

NO FIRE BOBBIES IN ESSEX

by Mike Smith

The Police, Crime and Fire Commissioner for Essex has overall responsibility for Essex County Fire and Rescue Service and, more and more, there are moves for closer relationships between the emergency services which have always worked very closely together. This even closer cooperation is seen in the increasing tendency of all three services, fire, police and ambulance, to share facilities and in the construction of joint stations, sometimes referred to as, "blue light hubs." Often these trends are reported as if this was a new idea, but until August 1941 some places had a fire brigade which was a part of the local police force, and sometimes the police provided an emergency ambulance service too.

HM Inspector of Constabularies Report for 1938 notes that there were 63 police fire brigades in England and Wales; to which can be added five burgh police forces and Lanarkshire Constabulary, thought to be the only county police fire brigade in the UK, in Scotland. Together the English and Welsh police forces employed 1,055 full-time firefighters and 2,151 part-timers. The biggest English police fire brigades were those of Liverpool and Manchester with full-time strengths of 173 and 200 respectively and among the smallest were the borough police forces of Penzance and Newark with strengths of five and eight part-timers.

Fire services across the UK in 1938 varied widely in terms of equipment, training and conditions of service for fire-fighters. This lack of standardisation was reflected in the police fire brigades too. Some chief constables seemed more interested in fire-fighting than in police work, whilst others made no secret of the fact that they would be glad to be rid of responsibility for the fire brigade. Manning systems in police fire brigades were diverse; in Liverpool fire-fighters were sworn as constables, but deployed full-time on fire duties. In the small borough forces perhaps an inspector and a sergeant or two, together with a number of constables had some fire training, with the rest of the force given some element of instruction enabling deployment as fire auxiliaries at a major incident. In Lanarkshire those officers who had been on night duty were on call for fires during the day and vice-versa, and they were paid an allowance for this availability. The chief constable reported that fire duty on these terms was very popular. Portsmouth City Police was one of the few forces that had a cadet scheme prior to World War II. The cadets, all fit young men, were also deployed as fire-fighters. In March 1922 the journal "Police Review" reported that if a fire broke out in Wolverhampton, where the police maintained a small cadre of officers ready for fire duty, a further squad of officers was collected by the "police motor waggon", and conveyed to the incident to be deployed on crowd control or as fire auxiliaries as the situation demanded.

The origins of police fire brigades lie in Victorian times. Providing an efficient police service was one of the first statutory requirements placed on local government by Westminster and grants were paid in support. Why not try and piggy-back the fire service, otherwise paid for entirely out of local rates, on the back of the police grant? Some local officials and chief constables freely admitted this. Consequently police fire brigades were largely based on urban police forces and tended to be more widespread in the north of England; hence the northern expression, "fire bobbies", to describe fire-fighters. There were no police fire brigades in Essex and only two in East Anglia, Norwich and Cambridge.



Oldham Police Fire brigade – early 1900's.

As has been said, standards in fire brigades varied greatly in the pre-war period and some of the bigger police fire brigades were very efficient. Hull Police Fire Brigade had a turntable ladder which extended to 150", much higher than anything in London; and the same brigade and the Leeds Police Fire Brigade could control traffic lights in favour of fire appliances in the city centres and activate illuminated signs on main roads warning traffic and pedestrians, "Fire engine coming". Police fire brigade trained fire-fighters often took senior posts in other police, and non police, fire brigades. Rochdale Police, which operated the fire brigade and the ambulance service, was an early experimenter with radios on fire appliances.

The disadvantages of police fire brigades were clear and most obvious in the smaller forces. At serious incidents police resources could be critically split as officers who might have been better employed on crowd control and preventing pilfering were deployed fighting the fire. It wasn't just manpower that was affected either. In the days before motorisation police mounted patrols were curtailed and cellular vans were immobile as their horses were taken to pull fire engines. Demands on the police were many. In 1929 Swansea Police were unable to man a fire engine to go out of the borough because officers were all committed supervising a general election. As World War II approached government moved to end police fire brigades and the 1938 Fire Brigades Act made provision for their phasing out. Like many of the Act's other provisions, this was overtaken by events and when war was declared the fire protection of many of Britain's larger cities including ports like Liverpool, Bristol, Cardiff and Swansea, and naval bases like Portsmouth and Plymouth, was still in the hands of police fire brigades.

The war increased the police's workload. Those forces with fire brigades found themselves training the newly formed Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) and in some areas chief constables found themselves in overall charge of the local Air Raid Precautions (ARP – later Civil Defence) organisation. Come the "invasion scare" of 1940 and the police were involved in Home Guard recruitment and in registering, and subsequently detaining, enemy aliens. Then, from that summer onwards, the "Blitz" started.

With the heavy bombing of provincial towns, particularly ports and industrial centres, police fire brigades were very much in the thick of things. The larger police fire brigades bore the brunt, but they weren't alone. The first fire service to be corporately commended for courage in the context of the war was Dover Borough Police Fire Brigade, along with Dover AFS, for tackling a serious fire on an ammunition ship in the port in July 1940.

"Blitz" conditions revealed serious shortcomings in the wartime fire-fighting organisation and highlighted further the disadvantages of police fire brigades. The government acted urgently and, over a period of three months in 1941, created the National Fire Service (NFS) covering the whole of Great Britain and absorbing the pre-existing fire brigades, including those operated by the police, and the AFS into one, unified, service. At a stroke the police fire brigades ceased to exist. Police officers deployed on fire duties, especially in the big city police fire brigades continued to serve as full-time firemen, and when the fire service was returned to local control in 1948 the separation of the police and fire services was confirmed with some chief fire officers in the new local brigades having started their careers as policemen. Other police firemen reverted to police duties later on in the war or at the conclusion of hostilities. The end of the police fire brigades was to the benefit of both services, but the suddenness of the transition did cause problems. One of the first actions of the London fire officer sent to take charge of the NFS in an area covering Herefordshire, Worcestershire and part of Warwickshire was to immediately inform his headquarters that the three largest towns in his new command, Hereford, Leamington Spa and Worcester, had previously been protected by police fire brigades. He had made local short-term arrangements to retain the services of a few key police fire brigade personnel, but had lost the services of staff with a knowledge of fire-fighting and local fire appliances and fire risks and he urgently needed replacements!