

THE OLD WAR HORSES WENT ON AND ON AND ON.....

Mike Smith

My favourite Essex Fire Museum exhibit is the Austin Auxiliary Towing Vehicle (ATV), registration number GXH 472, which is at the centre of a display depicting a V2 rocket strike on Chelmsford during World War 2. In its grey wartime livery of the National Fire Service (NFS), this vehicle stands in stark contrast to the red of the pre-war Merryweather and post-war Essex County Fire Brigade appliances. "Our "Austin, it's actually on loan to EFM from Leicester City Museums, is my favourite because one of these vehicles, in that NFS grey and complete with steel helmeted crew, was the first fire engine I ever saw as a very, very, small boy and my interest in fire engines and the fire service started from that moment.

In its NFS role the ATV did what its title said; it towed a trailer pump and the EFM display shows it doing that. When the government established the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) in 1938 as a national reserve to support the regular fire service in time of war, it issued a large number of trailer pumps to the new organisation. At the same time it delegated AFS training and administration to the existing peace time fire services and they had to provide towing vehicles, which would also carry the trailer pumps' crews and small gear. In London taxis were earmarked for this duty, but elsewhere local authorities bought, hired or requisitioned a motley collection of second-hand cars and light commercial vehicles. Many of these proved unsuitable and unreliable, although experience showed that the best vehicles for the task were the large American saloon cars, Packards, Buicks, and Studebakers, which had been imported into the UK in quite significant numbers in the 1930s. They were powerful enough to pull the trailer pumps and carry the crews along with hose, ladders, etc.



Chelmsford's AFS powerful American towing car with its Beresford-Stork light trailer pump. (EFM Archive

Actually the concept of the towing vehicle and trailer pump predated World War II. The 1938 Fire Brigades Act made borough and district councils in England and Wales responsible for providing fire services. In Essex Maldon Rural District Council discharged its obligations under the act by establishing fire stations at Cold Norton, Tillingham, Tollesbury and Totham, and equipping each one with a Bedford van and trailer pump. Chelmsford RDC did the same using Ford towing vehicles.

The EFM ATV is not exactly the same as the vehicles of that type deployed to wartime incidents such as the V2 rocket attack on the Hoffmann Ball Bearing Factory, Chelmsford, Christmas 1944. GXH 472 served after the war with the former Huntingdon County Fire Brigade and was repainted red before the wartime livery was restored. The spotlights each side of the cab and the fog lamp on the front bumper are post-war additions and the rear of the appliance was also extensively remodelled. In its original configuration the interior of the box-like body would have had a bench seat along each side incorporating space for hose and small gear. The back was completely open with two heavy canvas curtains which could be tied open or drawn to enclose the crew area. The headlights would have been shaded to comply with blackout regulations, perhaps with the nearside one having the word "FIRE" cut in a stencil on the shade. There would also have been a yellow triangle, with the black letters NFS, on the offside front mudguard. All these vehicles had a reinforced roof to protect the crews from falling shrapnel and bomb splinters.



A preserved Austin ATV and trailer pump similar to EFM's GXH 472. These pictures show the vehicle in its original form. (EFM Archive)

A large number of ATV and trailer pump combinations were operated by the NFS and while some were withdrawn to Home Office depots at the end of hostilities, many remained in service. Between the end of the war and the disbandment of the NFS in 1948 NFS and Home Office technicians derived a kit which allowed a 100 gallon water tank and hose-reel to be fitted in the back of the vehicle with a pump driven by the road engine. Small holes cut in the sides of the bodywork allowed the hose to be deployed on either side. This modification instantly improved the efficiency of the combination, allowing a fire to be attacked with the hose-reel as soon as the appliance arrived at an incident whilst the trailer pump was being detached and connected to a water supply.

Hundreds of these Austins and their trailer pumps were passed on by the NFS to the local authorities which took responsibility for fire services from 1 April 1948; many of them with the hose-reel modification. They were seen as a stop-gap by their new owners pending the delivery of new and better appliances. Many entered service as complete firefighting units in urban and rural areas and others were adapted to a variety of support roles:- emergency tenders, salvage tenders, foam tenders, hose layers and canteen vans. Most now got a coat of red paint and sported the coats of arms of their municipal or county owners. Those taken into service with Essex County Fire Brigade had a particularly striking livery. These vehicles, produced in haste and in large numbers to wartime "austerity" specifications, were not envisaged as having a long "shelf life", but they went on to serve, often as first line appliances in rural areas, through the 1940s and 50s and into the 60s, with some surviving on brigade fleet rosters into the early 70s. But that's not their full story. Quite a few were sent to Europe as the war ended as temporary replacements for fire appliances destroyed or looted in countries previously under German occupation. A number served with fire brigades in the Netherlands, and Brussels Fire Brigade operated several into the 1960s. In 1949 when Kent Fire Brigade sent a small contingent of firefighters to help their French colleagues at a devastating forest fire in south-

western France, they took an Austin ATV and trailer pump with them, driving it the length of France and back. And when the AFS was reconstituted in the UK in the late 1940s against the background of the "Cold War," many ATVs were withdrawn from stores and reissued pending the delivery of the Bedford "Green Goddess" appliances.

The ATVs were not the only wartime "stop-gap" fire appliances that continued in service long after their envisaged lifetimes. The well-known firm of fire engineers, Merryweather, produced a wartime 60' turntable-ladder. This, too, was on an Austin chassis with a rear facing crew shelter and a hand operated ladder. After the war some of these were further enhanced by fitting a pump in front of the engine and they continued to work throughout the 50s and at least one, remounted on a modern Bedford chassis, was still operational in Devon in the 60s.

When it comes to fire engine longevity the small Belgian town of La Calamine must hold something of a record. In spite of its name and the fact that, post World War II, the appliance was hand sign written with the fire brigade's title in French incorporating a Belgian flag, the town is in the German speaking area of eastern Belgium. This may explain how it came to receive, early in the wartime German occupation, the German equivalent of the ATV and trailer pump in the form of a Mercedes-Benz towing vehicle with a DKW trailer pump. There were some similarities between the two combinations. The Mercedes also had plenty of space for personnel and equipment, but its bodywork was largely made of wood and canvas. It had a distinctive four-tone warning horn. At the end of the war the combination remained in service and the fire brigade, decided to retain its grey-green German fire service wartime livery. It was finally retired in 1994 and preserved by La Calamine Fire Brigade. As one of only 17 of this type of vehicle left in the world it has been much in demand for rallies and film work.

The Franco-German armistice agreement of 1940 saw Germany re-annexe the French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. This led to some municipalities in those areas receiving German fire engines, usually Mercedes-Benz or Opels. With the end of hostilities the provinces were returned to France, but the German machines remained in service for many years albeit painted red, liveried in French, and, in some cases, with such refinements as white-walled tyres.

One French town which acquired a German fire appliance as a direct result of the war was Châlons-sur-Saône. There are two versions of how this came about. In one a German column, retreating in front of advancing American and French forces was ambushed by the French Resistance. The column fought its way clear, abandoning a large, fully equipped, brand new Mercedes-Benz fire engine and several trailer pumps. Volunteer firemen in the Resistance group were quick to appreciate the potential of these spoils, distributing the trailer pumps to local villages and the Mercedes to the town.

The other version is less dramatic. French troops, pursuing retreating German forces, stopped briefly in Châlons. The town's mayor noticed the fire engine in the vehicle park of a French transport unit and asked the captain in charge about it. He observed that the vehicle had been captured near Toulon shortly after French troops had landed. The transport unit had taken charge of it and as soon as they stopped for long enough the fire appliance bodywork would be stripped off to convert it into a general purpose lorry, currently in short supply. The mayor immediately offered to swop a relatively new municipal lorry in good condition for the Mercedes and the captain accepted. The Mercedes served its new masters exceptionally well until late in the 20th century.

Across Europe fire brigades were left in dire straits during and after World War II as their equipment was damaged, destroyed or looted. As the British Expeditionary Force left France in 1940 its vehicles were destroyed wholesale rather than be allowed to fall into enemy hands. Cherbourg and Brest were ports through which the BEF withdrew and Cherbourg Fire Brigade was still operating a fire engine based on a former British Army 15cwt truck in the mid 1960s. It may have been originally sent to France with a trailer pump as part of the BEF's fire protection for its store depots. The other vehicle in use with the BEF for depot fire cover was the Leyland FKT fire engine. A number of these had arrived in France in 1939 looking exactly like their civilian counterparts, apart from their dark green livery, including carrying a 50ft wheeled escape ladder. In the midst of the chaos of retreat and destruction the BEF found the time to formally present one of these to Brest Fire Brigade and it went on to serve throughout the war.

The end of hostilities saw a huge amount of former Allied military transport become surplus across Europe. Some of this was acquired by deprived fire services for conversion into stop-gap fire engines. The odd ex British Army Bedford could be found from the Netherlands to Austria, but much more common were left-hand drive former American vehicles. Particularly popular in France was the US Army's workhorse, the 2.5 ton 6x6 GMC truck and, a larger version of the jeep, the Dodge WC. The GMC could be adapted to carry water tanks

of varying capacities and well into the latter part of the 20th century examples of both these vehicles were still operational and familiar sights in France at rural and forest fires.

In fact, in its early days Essex County Fire Brigade also operated ex military lorries as fire appliances. It had several former British Army Bedford QL 4x4 3 tonners, which had been operated in a variety of roles in military service, including as fire tenders with the Army Fire Service.



An ex-Army Bedford QL lorry operating as a fire engine with a trailer pump from Rayleigh fire station in the early days of Essex County Fire Brigade.(EFM Archive)

In that capacity they towed a trailer pump, very much like EFM's Austin ATV. The Essex Bedfords operated in that same configuration, with one running as a breakdown lorry from brigade workshops. But at the end of the day they did not last as long as the Austin ATVs – good old GXH 472!