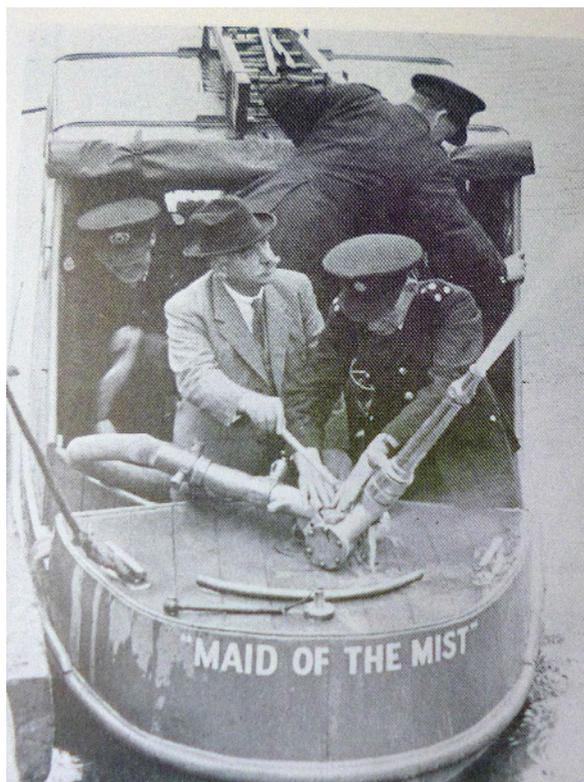


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## **Cover Picture. The Northampton Fire Boat**

During WW2 Northampton had several timber yards on the River Nene which ran through the town. Timber was carried in narrow boats from the London docks up the Grand Union canal and down into the town on the Northampton arm. In 1943 Northampton firemen built a fire boat as shown in the the only known photograph. Is this the farthest inland that a specifically built fire boat operated.

## **Editorial**

We are grateful to Nigel Crompton and Ian Forrester for their contributions to this issue. There is good news from the Greater Manchester Fire Service Museum. We would like to expand the current news aspects so there is a balance between past and present. The Network was formed for support and exchange of information. Your experiences may be of help to others and people may have solutions to difficulties you face. It would also be good to have information about planned events.

The copy date for the January 2019 issue will be **1 December 2018**

**Phil and Janice Morris**

### **SUCCESSFUL LOTTERY AWARD ENDS YEARS OF UNCERTAINTY FOR GREATER MANCHESTER FIRE SERVICE MUSEUM**

Four years after fire crews moved out of Rochdale's Maclure Road fire station, the Museum's wish to take over the building and redevelop it as a wonderful new fire museum for Greater Manchester will now come to fruition. Thanks to a £1.7m heritage grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund, also the acquisition of the site by Rochdale Council, our plans to restore the wonderful 1933 fire station and instal a brand new fire museum can now go ahead. The Museum has been in the former workshop building at the rear of the same site since 1983, but has outgrown its present home which also lacks proper visitor and other facilities. Work should start later this year on the complete refurbishment of the fire station, one of Rochdale's landmark buildings, and within two years we expect to open the museum, education suite, library/archive. cafe and shop. Meanwhile the operation will continue in the existing museum building. A huge thank-you to the Heritage Lottery Fund, lottery players everywhere, Rochdale Borough Council and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority for making this possible.

Do visit the special section on our website "COMING SOON" (to be commissioned in the next few weeks) which will provide full details, plans, images of the new museum plus lots more.

**Bob Bonner**

## **The Munitions Industry during the Great War**

This introductory article relates how the area now covered by Greater Manchester Fire Museum which includes Salford, Manchester, Stockport, Stretford, Bury, Rochdale and Bolton was a mass of factories producing a large and diverse amount of munitions for the war effort during 1914 - 1918. With the declaration of war on 4 August 1914, Britain found itself involved in a conflict on Europe soil for the first time since the Battle of Waterloo, fought in 1815. Many men volunteered whilst others who were on military reserve returned to the 'colours'. Immediately fire brigades, police forces and factories lost part of their workforce overnight.

By mid-May 1915, the British Army had suffered a number of setbacks, lack of shells had not helped, basic equipment was in short supply, uniforms non-existent, training rifles were in fact broom handles, however things had started to improve. Lord Kitchener and Major General Von Donop, the Master General of the Ordnance, had started to revolutionise War Office methods of purchasing and ordering. But this was not quick enough for politicians and certain newspaper editors. The Government introduced a number of Acts of Parliament including the formation of the Ministry of Munitions during May 1915. The first Minister of State was David Lloyd George who decided on a system utilising the skills of industrialists and not civil servants or politicians! Locally factories started to return to full production, receiving orders from the new Ministry. Some companies decided to expand, others constructed new buildings. Heaton Chapel saw a National Aircraft Factory constructed. On Trafford Park a National Steel Breaking Factory started operations. The Metropolitan Carriage, Wagon & Finance Company also on Trafford Park made aeroplanes although it appears never gaining national factory status. Elsewhere Messrs. H N Morris in West Gorton, an existing chemicals factory, was nationalised in October 1915 becoming a National Explosives Factory. Hardman & Holden Ltd, Valley Road, Clayton produced toluol in buildings paid for by the state. Construction started in October 1915 with the first production in July 1916. In Oldham, Sebastian Ziani de Ferranti, a large engineering works received orders for 18 pounder shells. Also producing shells were Bury Corporation Tramway Works on Bank Street who made 18pdr and 4.5 inch. These works later became designated a National Shell Factory (NSF). Over in Rochdale their Corporation Tram Works on Mellor Street produced 6inch shells also becoming a NSF. And to complete the hat trick Manchester's Tramways Department on Hyde Road had a new building constructed to allow even greater production. It too became a National Shell Factory. A large number of mills changed usage to produce cotton waste for the explosives industry. Cotton waste was a constituent part of for

instance the explosive propellant cordite. Bury, Oldham and Woodley witnessed mill premises designated National Cotton Waste Mills. The area saw Coop's Irlam soap factory producing glycerine, with the Goodwin Company (Manchester) and Rochdale Tallow & Candle Co also glycerine makers. Burden Tar Company (Bolton), Hunt & Mosecrop Ltd, T. Heyland & Co and T. Jackson were responsible for different acids. The last three companies were based in Manchester where even Manchester Gas Works manufactured acids and a toluol extraction. Around the Manchester locality a number of sites produced coke. In Whaley Bridge, the Fenilee Gunpowder Company increased production.

Salford companies such as Southern & Sons manufactured acids whilst J.E.C. Lord's tar distillery in Weaste saw production of a number of different substances. Both of these plants suffered fires attended by Salford Fire Brigade. On the 5 October 1918, Salford attended Lord's when a large oil storage facility was alight. Additionally in Weaste, the firm of Cresol Chemicals Limited produced picric acid in large quantities. Again Salford Fire Brigade attended these premises. Messrs. H N Morris in West Gorton whilst in full production of synthetic phenol suffered a fatal incident in March 1915 in which 2 workers perished. Full details of the fire brigade attendance have so far not been discovered.

However when on Monday September 20, 1915 the Blackley firm of Levinstein's (later to become ICI) also witnessed a large incident the newspapers of the day gave details of the City of Manchester Fire Brigade's attendance. With over 500 people working on site an explosion and fire occurred, the works brigade responded as did a motor escape from Central Fire Station with 2nd Officer Corlett in charge. Additional appliances attended from New Street, Miles Platting station with a number of ambulances from throughout Manchester. The explosion in a grinding room resulted in the deaths of 4 workers, two of the men lived in Middleton, one from Miles Platting and the last Blackley. Only a few weeks later on 8 November 1915, Levinstein's again suffered another incident this time in the nitro glycerine department. The time of call was 10.30 with the works brigade responding.

On 11 November 1917 Levinstein's works fire brigade attended one of the most disastrous fires in the neighbourhood when a wooden dormitory outbuilding at the Delaunay's Road Institution of the Manchester Guardians at Crumpsall caught fire. Originally called the Prestwich Union Workhouse, the outbuilding was home to a number of

elderly and infirm ladies, most of whom were bedridden.

It appears the two nurses on duty discovered smoke which rapidly turned to fire shortly after 11.30 at night. The fire appliances at the workhouse were soon brought into play. Workers at Levinstein's factory next door, witnessed the fire and raising the alarm with their works brigade promptly attending. The first fire call was logged at Ash Street Fire Station, Harpurley at 11.50 but from Levinstein's factory reporting the blaze. It was another seven minutes before a call was logged from the workhouse. By that time appliances were on their way from Ash Street, again New Street and Central with four combined motor pump escapes plus ambulances. CFO Corlett was in charge of brigade operations. According to the newspaper reports, only 15 minutes after the brigade started applying water in quantity onto the flames they were extinguished. Sadly out of over 40 residents in the building at the time, 15 were dead or died of their injuries later.

Large scale incidents involving not only many deaths but large destruction to buildings did occur such as the Ashton under Lyne explosion, which the Greater Manchester Fire Museum has many details of, whilst across on the outskirts of Wigan at Roburite & Ammonal Ltd premises, Gathurst on 15 May 1916 another fire and explosion in a mixing house caused serious loss of life, destroyed buildings, smashed windows over a large area and saw a number of firemen awarded the Order of the British Empire.

Seven men lost their lives, 22 more were injured including a number suffering serious wounds plus Annie Liptrot, a farmer who was struck by debris well over 300 yards away. Of those injured 5 were soldiers on guard duty at the factory. Lance Corporal Jonathon Rhodes, Royal Defence Corps (Jonathon originally served with the Lancashire Fusiliers) lost his life and was buried in Peel Cemetery with military honours and has a Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone.

Previously on 11 May, a fire occurred in another mixing house on the site. This was however successfully fought using a few 'Minimax' fire extinguishers with very little damage and no injuries. Mixing the component substances required to produce explosives has always been one of the most dangerous stages of the manufacturing process.

On the evening of 15 May, just after 6.20pm workers heard the roar of fire from within mixing house D, followed by dense smoke. Bravely the workers attacked the fire again using 'Minimax' fire extinguishers whilst others coupled up fire hoses and started a more continuous attack. Although the threat of a serious explosion was not thought possible at this stage, all non-essential staff were told to leave the area. The fire

continued to take hold of buildings and was spreading. By 6.45pm Wigan Police Fire Brigade were on site but had arrived at the chemical production side and were going to cross to the area of the blaze using a bridge.

Just before 7 pm a series of small explosions took place, fortunately none resulted at this stage in the spread of debris. But the fire continued to grow, consuming more buildings.

The Factory Managers decided that all fire fighting efforts should cease and the fire be allowed to burn itself out. Mr Cooksey, the Assistant Factory Manager, was sent to tell those using the fire hoses to leave the fire and get to cover. As he was nearing the by now fierce fire he noticed the dense smoke changing colour. He realised a very large and possibly deadly explosion was now immanent. Calling to those still fire fighting he told them to run for their lives. Only seconds later Mr Cooksey was blown over and most of those fire fighting were either dead or dying. The explosion itself lasted milliseconds and then only fire remained but the area was devastated plus nobody could guarantee there would not be another explosion.

Wigan Police Fire Brigade took over the fire fighting and rescue work and were fortunate that a large number of the work force returned to help.

One man was found alive in the debris. He was taken home but succumbed to his injuries the next day. Some of those seriously injured were waiting on the bridge and were caught in the blast.

All four members of the Wigan fire appliance received the OBE as did Mr Cooksey for their bravery during the incident. These were Sergeant Willie Rylance, Fireman Ralph Ainscough, Fireman John Jones and Chief Constable and Superintendent of the Wigan Police Fire Brigade, John Percival.

Almost as quickly as the factories were constructed and began production, after the signing of the Armistice in November 1918 a large number fell silent. Due to the success of the Ministry of Munitions, both male and female workers had already started to be laid off in late 1917 or moved to different factories; on occasions in different parts of Britain.

Some factory buildings remain to this day but most especially those making explosives were sold off in the 1920s. Fire fighting appliances remained until closure and sales catalogues mention these appliances but most of the fire fighters be it male or female had left many years previously.

**Nigel Crompton, MA (British History - First World War Studies)**

## **Disaster at Aston in the West Midlands**

You may remember that at last year's AGM The West Midlands Community Heritage Group told the meeting that plans were afoot to refurbish Aston Fire station where our museum was.

Aston Fire station is the oldest currently in the West Midlands Fire Service and was built 1926. It consisted of a three bay fire station with a block of firefighters' flats in the yard out the back.

Over the years the flats were vacated and became Fire Safety offices and the headquarters of 'A' division, one of five divisions in the Brigade. When those departments moved out the Heritage group were given some of the rooms on the ground floor for their museum. More rooms were eventually added to where the group had all of the ground floor of the two storey block.

The West Midlands Ambulance Service eventually approached the Fire Service to use the first floor of the block as Ambulance Service offices for their Ambulance 'Hub' with 12 Ambulances being based there.

After nine months the Ambulance Service decided the 'Hub' was in the wrong place and moved out. For whatever the reason the water was not turned off on their floor and when the 'Beast From The East' arrived at the end of February several joints blew off the pipework above the museum and large amounts of water found its way down into our museum.

This was a serious flood, not helped by the fact it happened on a Sunday and so was not discovered for sometime by the operational crews on station. They then struggled to find their keys to the museum and had to break in. The state of the museum was terrible with collapsed ceilings, drooping electrics & peeling wallpaper.

A massive clean up operation took place throwing some stuff away, drying other stuff out naturally, and storing unaffected items in boxes hired by the brigade. A large container was also provided and the boxes stored in there. Two other brigade sites were obtained and the larger items from the museum taken and stored there.

With the proposed refurbishment of the station the group would have to have moved out of the museum this summer sometime anyway but the flood forced us to do it in an unplanned way to the extent that we did it in such a rush we don't know where anything is.

It could have been worse but for now all of our stuff is in storage until the completion of the Aston Fire Station refurbishment in which we have been allocated some rooms. The proposed build time, we have been told, will take about a year.

**Ian Forrester**

## **The Co-operative Boot Factory Fire Brigade Rushden Northamptonshire**

Reminiscences of Peter Danby former employee and Captain of the Works Fire Brigade,

The company had its own fire brigade and I joined it in 1957. Basically the idea of the Co-op fire brigade was to have fire prevention more so than fire-fighting. The average number of firemen at each factory was between twelve and fifteen. We had a maximum of twelve at Rushden. It had nine firemen, a fire engineer, a second officer and a first officer.

We could work off mains water if but we had our own underground water tank. It was situated in the centre of the building and it was topped up by rain-water. That tank held forty five thousand gallons of water. It was known to the County Brigades that we had that water and it had been used by them on more than one occasion. The factory was also defended by a mains-fed sprinkler system.

The sprinklers went off on more than one occasion. The warning bells would go off, but at night it takes a long time to get out of bed and get back to the factory to turn them off. If there was a mains failure in the water the sprinklers would still work because there was a large water tower which fed the sprinklers by gravity and they would keep going for hopefully long enough for somebody to be alerted that you had a fire.

One night we had quite a bad fire within the factory. The sprinklers all went off, nobody answered the bell at quarter to two in the morning, by the time it was answered we had got one almighty flood at the factory. The fire happened on the night of the 28th August 1968 and was caused by smoking in the factory. A truck load of rubbish which should have been taken out at night was not taken out and somebody who was in the factory quite late at night discarded a cigarette end in it. It smouldered and got on fire, it was in an upstairs room and it just blazed up, set the sprinkler system going. We had eight heads go off in all. By the time we got there the fire was out but we had an enormous amount of water about. It had gone from upstairs, downstairs and into the basement. Just through somebody smoking.

To keep you on your toes there were fire practices in the yard in the evenings. We also went to the back of a nearby Rectory where we had our own hydrants to training and get ready for competition work. We used to be in the Midlands area competing against the Birmingham and Wolverhampton Co-op bri-

gades. The Co-op moved Desborough, Rushden and Northampton, into the London area division where we would go to out as far as Norfolk and London for competitions. The Co-op Challenge Shield, now displayed in Rushden museum, was inaugurated in 1903 and was awarded until 1967. The only reason it is in the museum is because I was the last person who won that shield.

During competition time we did get time off to go out doing a little bit of training and they used to come down from Co-op Headquarters in Manchester to check that we were doing things right. There were three drills, a three-man, a four-man and a one man.

Competitions prizes were given for first second and third places. This would be Co-op bed linen, crockery, cutlery or small articles of furniture like coffee tables. When I first got married I didn't buy hardly any bed linen or towels.

Our uniform was basically the same as the Rushden Fire Brigade except we had leather helmets, not chrome. All the equipment we used was brass and very, very heavy.

The Co-op decided in 1970 that they no longer wished to insure their premises with Co-op Insurance. They did away with the fire brigades and had the premises insured by the Sun Alliance group. However, the Sun Alliance did retain us as a team of people who could look after the place from a fire prevention point of view.

When the factory was running down we stopped the training programmes and competition work. We were not prepared to leave the place in the lurch and just think 'don't bother anymore' because at the end of the day we all earned a living there and you just can't walk out on a place like that. To the day when they closed it we still looked after the place. I never wanted to see it go or burn down.

We did used to have a number of incidents in the factory which was basically caused by the dust that used to come off the shoes when they was scouring them or roughing the bottoms. It created a lot of dust, you'd strike a little bit of grindery which was the nails and the tacks and stuff from the bottom and it would set the whole of the extraction system on fire all the way through the factory. The dust used to be pulled off the machines by a fifty horse power fan and with a little spark in the right place and the fan blowing it didn't take long for it to have nice little fire that would go right the way through the factory. It was all contained in the extraction system but it was an awful job to put it out.

The factory was two storey and the offices had a basement and three floors, in total seventy seven thousand square feet. I think it was the biggest factory in Rushden opened in 1900 and employing 500 workers. The factory was demolished in 1987 and the office section was converted into flats.



A Beresford Stork trailer pump number 13673 was issued to the factory in March 1940 and later acquired, restored and taken to rallies by Peter Danby. Where is it now?

Recorded by Rushden Research Group and reproduced with their permission.

**Phil Morris**

