are only 35 operational female firefighters nationally out of a total 57,400.

Women have increasingly filled roles in Control and as support staff.

Southend had two operational female firefighters in 2004.

In 2006 Control Room staff consisted of a 97% female staff, 2% female fire fighters, 1 % retained and Women made up 55% of support staff.

EE Group	Male	Female	Total	Female
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Control	1	38	39	97%
Operational	867	18	885	2%
Retained	508	7	515	1%
Support	101	125	226	55%
Grand Total	1477	188	1665	11%

In March 2015 Control staff strike in a dispute against a radically changed shift pattern that was imposed on all control staff and was perceived to force those with caring responsibilities out of the work place.

In 2018 the Fire Service in Essex has worked very hard to create a more gender equal environment, the term 'Firefighter' is now the gender neutral term all operational staff are called. The admissions procedure is exactly the same regardless of gender. Our most senior role is filled by a woman, Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive Jo Turton. Out of all operational firefighters based in Essex, 6% are women. Control Room Staff 81% women, Support staff consist of a 51% Female workforce.

EE Group	Male	Female	Total	Female
Control	7	29	36	81%
Operational	579	34	613	6%
Retained	503	3	506	1%
Support	150	159	309	51%
Grand Total	1239	225	1464	15%

Images:



*Above: Suffragette Firewomen at the Albert Hall Meeting – protest demonstration, Votes for Women, Friday 25th March 1910 **

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*Above: Women being trained in the West End to take the place of male staff who are called up**



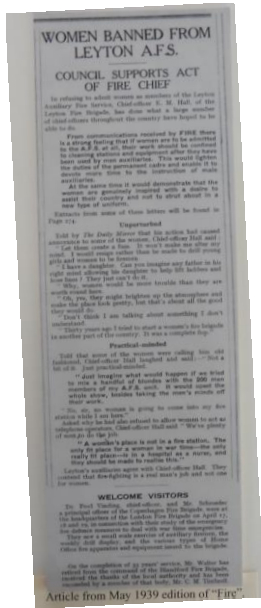
Two village ladies photographed on their way to attend fire-drill at a North-country village, where they are helping the local brigade, who are seriously

*Above: Village women attending a fire drill assisting the local fire brigade in 1916 who had a shortage of men*Western Morning News, Thursday July 20, 1916*

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Below Images all from EFM's collection – high res versions to follow via FTP

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Article from May 1939 edition of 'Fire' – Women Banned from Leyton Auxiliary Fire Service by Fire Chief. © EFM

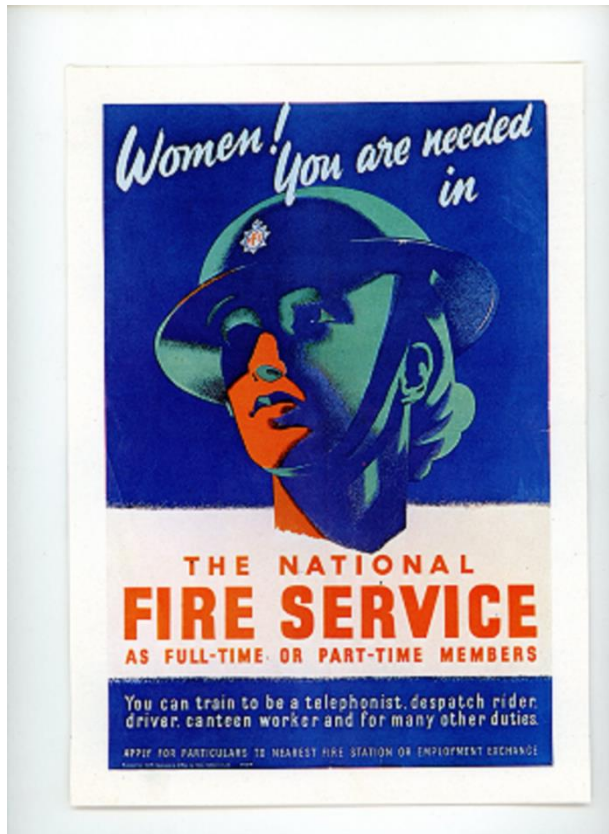


1939, Auxiliary Fire Service, Gold Flake cigarettes, 'A specialised job for trained personnel. Driving staff and cars and light lorries and important work in the watchroom and at the switchboard'. © EFM



Craven 'A' Cigarettes advert, 1941 © EFM

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Women Needed Poster, 1940 National Fire Service recruitment poster © EFM



NFS Firewomen based at Lexden, Colchester 1944, © EFM, original is collection of Irene Florence Bedford

Women in the Fire Service in Essex between 1918 and 2018



Oasis Fire Station Chelmsford c.1950, Station Officer Buckland and Fire Control Operator Mrs J van der Kwast.
© EFM



Essex Fire Head Quarters Hutton © EFM (EFM ref 2010/00329)

Women in the Fire Service in Essex between 1918 and 2018



Mrs Doris Romney and Miss Jean Hall in the Control Room at Station 30, 1955, © EFM, Morris 345

2. SEPARATE QUALIFICATIONS
(BY DISCIPLINE AND GRADE) RECORDED

The undermentioned were examined on 18th July, 1957, and qualified to drive brigade appliances (excluding turntable ladders):-

Number	Rank	Name	Station
11016	Sub-Officer	Gray, G.	Headquarters
10717	Fireman	Woods, H.L.	No. 30 Stn. Grays
10796	"	Agriss, H.G.E.	"
10830	"	Hoodie, G.W.	"

(b) WOMEN (SEPARATE) RECORDED

The undermentioned was examined on 12th July, 1957, and qualified to drive land rovers:-

Number	Rank	Name	Station
30264	Fireman	For, D.K.	No. 26 Stn. Vange

3. SEPARATE TRANSFER

Applications have been received from the undermentioned who have expressed the desire to transfer:-

Number	Rank	Name	Station	Qualifications	Station Applied
10427	Fireman	Hillaby, H.P.	No. 39 Stn. Leytonstone	B.A., Driver T.L.	No. 69 Stn. Barkly Central
10600	"	Wynn, H.K.	No. 34 Stn. Ilford	B.A., Driver	No. 2 Stn. Colchester

(A) WOMEN (GENERAL) RECORDED

The undermentioned will be enrolled on 26th July, 1957:-

Number	Rank	Name	Station
25005	Firewoman	Dence, A.A.	"B" Control
25006	"	Subcliffe, H.L.	"B" Control
25007	"	Honey, S.	"B" Control

(b) WOMEN (GENERAL) RECORDED

The undermentioned are enrolled with effect from the date indicated:-

Number	Rank	Name	Station	Date	Status
30911	Fireman	Hottage, G.L.	No. 27 Stn. Deptford	23.7.57	Whole-rate
30912	"	Pitt, F.E.	No. 26 Stn. Vange	23.7.57	Half-rate
30913	"	Soth, E.A.	No. 22 Stn. Bayleigh	24.7.57	Half-rate

U.S.J. BROWN
Chief Fire Officer

County Fire Brigade Routine Order, Front & Back, Includes Women recruits, 1957 © EFM

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Southend Station Firefighters, including two female, operational firefighters, 2004 © EFM

Individual Character sketches

1) Assistant Group Officer E. 'Hocky' Hockett

Assistant Group Officer 'Hocky', Hockett applied to join the National Fire Service at Hornchurch Station in 1940 after being released from her role as a book-keeper. Following training Hockett was posted to B. Division HQ Central at Dorin Court, Grays. Following further training she was promoted to Leading Firewoman and served at Grays for 18 months after which she was transferred to Sub Division 4 Control at Stanford-le-Hope in 1942. Initially this was to be a one week posting and Leading Fire Woman Hockett was certainly not happy with the move. However a week in and she soon decided that she enjoyed the posting and decided to stay, this stay would also result in her marriage to Station Officer Lazell. Leading Fire Woman Hockett completed officer training and was subsequently promoted to Assistant Group Officer (A.G.O).

Following an intake of Firwomen from the midlands, potentially operation 'Colour Scheme' in the spring of 1944, and the introduction of continuous Duty for all Fire Woman, A.G.O Lazell (nee Hockett) was responsible for Welfare and Mobilising for a period before someone was recruited into the position of Welfare Officer and Hocky returned to her role as Mobilising Officer. She served Station Control Rooms at Thameshaven, Laindon, Wickford & Billericay.



'Hocky' Hockett –


2) Irene Florence Bedford

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Irene Florence Eaton (nee Bedford) born and bred in Southend Irene joined the National Fire Service in 1942, the likely inspiration for her move to join was her uncle who was in the Auxiliary Fire Service in Southend at the start of the war. Irene was employed as a telephonist and in the run up to discharge was on clerical duties. Irene was discharged from the National Fire Service in December 1945 due to a reduction of the service as confidence grew that Allied forces were to succeed.



Irene Florence Bedford, National Fire Service Fire woman in Tyler's Avenue, Southend, 1942


NATIONAL FIRE SERVICE
CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

Name (in full) Irene Florence Eaton
National Fire Service No. 952043 Date of discharge 13th December 1945
Rank on discharge Firewoman
Cause of discharge Reduction of Establishment

	WITH LOCAL AUTHORITY FIRE BRIGADE	WITH NATIONAL FIRE SERVICE
WHOLE-TIME SERVICE	from _____ to _____	from <u>15. 6. 42</u> to <u>13. 12. 45</u>
PART-TIME SERVICE	from _____ to _____	from _____ to _____

13th December 19 45
W. Butterfield *Amos*
Fire Force Commander

Irene Florence Bedford Certificate of service

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Other Names **Florence**
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Date of Issue **7 JULY 1945** Serial Number of Book

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Holder's Name **BEDFORD Irene Florence**

Home Address **4 East Street**
Prittlewell Essex

Date of Birth **1/1/23**

Holder's Signature **Irene**

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