

Cliffe and Cliffe Woods Community News

100 Years of Cliffe Fire Brigade (continued)

On Saturday December 18th 2004 the unveiling of a Plaque commemorating 100 years of service (1904-2004) by the Cliffe Fire Brigade, now known as Kent Fire & Rescue Service, took place at the Fire Station, Cliffe. The occasion was attended by past and present members of the Cliffe Fire Brigade, members of the Parish Council and the Rev. Edward Wright, along with their wives. The plaque is placed on the left of the front fire doors and was unveiled by Mr. E Butcher who served in the brigade from 1972-1985 (latter years as Sub-Officer) and Mr. D Green who served in the brigade from 1959-1984 (latter years as Leading Fireman).

Current Sub-Officer Wayne Harrison expressed his thanks to all for attending on such a special occasion. Councillor Jasper Wright expressed the Parish Council's appreciation for the work and dedication by all the past and present fire crews, and for taking part and assisting in village functions over the years, and hoped that their competence and ability would continue to go from strength to strength.

Over the years the brigade attended many notable fires. In 1959 nearly all the local haystacks were set alight during a period of two to three weeks causing a lot of damage. Other large fires attended were petrol tanks at Northfleet, Woolworths in Gravesend, a petrol leakage at Isle of Grain refinery, and the largest of all at Chatham Dockyard at which 20 appliances attended.



On the brighter side, the Cliffe Fire Station was well known for winning the county-wide "Pump Competition" throughout the brigade and many trophies including the then famous Glanfield Shield which also included full-time fireman. The competition crew was trained by sub-officer K. Frost. The whole station "lived breakfast, dinner and tea" and it paid off. In the 1970s era all competition stopped owing to financial cuts etc.

In 1904 when the Cliffe Fire Brigade was created much of the equipment was purchased by the Cliffe Parish Council and the part-time crew were called out by a messenger. Over the years however the local firemen installed their own call-out system by installing a bell in their homes, controlled from the fire station. During the war (1939-

1945) the station was taken over by the Kent Fire Brigade and the local firemen were kept busy putting out fires caused by the German bombing and attended any aircraft crashes, one of which has just been marked by its own memorial in St. Helen's churchyard, when a Stirling bomber, coming home from a raid, crashed into Rye Street Farmhouse killing all the crew and one local lady in the house.

After the war the air raid siren, which was used for warning of an air raid and the all clear signal, was retained for use by the firemen as a call-out system during the day. It also warned other villagers, that the firemen would be racing to the fire station in Buttway Lane on their bikes, cars or motorbikes, and the fire engine was on its way out, so stay out of the way. The fire engine used to stop and pick up those that didn't get to the station in time. The indoor bells were eventually replaced by beepers. – then it all changed. Nobody knew the fire engine would be coming out and if people saw you running or chasing about they thought you were mad, until they heard the fire engine's bell (now 'two-tone horns').

As the fire station is part time, all the members have to live locally so you can imagine the number of Cliffe men that have passed through the station over the past 100 years. All dedicated firemen to their cause.

Over the years the local brigade has not stood still and continues to modernise with new equipment and training. My personal experience was of a gleaming fire engine that the village could be proud of. There was a lot of work to keep the brass work shining, steel tools had to be emery clothed to shine, leggings and boots 'shoe polished', axe handle scrubbed and the chrome head polished like a mirror, even the tyres on the appliance were polished with shoe blacking. But although, sadly, there is no brass on a modern appliance, it is most pleasing to see the high standard of cleanliness kept up by our present firemen. Congratulations to our Fire Brigade on their centenary and here's to many more.

Derek Green (Parish Councillor, ex-Cliffe Fireman)