

The Ups & Downs at the Top of the Ladder

Part One

It is very easy, when researching early Essex fire brigades, to concentrate on fire appliances or fire stations and neglect those who managed them. This series of articles will feature some of the men who ran their local fire brigades, in particular the more innovative and colourful characters, or those who experienced various degrees of misfortune.

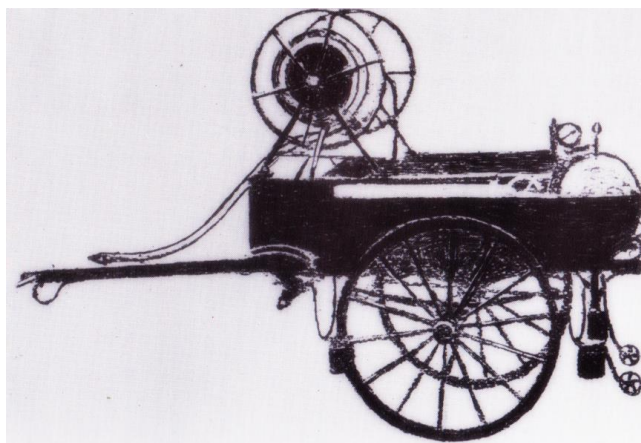
Captain Harold Linton Lea Woore - Epping Fire Brigade (in post from 1914 – 1939)

Harold Woore was one of the most innovative and enduring Essex, if not British, chief officers. Born in Poplar, London, in May 1866 he followed in his father's footsteps and went into the metal industry. He was able to put the skills he learnt here to good use throughout his career.



Harold Linton Lea Woore (Essex Fire Museum (EFM) archive)

As a young man he developed a love, if not an obsession, of fire brigades and joined the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (later the London Fire Brigade) as a Gentleman Volunteer under Captain Sir Eyre Massey Shaw in the 1880s where he served for 12 years. Harold moved to Epping to take up the position of works manager of Messrs Cottis & Sons Ltd, a local ironworks and agricultural engineering company. It wasn't long before his design and engineering skills became apparent when he built a hose cart equipped to tackle small fires at the works.



Harold's first aid hose cart with an adjustable carriage, hose reel and 20 gallon compressed air water cylinder. (EFM archive)

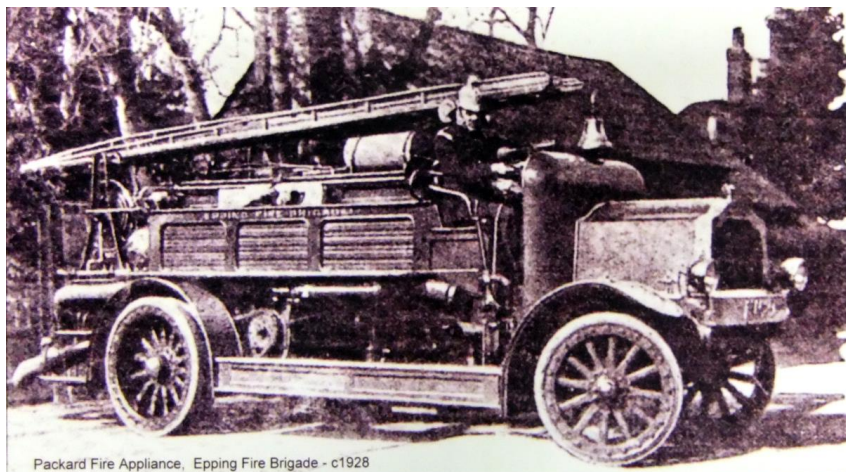
His obsession with fire brigades deepened, he would often turn up at Epping fires dressed in his old uniform and join in, apparently to the annoyance of the Epping firemen. The resignation of the Brigade's chief officer in 1914 presented an opportunity for Harold to make his mark and he was appointed chief officer of the Epping Fire Brigade. Harold's forward thinking became evident in 1916 when he pragmatically acquired, and quite possibly adapted, a 1906 Mercedes motor

fire engine in preference to a brand new Dennis appliance which was trialled that year. In June 1917, when the brigade was desperately short of firemen and horses due to the war, the Mercedes was used, for the first time, to pull the Brigade's old horse-drawn steamer to the Copped Hall fire where the Brigade unsuccessfully attempted to save the mansion.



Type –Mercedes 40/45 hp. Year 1906. Registration LC 6468. (EFM archive)

With the war over, Harold turned his attention to bolstering the Brigade's equipment and as there were thousands of surplus army vehicles available to purchase cheaply, he bought an American built ex British army Packard 4A and set about converting it into a fire engine with its own pump.



Type –Packard 4A (solid tyres). Registration AM 5857. (EFM archive)

This was an extraordinary engineering achievement which resulted in one of most impressive fire appliances in the county. One day during an exercise at a pond, the Packard stopped working and Harold disappeared underneath it; he found what the trouble was but in the process of fixing it lost part of his finger. He re-emerged and ordered one of his men to take him to his doctor. He was back at the pond within 30 minutes! The Packard served the Brigade well and eventually was sold to the Daily Mirror to protect its Fleet Street office during the Second World War blitz. Harold eventually obtained an impressive personal collection of four operational fire appliances and a trailer pump, far more than most Essex fire brigades had. By doing this it effectively made the Brigade his own. There is no doubt that his ability to produce home-grown fire engines spurred many other chief officers to do the same.

It was not always plain sailing for Harold, an article in the *Chelmsford Chronicle* dated 15 February, 1935, outlined that an anonymous person had maliciously criticised him for the way he handled the Brigade. This drew a fervent defence of Harold from the town councillors who backed him and praised him for financially supporting the Brigade – his hobby - to the tune of £600 in that year alone. It was stated that: "The Epping Fire Brigade was second to none in the kingdom – the costly gift of a private gentleman". It was later reported that over the years he had spent £5000 of his own money

on the Brigade including the construction of the new fire station on land he had purchased. It must have come as shock when only a month after agreeing to become the chief officer of the Epping Urban Council Fire Brigade in 1939, and having treated the fire brigade as his own for 25 years, he was asked, by the Council, to resign. He found it difficult to accept the conditions set in the Fire Brigades Act 1938 which required local authorities to take control of fire brigades thus doing away with the type of brigade Harold had developed. He refused to resign which led to further tension but eventually he had to concede defeat. However, he still managed to have a trick up his sleeve. Before he was appointed Epping's chief officer he was approached by Ongar to take on their brigade, on a part time basis, as well as being in charge of Epping. No doubt he thought he could still do that after Epping had closed its doors on him but there is no evidence to suggest that this plan came to fruition.

Harold retired to Norfolk and died on 14th November 1962 aged 96.



Harold's fire engine collection Copped Hall, 1938, note the Packard (extreme right) now with pneumatic tyres. (EFM archive)

Superintendent Edward. J. Smith - Maldon Fire Brigade (in post from 1881 – 1886)

Superintendent Edward 'Teddy' Smith of the Maldon Fire Brigade was another of those men who, like Harold Woore, had a deep sense of community. By all accounts he was a very kind and generous person. He was a man of independent means and was never slow to divert personal capital to worthy causes or to those in distress. Despite having asthma, he was fit enough to withstand the physical demands associated with the fire brigade, at least for a while. He became superintendent of the Maldon Fire Brigade in 1881 and was very conscious that the Brigade was in a deplorable state. Out of his own pocket he purchased two houses, one to live in and the other to convert into a well appointed fire station with an office above it which he rented to the Council for a peppercorn sum.



Thought to be the two properties purchased by Teddy Smith with a later Leyland fire engine parked outside. (EFM archive)

He then purchased, for £200, a 'first class' manual fire engine which sadly did not meet his expectations. Following that, he bought a modern steam fire engine thus transforming the Brigade into one of the best equipped in the county. The Council pressed him to accept the captaincy of the Brigade but he much preferred to be second in command, always wearing his uniform so as to be ready for duty at all times and nothing would induce him to change into civvies. Unlike Harold Woore, 'Teddy' Smith never viewed the Brigade as his own but belonging to the town. His philanthropy extended to all around him and the residents of Maldon mourned his passing from 'effusion of the brain' on Sunday 22 August, 1886 at the age of only thirty three. A lengthy obituary in the *Chelmsford Chronicle* for Friday 27 August, stated that - "Possessed of independent means, it ever appeared to be his chief aim and pleasure to use them in promoting the well being of his fellow men, and although his benevolence was always extended in the most unostentatious manner, it is well known that many a poor family and struggling small tradesman have had cause to bless his timely assistance". It concluded by saying, "... Mr. Smith's death will leave an unmistakeable void in Maldon, as certainly it removes one of the town's most familiar faces. The sympathy offered, by numerous friends, to his sorrowing widow is but an example of the genuine regret felt throughout the whole town". A most fitting tribute to a forgotten young hero.

Captain Thomas Frostick - Brentwood Fire Brigade (in post 1883)

There is little doubt that the vast majority of fire officers were fine upstanding pillars of their communities. Thomas Frostick, captain of the Brentwood Fire Brigade, bucked the trend. Born in Brentwood in 1852 he was a local chimneysweep who became head of the Brentwood Fire Brigade in the early 1880s. There is also a contemporary record of a R. Frostick being relieved of the responsibility of looking after the Brigade's two fire engines in September 1883. This was probably Richard Frostick, Thomas' father, also a sweep. Thomas was married twice, his first wife Isabella died of measles in June 1882. In July 1883 his second wife Eliza, whom he had just married, appeared in court and what happened there can best be described by the following article which was published in the *Essex Standard* on 14th July 1883:

At Brentwood Petty Session [Magistrates' Court] on Thursday, before the Hon. F. Petre, in the Chair ... the wife of Thomas Frostick, a chimneysweep, of Brentwood, was charged with assaulting Thomas Frostick, her stepson, aged five years. The defendant said the child misbehaved himself, and she thrashed him. The poor little fellow's back was exposed by the grandmother, and was seen to be discoloured and covered with bruises. The defendant's husband [Thomas Frostick], who was evidently under the influence of drink, sided with her, and owing to his interruptions he was removed from Court. — The defendant was fined 10s [shillings] with 10s. 6d. costs, the Chairman remarking that it was a very grave case, and that if anything of the kind came before the Bench again, magistrates would deal very severely with it. On the parties leaving the court there was a disturbance outside, and some police officers hastening out found that Frostick had his poor little boy under his arm and was swinging him round in a most savage manner, the poor child screaming in terror. This was reported to the Bench, and the Chairman asked Superintendent Dobson [police] to have a sharp look out and to take immediate steps if their children were beaten again. Supt. Dobson said, 'And that is the man who is captain of the Brentwood Fire Brigade. He received a reward from the fund subscribed by the townspeople and has been drinking ever since'. The Chairman, 'It is a disgrace to the town to have such a man in that position'.

It is not known what Frostick's reward was but it is clear that it did more harm than good. Frostick later appeared in Court for trading without a licence and was fined one shilling with seven shillings and six pence costs. He gave up chimney sweeping and by 1901 was an engine driver. He died of a respiratory disease in 1916 at the Chatham Workhouse Infirmary, aged 64. As for Thomas Frostick Jnr, he was placed in Chelmsford's Industrial School and Home for Destitute Boys eventually moving to Bournemouth also as a chimneysweep. Sadly he collapsed in Wallisdown Road and died, on the spot, of a heart attack on 20 August, 1936, aged 57. It was with bitter irony that his sister, Annie, died at the family home in Back Street, Brentwood, along with her grandfather Richard Frostick in a tragic fire on the night of 28 June 1885 which was attended by Frostick's old Brigade commanded by his replacement Elijah Andrews. The poor child was in the process of being rescued from the burning house when she, in a panic, broke free and dashed back to her bedroom to hide under her bed where she was later found dead. The tragedy provoked calls for an efficient escape ladder to be purchased by the town which features in the next section.

Captain Elijah Andrews – Brentwood Fire Brigade (in post from c. 1885 – 1902)

In 1885, Frostick's replacement was his polar opposite. Captain Elijah Andrews, like most Essex senior fire officers, was a volunteer. He was a plumber, a not uncommon profession for firemen. He lived with his family in the High Street, Brentwood. He was one of those innovative officers who transformed his brigade, with the assistance of the Council, into a very fine fire brigade which had a good deal of success in competitions both locally and nationally. He presided over the re-equipping of the brigade including the introduction of a new steamer christened 'Tasker' named after the local worthy Mr J.C. Tasker who donated it to the Brigade in March 1897.



FIG. E.—PRESENTATION STEAM FIRE ENGINE FOR BRENTWOOD.
'Tasker' being presented at Messrs Merryweather, Greenwich in 1897. Elijah Andrews is thought to be far right. (EFM archive)

Elijah's main claim to fame occurred on Wednesday 15 January 1890, when a brand-new Rose Bray fire escape vehicle entered service with the Brigade. At almost half a ton it was a very impressive machine which could reach 85 feet. It was equipped with an 'endless lifeline' which, when needed, could lower people safely to the ground. A chute could also be attached to the top of the ladder to allow people to slide down to safety. On arrival at Brentwood it was paraded through the town. At the White Hart Hotel it was extended up against the building with its chute attached.



A coloured image of a chute being used at a country house fire (EFM archive)

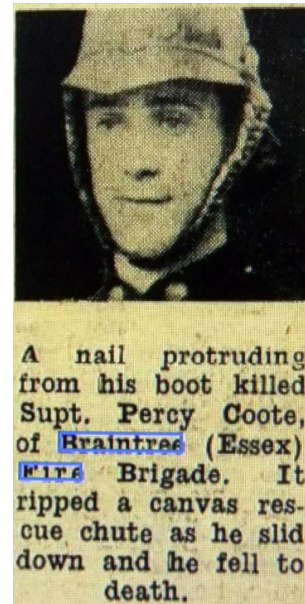
Elijah, always leading from the front, ascended the ladder followed by his men and slid down the chute to the ground. Not content with this act he climbed the ladder again and this time, to the delight of the large crowd of spectators, descended the chute head first! Captain Elijah Andrews retired from the Brigade 1902, thankfully in one piece, and died in Clacton-on-Sea in September 1930, aged 75.

Superintendent Percy Coote – Braintree Fire Brigade (in post 1936)

The joy and excitement experienced when Brentwood's chute was used for the first time was in marked contrast when on the afternoon of Saturday 26 September 1936 men from the Braintree Fire Brigade ascended the drill tower to their chute which was suspended from it 30 feet off the ground. A number of the men descended safely to the ground in the well-tryed fashion. It was then the turn of 43 year old Superintendent Percy Coote, the son of Harry Coote also a highly respected Braintree fireman. Percy had served the Brigade for 22 years. He was also the captain of the Crittall Works Brigade where he worked as a fitter. Everything seemed to go well with his descent in the canvas chute until he was about halfway down and the chute was seen to rip apart sending him crashing head first to the ground.



*Site of the fatal accident to Superintendent
Percy Coote in 1936 (EFM archive)*



*Sunday Mirror 27.09.1936
(British Newspaper Archive)*

Percy was rushed to the William Courtauld Hospital, unconscious, where he died of a fractured skull and other injuries three hours later without regaining consciousness. The subsequent inquest determined that this tragic freak accident resulted from a nail protruding from the right heel of his fire boot which snagged in the chute. It was thought that the nail had unobtrusively worked loose after he had put his boots on. It was a bitter quirk of fate that the two head-first descents down an escape chute mentioned in this article produced such terribly contrasting consequences. The inquest jury predictably returned a verdict of accidental death. Percy Coote left a widow Ethel, but no children. His father, Harry, already in poor health, found it difficult to come to terms with the death of his son and died a month later.

By Mick Ford