

## **The Basingstoke Volunteer Fire Brigade**

The arrangements for fire-fighting in the town before the creation of Basingstoke Volunteer Fire Brigade are unclear. An inventory of the goods inside Basingstoke church taken by the churchwardens in May 1728, listed a fire engine with 16 buckets. Also potentially of use in fire-fighting was the “cradle for mending the tower” and two ladders.<sup>1</sup> This indicates that the cost of purchasing and maintaining the engine might have been met from church rates. An account of a fire in the town later that year refers to “the playing of two Engines” and the use of firehooks.<sup>2</sup> It is not clear whether the second engine was owned by the town, or by a Fire Insurance Company.

An undated document, probably written shortly before 1838, recorded that there were three fire engines belonging to the town: the large engine stationed at the Church; the Royal Exchange engine also at the Church; and an engine at the Town Hall. There was an engineer appointed for each engine, but no crew and no overall superintendent.<sup>3</sup> Presumably, in the event of fire, the townsfolk in general were expected to come out and work the engines. In 1838 the Norwich Union Fire Office provided another fire engine for the town, which was kept under the control and management of their agent, William Glover, a plumber and painter, at his premises in Winchester Street.<sup>4</sup>

Following a public meeting on 20 March 1838 at which the Mayor and Council were asked to take responsibility for the management of the three engines and the establishment of a fire brigade to be paid out of the town rates,<sup>5</sup> the Council resolved that the Watch Committee should make arrangements for setting up a fire brigade.<sup>6</sup> The Watch Committee resolved that the brigade should consist of a superintendent with an annual salary of £3, three engineers with an annual salary of £2 each, and twelve firemen who would be paid 3s.6d. each time they were called out to test the engines or attend a fire. It also resolved that the engine would be sent to any parish in the vicinity of Basingstoke in the event of fire if the messenger brought a written undertaking signed by a responsible inhabitant of the parish confirming they would pay £2 for each engine required and all the expenses attending the conveyance.<sup>7</sup>

At a fire in Wote Street in 1839 the engines could not be properly supplied with water due to an insufficient number of buckets. Two years later the Watch Committee

agreed to the purchase of new buckets. A further supply was bought in 1851, bringing the total of buckets up to 120.<sup>8</sup>

From 1857 the superintendent reported that the old tub engine was in a decayed state and was hardly worth repairing.<sup>9</sup> In 1861 the brigade sold the old engine for £5.7s.6d. and bought a new engine of £124 less 7½ per cent for cash.<sup>10</sup>

In 1864 the superintendent reported to the Watch Committee that there was a Fire at Dummer:

“for which the engines were requested to be sent but the long time that elapsed before the Messenger arrived at Basingstoke and the unavoidable delay in consequence of that time (two o'clock in the morning) in getting Post Horses and the men together, little could be done beyond saving some property which would otherwise have been burnt”.<sup>11</sup>

In 1868 responsibility for the Fire Brigade transferred to a Fire Brigade Committee of the Town Council. In 1869 the superintendent asked the council:

“to take into their serious consideration the very poor supply of water to be obtained in the most important streets and that they consider the terrible consequences that might ensue should a large fire occur on a windy night in one of the main thoroughfares of the town.”<sup>12</sup>

By 1871 the Basingstoke and Eastrop Waterworks Company Ltd had approved tenders amounting to £621 to provide iron pipes, sluices, cocks and hydrants for use in case of fire and for watering the sewers and flushing down drains.<sup>13</sup> The superintendent of the brigade reported that high pressure supplied by the hydrants would “prove of inestimable value”.<sup>14</sup> By 1883 52 hydrants had been placed round the town.<sup>15</sup>



*Basingstoke Volunteer Fire Brigade 1887. Superintendent John Burgess Soper with the white beard.*

The rules of the Basingstoke Volunteer Fire Brigade in 1890 included the following:

- the Brigade should consist of seventeen members (Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Foreman, Engineer, Sub-Engineer, Secretary and twelve firemen);
- in the event of an alarm of fire, “every man will at once proceed to the Engine House; and in the case of a fire in the country the first seven men and one Superintendent only ... shall proceed to the fire” so that there would still be cover for the town;
- in cases out of town there would be a charge of £2 2s. for the use of each engine and a charge of 1s. an hour for each member of the brigade attending the fire, as well as a reasonable sum for horse-hire and all attendant expenses;

- “In proceeding to a fire, if the engine can be soon drawn by hand to the spot, it will be better not to use horses, but all to lend a willing hand in dragging the engine to the place where it is required. When the distance warrants it, horses must be procured.”<sup>16</sup>

Arthur Hailstone reminiscing in 1938 about the Basingstoke Volunteer Fire Brigade in the 1890s said that in the event of fire a person had to run to the Corn Exchange where the fire engines were kept, break a glass, ring a bell and wait for Mr Hopkins to appear: “This gentleman was the trumpeter in the Yeomanry and cornet player in the local band. He would run round the town, blowing his bugle to call out the firemen. There was an arrangement with the Barge Inn to supply the horses.”<sup>17</sup>

### **The Hurstbourne Park Fire**

At around half-past eight in the evening of 1 January 1891 the servants discovered a fire at Hurstbourne Park, the mansion belonging to the Earl of Portsmouth, one and a half miles north of Whitchurch. One of the servants mounted a pony and rode to Whitchurch Fire Station. From Whitchurch telegraphic messages were sent to Basingstoke and Andover Volunteer Fire Brigades. The Superintendent of the Basingstoke brigade received his telegram at about twenty-five minutes to ten and at once proceeded to call his men. In a few minutes the crew were ready to start, but due to the slippery conditions of impacted snow they were unable to obtain any horses. So the men dragged the engine to the railway station and were fortunate enough to find a waiting goods train at the station. The stationmaster arranged for the train to run non-stop to Whitchurch with the firemen and their engine in a goods truck:

“Their journey down the line in the foggy night, with a biting wind blowing, and the smoke of the roaring engine besmirching their faces, was perhaps one of the strangest they ever experienced.”

The firemen arrived at Whitchurch railway station at twenty past eleven. They sent a runner into the town to ask for horses, and meantime they began to drag the engine uphill through the snow in the direction of Hurstbourne Park. No horses were available from Whitchurch, and it was not until they were about 350 yards from the house that someone coming from the park was able to supply two horses to pull the engine the rest of the way. They arrived at the fire a few minutes past midnight and joined the Whitchurch brigade in trying to save what was left of the house, but the

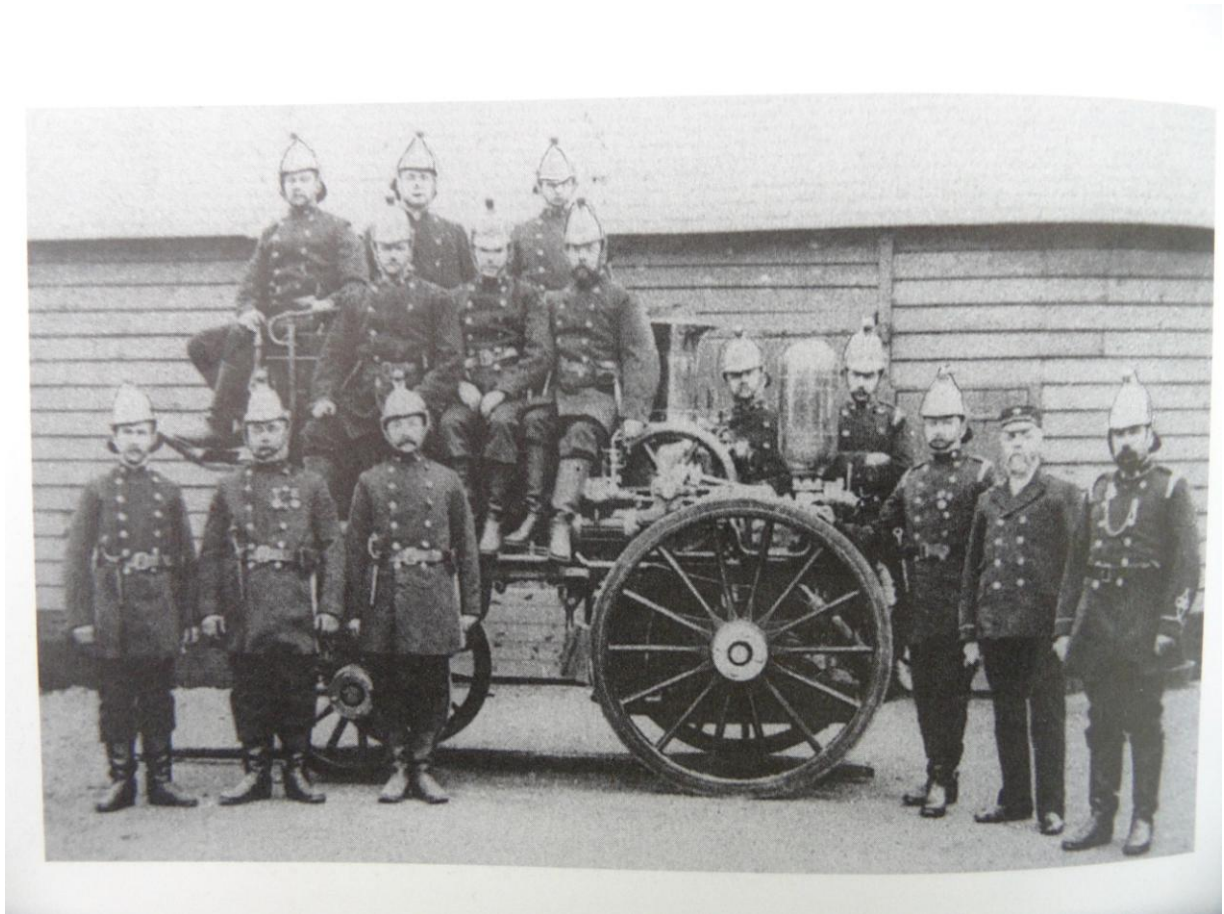
combination of the strong wind and a shortage of water meant that their efforts were in vain. The mansion was completely destroyed.

Owing to the number of New Year's balls taking place around Andover, it appears that the horses that the Andover brigade normally used were not available. Although the landlord of the White Hart and a local grocer offered to provide horses, for some reason the brigade declined the offer. At 10:25 the Mayor of Andover sent a telegram to Whitchurch addressed to Hurstbourne Park saying, "You must send horses if you want the engine". In view of the time it took to relay the message from Whitchurch to Hurstbourne Park and for the horses to be sent to Andover, the Andover Brigade did not reach Hurstbourne Park until two o'clock, even though Andover was only five and a half miles away.<sup>18</sup>

As well as using the engine that was bought in 1861, the Fire Brigade in 1891 was still using the two other engines: one was supplied in 1800 and the other in 1735. Both were still in working order.<sup>19</sup> Following the demonstration of a Merryweather steam powered fire engine in May 1891 which sent a jet of water several feet above the flagstaff over the Town Hall tower, some 160 ft. in height, some of the town councillors considered that the three manual fire engines would be insufficient to cope with a major fire in the town, while others questioned the necessity of buying a steamer and considered that the town could not afford one. Eventually, after much debate, the Council decided to buy a steamer from Messrs Merryweather for £400: £200 raised from subscriptions promised to the Fire Brigade; and £200 from the rates.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Great Fire of Basingstoke**

On the night of Monday, 17 April 1905 a fire consumed the whole of the premises of Burberry's department store in Winchester Street, comprising three large shops, a large storeroom, a dressmaking workshop and the living accommodation for 25 staff. It also destroyed Wagstaff's ironmongery shop and stores and John Mares' No.3 clothing factory. Buildings on the other side of the street had their windows broken and damage to the paintwork caused by the heat of the fire.



*Basingstoke Volunteer Fire Brigade with steamer, 1903*

The fire started at about six o'clock when one of the assistants was lighting the window in the millinery department when a piece of light material dropped onto her taper and ignited. As the window was full of flammable material, and a front door was open giving rise to a draught that fanned the flames, the fire rapidly took hold and very soon the whole building was on fire. The 27 dressmakers who were in the workshop busily executing urgent orders for Easter brides and the domestic staff who were upstairs had to run for their lives through the back entrance into New Street with no time to collect their hats and coats and other personal belongings.

The 25 girls whose bedrooms were above the shop lost all their possessions, including the money that was in their purses, their watches and their jewellery. Miss Cann, who was in charge of the counting house, lost a valuable piano and all her jewellery. All they had left was the clothes they stood up in. Some of the girls had to borrow sixpences so they could telegraph home.





*Burberry's shop before the fire*

The fire brigade arrived within minutes of the outbreak. They placed their steamer in the Market Place and laid double lengths of hose from it to the front of the premises. While steam was being got up, a length of hose was attached to a hydrant in Winchester Street, but the water pressure was so low that it had little effect. Once the steamer got going the two jets fed by the steamer were of considerable force. While there was sufficient water from the hydrant supplying the steamer, the demand from that hydrant coupled with the narrowness of the mains meant that there was not enough water in the other hydrants, despite the borough surveyor having shut off the supply from the rest of the town. The mains up Wote Street and Church Street were only four inch and those in Cross Street and New Street were only three inch, and the outlet of the hydrants were only 2½ inches diameter.

Owing to the high wind and the flammable nature of the stock, the fire took hold very quickly. Shortly after half-past six the roof of Burberry's building collapsed, and the flames were spreading westwards towards Wagstaff's showroom and stores.

As the whole of Burberry's and Wagstaff's premises were beyond saving, the jets were deployed in saving Wadmore's grocery shop on the corner of Winchester Street and New Street, and Mr Aldous's house to the east of Burberry's shop. Fireman Porter was posted on a roof in New Street trying to prevent the fire from

reaching the back of Wadmore's stores when he trod on a skylight and disappeared from view. Luckily he held his arms up as crashed through the glass so he landed on the floor below without a scratch.

When it became clear that Wagstaff's building was in danger, there was a mad rush to remove the barrels of oil and casks of gunpowder that were stored on the premises. On the other side of the inferno, a number of local characters considered it prudent to rescue the contents of Mr Aldous's wine cellar by pouring the contents down their throats, until they were discovered and evicted.

Urgent messages were sent to the Alton, Andover and Winchester fire brigades for assistance. Alton received the call at about twenty minutes to seven. While they were attaching the horses to the steamer, one of the horses, a chestnut from the Swan Hotel, struck out with its hind foot and fractured Chief Officer Hetherington's ribs, so the brigade had to set off for Basingstoke without him. Half way to Basingstoke, one of the horses split one of its posterns and had to be left at a farm. Despite these setbacks they accomplished the eleven miles in an hour and ten minutes, arriving at Basingstoke around eight o'clock. They took their steamer to the canal wharf and ran nearly a mile of hose up Wote Street, through Potters Lane, across Church Street, along Cross Street and up New Street.

The Andover brigade and their steamer came up by special train and planted their steamer at the bottom of Church Street by the river Loddon and ran their hose past the west door of the church, and up Church Lane to attack the fire from Mares' yard. The Winchester engine did not come as the City Council did not allow their engine to go beyond the bounds of the city, but the captain of the brigade and half a dozen of his men caught the train to Basingstoke to assist the other brigades.

Eventually the fire was brought under control. Wadmore's stores, Mr Aldous's house and Mares' remaining two factories were declared safe, so the visiting firemen returned home. The Basingstoke Brigade continued to pour tons of water onto the flaming ruins throughout the night. A gas pipe continued to spurt flames until a local gas fitter managed to insert a block in the early hours of the morning.<sup>21</sup>





The Great Fire in  
Winchester Street,  
Basingstoke.  
April 17th 1905.

*H. A. Aylward, Photo.*

*Damping down the fire*



THE GREAT FIRE AT BASINGSTOKE. APRIL 17, 1905.

BARTLETT, Stationer Basingstoke.

*The aftermath*

In 1913 Basingstoke RDC and Overton Parish Council agreed to contribute towards the cost of a motor fire engine for the Basingstoke Fire Brigade on condition that this bought them the right to the services of the Basingstoke Brigade. As the basement of the Corn Exchange was too small to house a new engine, and was also not ideal for the horse-drawn engines as it was on a bad incline for horses to start on, there was a need for a purpose-built fire station. In November 1913 the Town Council opened its new station in Brook Street. They bought the land from Messrs May and Company for £225 and paid £965 for the building, which was designed by J Arthur Smith and built by Goodall and Sons. The fire engine, christened "Amy" in honour of the Mayor's wife, was built by Dennis of Guildford and cost £888. It had a maximum speed of 12 mph and carried ten firemen, a 35 ft. telescope ladder and 1,200 ft. of hose. It was capable of pumping up to 300 gallons of water per minute.<sup>22</sup> In 1928 the brigade brought another motorised fire engine from Dennis Bros for £1,150.<sup>23</sup> The Fire Brigade Committee authorised the brigade to dispose of the old steamer and accept any reasonable offer.<sup>24</sup>

In 1930, a Colonel Bates complained to the Basingstoke Rural District Council that the local constable tried to telephone the fire brigade several times between 5.20 and 5.45 in the morning to get the brigade to attend a rick fire at Worting Farm. He could not get through and had to send a motor cyclist to Basingstoke to alert the brigade. This was because the Basingstoke telephone exchange had disconnected the service. Some three years earlier the exchange had disconnected the service during a thunder storm and a cottage burnt down at Dummer because the villagers were unable to telephone the fire brigade.<sup>25</sup>

As elsewhere, control of the fire brigade passed to the National Fire Service in 1941 and then to Hampshire County Council in 1948.<sup>26</sup> In April 1997 the Hampshire Fire Service was replaced by the Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority.<sup>27</sup>

During the life of the Basingstoke Volunteer Fire Brigade one fireman was killed on duty. In October 1931 Fireman Simpson died when he fell off the back of the fire engine as it rounded the corner into Wote Street on its return from extinguishing a rick fire at Viables Lane.<sup>28</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> HRO, 35M48/16/19 Basingstoke: Inventory of church goods 1728.
- <sup>2</sup> *London Evening-Post*, 22 Oct. 1728.
- <sup>3</sup> HRO, 46M89/20 Plan for a Fire Establishment.
- <sup>4</sup> *Hampshire Advertiser*, 17 Feb. 1838.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid. 24 Mar. 1838.
- <sup>6</sup> HRO, 148M71/1/6/2 Watch Ctee minute bk 1836-57, 1 May 1838.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid. 28 May 1838.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid. 1 Oct. 1839, 19 Jan. 1841 and 1 Jan. 1852.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid. 1 July 1857 and 1 Oct. 1857; 148M71/1/6/3 Watch Ctee minute bk 1858-75, 1 July 1859 and 2 Jan. 1860.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. 1 Apr. 1861 and 1 July 1861.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. 1 Apr. 1864
- <sup>12</sup> HRO, 148M71/1/3/13 Town Council Minute Bk, 1866-74, 4 May 1869.
- <sup>13</sup> HRO, 148M71/1/5/61/1 Papers relating to Basingstoke Waterworks.
- <sup>14</sup> HRO, 148M71/1/3/13 Town Council Minute Bk, 1866-74, 9 Nov. 1871.
- <sup>15</sup> HRO, 148M71/1/5/61/8 Papers relating to Basingstoke and Eastrop Water Bill Bundle 2 List of Hydrants.
- <sup>16</sup> HRO, 148M71/1/5/54/4 Rules and regulations of the Basingstoke Fire Brigade, 1890.
- <sup>17</sup> *Basingstoke Gaz.* 1 Feb. 1980.
- <sup>18</sup> *Hants and Berks Gaz.* 3 January 1891.
- <sup>19</sup> *Hants and Berks Gaz.* 16 May 1891.
- <sup>20</sup> *Hants and Berks Gaz.* 16 May and 19 Dec. 1891.
- <sup>21</sup> *Hants and Berks Gaz.*, and *Hampshire Observer and Basingstoke News*, 22 April 1905.
- <sup>22</sup> *Hants and Berks Gaz.* 8 Nov. 1913.
- <sup>23</sup> HRO, 148M71/1/3/21 Town Council Minute Bk, 1927-30, 25 May 1928.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid. 19 July 1928.
- <sup>25</sup> *Hants and Berks Gaz.* 19 July 1930.
- <sup>26</sup> Fire Services Act, 10 & 11 Geo.VI, c.41.
- <sup>27</sup> [www.hantsfire.gov.uk](http://www.hantsfire.gov.uk)
- <sup>28</sup> *Hants and Berks Gaz.* 30 Oct. 1931.