Wembley’s Volunteer Fire Brigade, 1895-1936

When Wembley Urban District set up its Fire Brigade in 1895, the firemen were volunteers, mainly from among the Council’s own employees. They would be summoned by a bell above the fire station, in St John’s Road behind the Council offices, when an alarm was raised. The fire engine was an old hand-worked fire pump, which had belonged to the Harrow Brigade who had dealt with fires in the area before Wembley became a separate District. The firemen’s first task would be to find two horses to pull the pump, either from the Council’s yard at Ecclestone Mews, or from a local trader who was willing accept payment for allowing his horses to be borrowed.

The volunteers were paid a fee for attending training “drills”, and an hourly amount for each fire they were called out to. Following a petition from the firemen the Council agreed a revised scale of remuneration from January 1900:

Each member present within the first hour, 2/6 [half a crown], and 1/- [one shilling] per hour for first 5 hours & 9d [nine pence] per hour afterwards. 6d [six pence] each for refreshments.

An extract from the minutes of a Wembley Fire Brigade Committee meeting on 8 January 1900.
[Source: Brent Archives.]

Wembley in the early years of the twentieth century was a mixture of rural farms and small villages that were growing together into a town with both housing and commercial developments. The District’s population in 1901 was around 4,500, so that its Fire Brigade was not called out very often. The few serious fires usually involved hay stacks (or “ricks”) at local farms, and claims against insurance companies to recover the cost of dealing with them. Some months there were no call-outs to report to the Committee, and matters such as the location of new hydrants, low water pressure in the Colne Valley Water Company’s 4 inch mains or the broken rope on the fire station bell (replaced by an iron chain) were discussed.

A minute from a Fire Brigade Committee meeting in March 1900.
[Source: Brent Archives.]
In February 1905 self-employed builder, Edward Cox, was the first member of his Sudbury family to join the Wembley Fire Brigade. His brother Ernest, a plumber, also became a part-time fireman in March 1911. Volunteers could apply to join the Brigade, and if accepted by a vote of the firemen, their name would be put forward to the Council’s Fire Brigade Committee for approval of their appointment. The Brigade’s Chief Officer at this time was a retired army officer, Major Fleetwood Buss, who lived at “Rosmoyne” in Harrow Road, opposite the site where a new Wembley Fire Station would be built in the late 1930’s. The Major had drilled them into an efficient unit, which regularly won prizes at competitions across Middlesex. In April 1913 the Wembley Trademens’ Association presented the Brigade with a Silver Challenge Cup, to be awarded each year to the winner of a competition for its most proficient fireman.

Wembley Volunteer Fire Brigade - 1904.

By this time Wembley was considering the purchase of a new fire engine. On 29 October 1913 a special meeting of the Council agreed to pay £1,000 to Messrs Merryweather for a motor fire pump, an extension escape and other equipment. The vote was 6 to 3 in favour, after which one opposing Councillor resigned because of the considerable expense involved! When the motor fire pump was delivered in 1914, the Council decided to appoint one of the firemen as a full-time driver. On his first lesson with a Merryweather instructor, Driver W. Mansell found that it was very different from driving a horse and cart, overturning the vehicle and ending up in St Mary’s Hospital, but he eventually passed his test.
With the outbreak of the First World War it was decided to cut the size of Wembley Fire Brigade from 15 men to 10, by not filling vacancies that arose. The volunteers were to receive a retaining fee of five shillings a year. The Committee also decided to train two relief drivers from among the firemen, and were told in December 1914 that J. Mansell and Ernest Cox ‘...had been passed by Major Buss as efficient and capable men to drive the motor engine.' They each agreed ‘...to be on duty at the Engine House alternate weeks from 6pm to 10.30pm with one Sunday in four all day at a remuneration of 12/- per week whilst on duty in addition to ordinary fees for drills and turn-outs.’ When both of the Mansell brothers threatened to resign from the Brigade in 1915, Edward Cox, by then Senior Fireman, was also taught to drive the motor fire pump.

On the night of 2 February 1917 the Wembley Brigade was called out to help fight a blaze at the Purex lead paint works in Greenford. Harrow Fire Brigade were already on the scene, and the Wembley men were asked to stop the fire from spreading to a munitions factory next door. The water pressure from their hydrant was insufficient, so they used their skills to pump water from the Grand Junction Canal, half a mile away. By this time help was also on hand from the Acton, Ealing, Hanwell and Southall Brigades, and after four hours the flames were finally overcome. The Wembley firemen’s action averted a disaster, as the munitions factory, National Filling Station No.28, was a large complex of wooden huts used for filling 6 inch diameter shells with high explosive charges and poison gas.

A report of the Purex Works fire from the “Middlesex County Times” of 10 February 1917, written from the Ealing Fire Brigade point of view as the newspaper was published there.

Later that year, King George V set up the Order of the British Empire, awarding medals to civilians who had shown distinguished service during the First World War. In November 1920 Edward and Ernest Cox were among four Wembley firemen to receive these medals for their efforts at the Purex Works fire. Wembley Council had put forward the names of all its Brigade’s men who attended the blaze, but the Home Office had limited them to a maximum of four. They decided to nominate the two most senior officers present, Chief Officer Wiggins and Superintendent Harris, and to let the firemen themselves choose the other two.

Part of the report of a Wembley U.D.C. meeting in November 1920, at which the Wembley firemen were presented with their Medals of the Order of the British Empire for Meritorious Service, from the “Harrow Observer” of 19 November 1920.

[Source: Brent Archives – local newspaper microfilms.]
As part of the post-war reorganisation of Wembley Fire Brigade new rules were introduced from 1919 (see Appendix at pages 8-10), setting out duties, pay and other matters such as uniforms and insurance. As well as a full-time driver, the Brigade was to have three officers and twelve firemen. All members had to live within easy distance of the fire station, and had to report there immediately on an alarm being sounded. To assist with this, alarm bells were installed in each fireman’s home, with telephones installed in the officers’ homes. Men could be fined, or even dismissed, for failing to respond to an alarm.

A note about the Fire Brigade from the 1920 edition of the Wembley Guide.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection, Acc.351.]

Edward Cox was appointed Chief Officer of Wembley Fire Brigade in April 1919, with an annual retaining fee of £25, having been promoted to Second Officer the previous year. Ernest Cox, who had returned to duty as a fireman in January that year after being called up for service in the forces near the end of the war, was made Third Officer in June. Their nephew, William Stevens, joined the Brigade in May 1919, and their youngest brother Albert, who still lived at the family home in Myrtle Cottages, Sudbury, was elected as a fireman in January 1920, both after wartime army service. As a result, this photograph of the Wembley Fire Brigade, taken in 1920, includes four members of the Cox family.

Wembley Fire Brigade, with their Merryweather motor fire pump, in 1920.

[Photograph courtesy of Carol Snape, who sent a copy of it to Wembley History Society in January 2010. It was from her family’s collection, and the firemen were thought to include a brother and three uncles of her late grandmother, with surnames probably Cox or Stevens. We now know that Chief Officer Edward Cox is standing at the right of the picture, with Ernest Cox and William Stevens seated to his right. Albert Cox is probably the fireman standing second from the left on the back of the fire engine.]
When William Stevens got married in 1925 it was Wembley's first Fireman's Wedding. As the couple left St John's Church the other firemen gave them a guard of honour, forming an arch with their hatchets, before they were driven to the reception at the British Legion Hall in Lancelot Road on the fire engine. Along with many other ex-servicemen, William Stevens had joined the local branch of the new British Legion. His bride, Cicely Southern, was the daughter of the Legion's Hon. Secretary, and the couple had met as members of the Legion's tennis club. Albert Cox (born in the same year as William, 1897, although being his uncle) was best man at the wedding, and had his own Fireman's Wedding in August 1926.

**Aside: The Wembley “Fireman’s Wedding” of William and Cicely Stevens.** [Courtesy of Caroline Henney.]

**Below: The Fire Brigade Committee minute of 21 July 1926, agreeing Albert Cox’s "Fireman's Wedding".**

[Source: Brent Archives.]

19. **Fireman's Wedding.** It being the unanimous wish of the Firemen that the Brigade should be in attendance with the Engine at the Wedding of Fireman A. Cox at St. John's Church, Wembley, on August 2nd next, it was RESOLVED that the Chief Officer be authorised to make such arrangements as he deems desirable therefor.

The British Legion, an organisation which looked after the interests of ex-servicemen as well as providing a sports and social club, had a number of other firemen as members. Generally, this was a benefit as it helped to maintain comradeship in the Brigade, but it did occasionally cause difficulties, as shown by this paragraph from a letter sent many years later to Joan Stevens (William’s daughter) by her “Aunt Southern”:

It happened that a club for ex-service men had been opened in Wembley after World War 1, which was known as the Wembley Legion. Many of the firemen belonged to it. They had a cricket team, and usually played in the local park on a Saturday afternoon. I was in the park one day when they were playing against a team from a neighbouring town. The Legion were fielding, when suddenly the fire-bell rang out through the summer air. As one man, the home team turned and raced for the gates, leaving the visitors to stare after them in astonishment.

[Extract of letter courtesy of Caroline Henney.]

The number of people and buildings in Wembley had grown considerably since 1900, especially after the British Empire Exhibition of 1924/25 had attracted people to move to this
leaffy suburb. New housing estates meant that new fire hydrants and fire alarm points had to be installed, and regularly tested. The number of call-outs increased, even though some were false alarms. Motor cars and lorries catching fire were a common reason for calls.

Chief Officer Cox proposed that the Brigade should have a second vehicle, which could respond quickly to calls with a small number of men, rather than the motor fire pump having to wait for a full crew to reach the fire station before setting out. In July 1924 the Council agreed to spend £790 on what it called a “first aid machine”, which would carry light ladders, fire extinguishers and have a 40 gallon water tank with a small rotary pump. With the growing workload, the number of Brigade members was increased to 20 in 1928.

Just as his had been the first Fireman’s Wedding, William Stevens also received Wembley’s first Fireman’s Funeral six years later when he died in April 1931 after a short illness, aged just 33. Every member of Wembley Fire Brigade turned out, together with representatives from the Harrow, Wealdstone, Willesden and Chiswick brigades. The fire engine, carrying his uniform and many wreaths, formed part of an impressive funeral procession from St John’s Church to Alperton Cemetery.

The 1931 census showed that Wembley’s population had grown to 48,500. It continued to increase over the next few years, and when the rapidly developing next door District of Kingsbury was merged into Wembley Urban District in 1934, the Council had to review how its services were organised. By the end of the year it was interviewing men from other brigades, and five full-time professional firemen took up duty in January 1935. The Fire Brigade Committee also thought that they needed a full-time Chief Officer. Edward Cox, who was now approaching the Brigade’s official retirement age of 60, said that he would be willing to take on the role, but when he was told that his appointment would be reviewed after twelve months, he changed his mind.
At a special inspection of its Fire Brigade by members of the Council on 1 July 1935, Chief Officer Cox retired after three decades faithful service to the District, retaining the rank of Honorary Chief Officer. Ernest Noah, the new full-time Chief Officer recruited from the Stoke-on-Trent Fire Brigade on a salary of £400 p.a., was introduced to the firemen. Bars to their long service medals were presented to Charles Foskett (20 years) and Albert Cox (15 years), as well as the 30 year bar to Edward Cox. He was also awarded a retirement gratuity of £250 at a Council meeting a few months later.

On 31 January 1936 Ernest Cox (by now Second Officer) and Albert Cox were in the last group of eleven volunteers to be discharged, as Wembley’s fire-fighters became a wholly professional Brigade. The departing men were each given a final payment of £1 for each year of service, with an extra amount for the retiring officers. In thanking the men for their loyalty and efficiency, Councillor Harley, the Fire Brigade Committee Chairman, regretted that:

'It had been found necessary to dispense with their services in view of the rapid growth of the district, which demanded that a full-time brigade should always be available.'

A report from the “Wembley News” of 7 February 1936.

The new Wembley Fire Brigade had four officers and twenty-one men, split into three shifts to provide 24 hour cover. Before the end of 1936 they were handling 16 calls in a two week period, including several ambulance calls, which at that time were also part of the Brigade’s duties. While confirming the need for a full-time, professional team of firemen, for a District that was about to achieve Borough status, it takes nothing away from the service that Wembley residents received from their part-time volunteer fire-fighters for over forty years.

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Acknowledgements: This short history only exists because of an enquiry made by Carol Snape in January 2010 about the photograph shown on page 4. Initial research showed that very little had been written about Wembley’s Volunteer Fire Brigade, and that there was an interesting story which deserved to be told. I am grateful for the further “family history” details provided by Carol, and her cousin Caroline Henney, which helped to shape and add human detail to that story. My thanks also go to Rosamund King, Malcolm Barres-Baker and Rachel Oliver at Brent Archives, Dr Jonathan Oates at Ealing Local History Centre and Elena Payami at the London Fire Brigade Museum for their help in finding material for this piece.

APPENDIX: Wembley Fire Brigade Rules.
The following are facsimile pages from the minutes of Wembley U.D.C.’s Fire Brigade Committee meeting on 6 August 1919, showing the New Rules which applied thereafter.

NEW VISION OF RULES.
A duplicated draft of the Proposed Revised Rules having previously been circulated amongst the Members of the Council the same were carefully considered and amendments made thereto RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND that the Rules as amended be submitted to the Council for approval as follows:-

PROPOSED NEW RULES

for the

WEMBLEY FIRE BRIGADE

1. Constitution. The Brigade shall be known as the WEMBLEY FIRE BRIGADE and consist of Chief Officer, Second and Third Officers, Driver and Twelve Firemen.

2. The Brigade shall be under the control of the Council and managed by the Fire Brigade Committee of the Council.

3. Election of Members. The Chief Officer appointed by the Council will be responsible for the maintenance of efficiency, good conduct, order and discipline of the Brigade; the carrying out of duties and the preservation and upkeep of apparatus, etc.

4. The nomination of second and third officers shall be made by the Chief Officer and subject to the approval of the Fire Brigade Committee shall be appointed accordingly.

5. Firemen shall be nominated by the Chief Officer and elected by the votes of a majority of members present at a general meeting of the Brigade subject to confirmation by the Fire Brigade Committee of the Council.

6. Applications for membership shall be made in writing to the Chief Officer.

7. Each member shall be supplied with a copy of these rules and shall subscribe his name to the official copy in a book kept for that purpose.

8. Members of the Brigade shall be furnished with Uniform consisting of helmet, undress cap, tunic, trousers, boots, Lifeline, belt, axe and case, and leggings. Firemen will be held responsible for the preservation of uniform and equipment and on leaving the Brigade must at once deliver up all articles in a good and clean condition, fair wear and tear excepted. Uniform shall only be worn when on duty or by special permission of the Chief Officer.

9. If worn contrary to this regulation a penalty of £6/6d shall be incurred for each offence.

10. Members must reside within easy distance of the Fire Station and on change of address must notify the Chief Officer at once. Any member leaving the district for 24 hours or more must inform the Chief Officer or Officer in charge.

11. Members wishing to resign shall give fourteen clear days notice to the Chief Officer in writing of such intention. Members on reaching the age of 60 years or by reason of inefficiency or any other reasonable cause shall be called upon to retire from active duty.
Fire Brigade Committee. 6th August 1913.

7. Drills shall be fixed in advance by the Chief Officer and the date and times appointed posted on a Board at the Fire Station. There shall be at least one drill per week and such additional drills as may be considered necessary. Members must punctually attend unless prevented by illness or other reasonable cause. A Register of Drills shall be kept and the names of members present recorded therein. No fireman shall be considered present unless answering the roll call at the time appointed for drills. Failure to attend drills shall be punishable by a fine of 2/6d for each one.

8. On the alarm of Fire all members of the brigade must at once proceed to the Fire Station. Any member failing to respond shall be reported to the Fire Brigade Committee who are empowered to inflict a fine not exceeding 10/- or disqualify the member offending.

9. All fines inflicted shall be paid into the Prize Fund of the Brigade.

10. On withdrawal of Brigade after a fire the Chief Officer or Officer in charge will leave a sufficient number of Firemen in charge of the premises who shall be paid at the same rate per hour and for refreshments as for attendance at fires. The Brigade shall be allowed to attend fires outside the district at the discretion of the Chief Officer. Reports of Fires shall be recorded by the Chief Officer in a book set apart for that purpose.

11. No individual member of the Brigade shall receive any money or remuneration for any service connected with his duty.

12. All payments due to Members will be made by the Surveyor to the Council. Payments will be made to members on the following scale or such variations thereof as may from time to time be sanctioned by the Council for services rendered in accordance with these rules and as certified by the Chief Officer for attendance at fires:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance at Fires</th>
<th>Rate for 1st Hour &amp; each succeeding Hour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Officer.......</td>
<td>2/6d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Officer.....</td>
<td>2/6d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Officer......</td>
<td>2/6d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relief Driver.......</td>
<td>2/6d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firemen ............</td>
<td>2/6d</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. The following amounts shall be paid for refreshments at fires. All members attending 6d. each for the first hour and 6d. each for each further period of 2 hours. Labourers 3d. per hour. The Chief Officer shall have power to provide refreshments or certify additional expenditure for the same where necessary.

[Source of these pages: Brent Archives – Fire Brigade Committee minutes.]

The following records of Wembley Urban District Council at Brent Archives were referred to in researching this history:

Fire Brigade Committee Minutes:
Acc. 1977128/27/1 - 1900 to 1914;
Acc. 1977128/27/2 – 1914 to 1925;
Acc. 1977128/27/3 - 1925 to 1930.

Public Health (& Fire Brigades) Committee Minutes:
Acc. 1977128/15 – 1930 to 1937.
Fire Brigade Committee. 6th August 1919.

14. The above rates of payments shall be made to members engaged upon Salvage work. Members who are also employees of the Council will, if acting during their usual working hours, be paid accordingly and their ordinary wages deducted or allowed for as the case may be.

Salvage.

15. Each member answering the roll call and completing the drill shall be paid:-
   - Chief Officer 5/6d
   - Second Officer 3/-
   - Third Officer 3/-
   - Firemen 3/-

Payment for Drills.

16. Time for payment shall be calculated from the moment of leaving the Fire Station until return or upon completion of salvage duty if continuous, otherwise the actual time occupied in salvage to be added and shall be certified by the Chief Officer or Officer in Charge at the completion of the work.

Calculation of Time.

17. Each Member of the Brigade shall be insured against accidents or injuries occasioned during the course of or discharge of his duties as a Member of the Brigade at the Council’s expense as follows:-
   - Chief Officer, £1000 on death or permanent total disablement, 2500 permanent partial disablement, 26 per week for temporary total disablement not exceeding 26 weeks and 30/- per week for temporary partial disablement.
   - Other Members of the Brigade, £500 on death or permanent total disablement, £250 permanent partial disablement, 45/- per week temporary total disablement through accident for a period of 26 weeks, after which the legal liability indemnity to apply.

Insurances.

18. The Council reserve the right to make such alterations to these Rules by resolution from time to time as may be considered expedient. Notice of any such alteration shall be posted upon the Notice Board at the Fire Station and be binding on the Members of the Brigade as from the date thereof.

Alteration of Rules.