



The
CHIEF





THE CHIEF

A TRIBUTE
TO THE LATE

JIM HARKER

CHIEF FIRE OFFICER
OF THE
GEDDINGTON VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADE
1979-84

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“THE CHIEF”

Jim Harker devoted a great deal of his life to Geddington and the Geddington Volunteer Fire Brigade became, in many ways, the embodiment of the spirit of service and affection which guided all the many things that Jim did for his beloved village.

It began quite by chance really, in 1977, a year which will always be remembered for its “winter of discontent”, the regular firemen took what was for them the rare step of going on strike. Although the Government announced emergency plans, villages like Geddington seemed distinctly vulnerable if disaster were to occur. Jim Harker immediately organised a team of volunteers, drawn from all sections of the village community, who were ready to turn out at any hour and to help in any emergency which might arise. Lists of telephone numbers were drawn up and an organization was created. These volunteers had no training or special expertise but they mustered between them a great variety of talent and they shared a willingness and a determination to do whatever they could, should they be needed.

Fortunately, apart from a tree felled by a winter gale, their resolve was not put to the test, but the enthusiasm which had been engendered had a special quality. The firemen's strike ended and the volunteers staged a “standing down” dinner, which was greatly enjoyed, so much so that an anniversary dinner was arranged the following year. At this second dinner, it was decided that there was a permanent place in the village community for a body of men who were willing to join together to tackle any emergency, firemen or no firemen, and so the idea of the Geddington Volunteer Fire Brigade was born.

On 7th December 1979, the Brigade was formally established with Jim Harker elected by acclaim as its Chief. From then on, events acquired their own momentum. A Charity Fund was set up, a trailer pump was acquired and renovated, a uniform evolved, a goat was adopted as a mascot and a marching song was composed. It was all great fun and much of it harmless nonsense but, beneath the superficial joke was a serious purpose: a body of men was organized and ready to help in any village crisis. Crises of various kinds soon came along. Teams turned out to mop up a flood in an old lady's cottage, to move a pensioner's furniture into a new flat and to raise more funds at Dutch auctions. Presiding over these activities was “The Chief”, always taking the lead, always looking for opportunities where the Brigade might help and always enjoying the humorous banter which characterized the Brigade's meetings. Not content with the trailer pump, he was soon in negotiation to purchase a full-sized fire tender, which was solemnly christened “Queen Eleanor” by Princess Margaret at Boughton House in 1981 and which became a popular feature at local fetes, swelling the Brigade's charity fund. This steadily growing fund enhanced the annual distribution of the ancient Samuel Lee Charity and provided a Christmas bonus to senior citizens in the village.

“The Chief” played a very special role in the Brigade, which he saw as an extension of his own sense of community service. It was an expression of his

pride, his humanity and even his patriotism, all of which were deeply embedded in his character. All those who served in the Brigade held him in the greatest respect and affection, recognising the honesty and sincerity of purpose which guided all he did, both publicly and privately. His early and sudden death was a grievous blow and it was fitting that Brigade members should have carried him to his final resting place in the village churchyard. He left a gap which could never be filled: the Brigade will never have another Chief.

As a tribute to "The Chief" and to a fine English gentleman, we here print some extracts from the Parade Records of the Geddington Volunteer Fire Brigade in the hope that they will convey something of the spirit and the enjoyment which were his unique inspiration.

All proceeds from the sale of this publication will go to the Geddington Volunteer Fire Brigade, which is a registered charity.

THE BOXING DAY PARADE

Every Boxing Day since 1979, the Brigade has paraded through the village and demonstrated its squirting power, usually successfully, at the brook. A collection is taken for charity and a good time is had by all.

Boxing Day 1979

"The Chief Fire Officer, impressively disguised as the late Prince Bismarck, inspected the Parade and issued his orders of the day."

September 1980

"It was agreed to arrange for a Parade on similar lines to the previous Boxing Day and the Chief undertook to seek the Vicar's intercession in respect of the weather."

January 1981

"Fireman Miles presented his photographs of the Boxing Day Parade. Members felt that they did convey something of the atmosphere of the occasion. Most remarkable was the areola which was clearly visible surrounding the head of the Chief. While sceptics might attribute this variously to the high polish on his helmet or the Victualling Officer's beverage, more faithful souls might recognise the truly supernatural nature of this phenomenon. It would be unwise, however, to give publicity to this manifestation in case the arrival of too many nuns disrupted the normal progress of agriculture at Little Oakley."

EMERGENCY SERVICE

The Chief was always on the look-out for ways in which the Brigade could serve the village or individuals who needed particular help. He frequently assisted people in trouble himself and, if the record of these events was usually lighthearted, the good deeds themselves were genuine.

January 1980

"The Chief reported that he would divide the village into four sections for emergency purposes."

April 1980

"The Chief had circulated a copy of the list to all members. The Chief pointed out that each section should include a Parish Councillor and one man over 55 years old. The latter provision ensured that someone could be sent out 24 hours after a nuclear emergency, for whom risk of genetic consequences was considered less significant."

May 1981

"First-Aid Course: Members were warned of the Chief's search for a suitable case on which to pass his practical in emergency tracheotomy, using his pen-knife."

"The Chief reported that an unnamed member of the Brigade had rendered assistance to a member of the public who had suffered an epileptic fit. The victim had almost bitten the Chief's finger off."

September 1981

"The Chief reported that, upon seeing a hedge on fire in the Headlands, Kettering, he had leapt from his car, donned his helmet and extinguished the fire. Members suspected that the owner of the hedge was probably trying to burn it down anyway."

November 1981

"The Chief had assisted at the scene of two fatalities but hotly denied the suggestion that both had undergone tracheotomy. He also denied reports that he had promised a nubile young lady that he would get her into the Brigade."

June 1982

"The Chief Fire Officer reported that the Quartermaster had visited his farm in the quest for timber for Mabel Wilson's fence and had removed a section of the fence of the bull-pen. The bull had exploited this situation by upending a large water container and drowning six pigs."

December 1982

"The Brigade had carried out the removal of Mrs. Noble, a pensioner, on Hallowe'en, from her flat in Castle Gardens to a new dwelling nearby. As well as furniture removal, this had also called for some carpet-fitting, a new experience for the Brigade, but the Chief, with his emergency tracheotomy equipment, rose to the occasion and the carpet fitted very well, except at the edges."

January 1983

"The Chief Fire Officer reported that there had been a successful sluicing of the overflowing manhole adjacent to the ford. A number of unkind things were said about the Anglian Water Authority."

May 1983

"The CFO reported that he had kept company with Firemen Driver and Sharp on a night-watch at the top of Wood Street when the recent floods were threatening. On this occasion, disaster had been averted. Members reflected on the fact that the CFO was adding another to his list of historical impersonations, this time as Canute, or possibly his lesser known illegitimate son, Harkacanute."

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Brigade is nothing if not outward-looking. Contacts have been made in Germany and in the United States and one member currently serves in South Africa. Holidays abroad have also presented unusual opportunities for service.

July 1980

"The Chief submitted a written report of the involvement of himself, with Firemen J.N.R. Harker, Miles and Spence, in assisting the Volunteer Fire Brigade in Clohers-Foucsouant in Brittany. A forest fire had broken out and, once the Chief had revealed both his prowess and his helmet, he had been placed in charge of 40 peasants. In spite of the insuperable language barrier, the operation was successfully completed and the Entente Cordiale had been cemented in the subsequent celebrations. It was unanimously agreed that this overseas service was worthy of special recognition and the Chief was presented with a new decoration, the Special Overseas Decoration. The Adjutant formally presented the medal, accompanied by an impromptu rendering of the 'Marseillaise', which members seemed to prefer to the more appropriate march, 'Pompiers et Circonstance'."

November 1981

"The Chief reported meeting a Californian oil millionaire, who had spoken of possible twinning arrangements with his Brigade back home. Nothing more had been heard and Fireman Rowney advanced the theory that this had been a hoax perpetrated by a recluse who lived in a bunker at Grafton Underwood."

January 1982

"The Adjutant read a special dispatch which he had received from Lanzarote, where the Chief had passed his winter vacation. The Chief gave an account of how he had endeavoured unsuccessfully to douse a volcano, with the assistance of H.M. King Hussein of Jordan."

June 1982

"The Chief had received intelligence from South Africa from Associate Fireman Buchanan, together with a photograph depicting him in company with a well-built coloured lady with a hen on her head smoking a pipe. Members were not previously aware that hens smoked but Fireman Rowney, who knows a thing or two about poultry, observed that it must have been a Puff Orpington."

November 1983

"The CFO observed that Fireman Rowland was absent on a visit to Colonel Ghadafi, offering him a place at Tresham College to take the City and Guilds course in International Relations and the ONC in Applied Terrorism. The CFO took note of what had happened to Hong Kong as a result of Fireman Rowland's visit there and dreaded to think what might now happen in Libya."

January 1984

"When the Chief referred to the Libyan Head of State as Colonel Grafitti, it was immediately obvious that the writing was on the wall for that regime."

ON PARADE

The Chief missed very few of the regular meetings of the Brigade, over which he presided with great enthusiasm. In spite of a constant barrage of digressions and frequent interruptions, the essential business of the Brigade was somehow transacted, not that the Chief was not more than ready to contribute his own diversions and flights of fancy.

November 1980

"Fireman Brunger explained the way hydrants are marked and said that, in Geddington, as befitted its historical traditions, measurements were in the old style. This news was greeted enthusiastically by the Chief, which came as a great surprise to those members who had not previously conceived of their leader as being under any circumstances in favour of the Foot."

January 1981

"The Chief Fire Officer spoke with emotion and pride of the many achievements of the Brigade over the past year."

April 1981

"The only complaint arising from the Ladies' Night was from the Chief who was concerned that he had been seated next to the Adjutant and had, therefore, missed out on much of the wine. This received little sympathy from the rest of the members."

May 1981

"The Chief presented Miss Katherine Rowland with a Certificate and token as a mark of the Brigade's appreciation of her musical services to the Brigade. The Chief paid tribute to Miss Rowland's prowess in a speech which, as was subsequently reported, the young lady had looked forward to with greater trepidation than had been the case with her French Oral examination. Members sympathised with Miss Rowland, knowing just how she felt."

July 1981

"The Chief informed the Brigade of the Village Market proposed for 1982 and spoke enthusiastically of sky-divers dropping onto the Brigade. Fireman Marlow conjured-up a delightful vision of such parachutists being prevented from landing by being kept aloft on the top of water-jets projected by 'Queen Eleanor'."

January 1982

"The Chief reviewed the events of 1981 with great enthusiasm and a vocabulary so extensive and inventive that he was likely to be recruited by the BBC as research assistant for 'Call My Bluff'."

"The Master of the Pumps demonstrated a smoke detector alarm for domestic use, which he prudently kept well away from the Chief."

March 1982

"The Chief Fire Officer congratulated members on the turn-out at the Annual Dinner and reported that, as a direct consequence, the Kettering Fire Station men would conduct members to their gas-chambers."

May 1982

"The CFO reported on the Brigade's response to the request to attend the Caravan Rally on Fireman Sawford's land. These holiday-makers had been in need of cheap entertainment and this they had been given."

September 1982

"The Chief Fire Officer said that he had little to report and reported very little."

"Fireman Rowland asked the CFO what the position was on sex. Having received an impressive and ingenious variety of answers, he was reminded by the Adjutant that the Brigade's Constitution made no reference to sex, although it should not be inferred from this that the Brigade was against it."

"Fireman Rowland, much affected in recent years by cash limits, positively spluttered in his expression of horror at the lamentable financial position, but was firmly put down by the CFO who, gazing into the middle distance, spoke of his unshaken confidence in the financial stability of the Brigade. Sir Geoffrey Howe would have been proud of him."

"The CFO pleaded guilty to appearing on parade in brown footwear."

October 1982

"Before the commencement of business, the CFO, well-fortified with a restorative tonic, prescribed, so he said on the NHS, and generously diluted with gin, extended a warm welcome to Fireman Jackson, who was attending his first parade."

January 1983

"The CFO reported that the Brigade had come into possession of a replica of an old fire-mark. Members can be assured that this was not a reference to where the Chief stubbed a fag-end on the bed-post."

"A proposal that the goat should be promoted was vetoed by the Chief Fire Officer when it was pointed out that it was the universal custom for Commanding Officers to kiss newly promoted goats on as many cheeks as possible."

March 1983

"In the absence of the Chief Fire Officer, who was said to be rehearsing for his role as Sir Francis Drake, waiting for the Armada to sail up the Ise, the Adjutant took the chair."

"An investment of £500 had been made in the Britannia Preference Shares Fund. The Adjutant said that he knew the Chief would welcome with pride such a patriotic investment."

September 1983

"The Chief Fire Officer, in a wide-ranging and frequently interrupted report, spoke first of a letter he had received from Kingswood School, wherein it had been said that the visitors to their Fete had gained 'great insight into the work of a Fire Brigade'. Members were at a loss to understand how such a mistake could possibly have occurred."

January 1984

"The Chief described the past year as hectic and proceeded to deliver a Report which reflected this description. He concluded by saying that the Brigade was in good heart and looking forward to another successful year. He was rewarded with murmurs of admiration and approbation and several gins."

A MAJOR PURCHASE

At the beginning of 1981, the Brigade acquired its greatest asset, a splendid Fire Tender, powered by a Rolls-Royce engine and capable of pumping water at great pressure. It has been much in demand at Fetes and Galas in the district ever since it was bought, thanks to the efforts of the Chief.

January 1981

"The Chief reported on his visit to British Aerospace Ltd, at Lutterworth. He had inspected and agreed to purchase a T80 Thorneywood Fire Tender. The Chief's negotiations with British Aerospace over the price made Mr. 'Tiny' Rowland seem by comparison a mere pygmy and provided further evidence of the soft centre in the management of state-controlled enterprises."

THE CHIEF AND THE MEDIA

The Chief liked to get publicity for the Brigade and its exploits were featured on more than one occasion in the local paper and on Radio Northampton. In 1982, the Brigade made an appearance on television in the BBC East programme, 'Weekend'. The Brigade was never allowed to forget it.

October 1982

"The CFO reported that the Brigade was due to make a recording for BBC East's 'Weekend' programme. Mr. John Mountford was to be fixed in the Corby stocks and duly squirted. The CFO promised to wear black shoes."

November 1983

"Mysterious Diggings in Clay Dick"

"The CFO said that there was no truth in the rumour that recent excavations were for building a new Brigade HQ and Nuclear Fall-out Shelter, nor did they indicate a site for Cruise missiles. There would therefore be no need for the Geddington Common women to gather at the site. It was, in fact, so he was led to believe, a BBC Relay Station, doubtless installed in preparation for beaming the Brigade's next TV appearance direct to the Television Centre and the transatlantic satellite."

A RIGHT ROYAL OCCASION

In 1981, a major Fete, organized in the grounds of Boughton House, was graced by a royal visitor. This was too good a chance for the Brigade to miss and it provided the Chief with what some might call his finest hour.

April 1981

"It was agreed that the Brigade would parade and demonstrate the new Fire Engine at Boughton House on 7th June. H.R.H. Princess Margaret was expected to attend and the Chief agreed to enquire if she might consider formally naming the engine on the occasion. He expressed concern, however, that a practice was necessary if any demonstration was envisaged and that the goat must be on its very best behaviour, as he did not wish to risk any unforeseen occurrence spoiling his chance of an eventual knighthood for his services to the Brigade."

May 1981

"The Chief reported discussions with the Duke of Buccleuch, who had clearly heard of the Brigade's reputation and had stipulated very firmly that he did not wish to have quantities of water squirted about."

7th June 1981

"H.R.H. The Princess Margaret arrived at the Brigade's enclosure and, having been greeted by the Chief, engaged in conversation with Lucifer, Fireman Sawford and the officers and men of the Brigade. At the request of the Chief, Her Royal Highness gracefully poured a bottle of Geddington Elderflower Wine (1980) on the bonnet of the tender, thus christening it 'Queen Eleanor'. She was then shown some of the tender's unique fittings, which she said were 'Marvellous', after which she beat a retreat with the Brigade song and three hearty cheers ringing in her ears."

July 1981

"The Chief announced that an enquiry had been received about the possibility of the Brigade appearing at Barnwell Fete. Clearly the word was passing quickly round the family."

IN MEMORIAM

The Chief died on 2nd February 1984. The members of the Brigade were shattered by the news but they all agreed that, although no man could ever take his place, the Brigade should continue in what had come to be described as its finest traditions. One of the traditions is that an Ode is recited at the Annual Dinner to commemorate some aspect of the previous year. The Chief did not always get a mention but the following extracts recall some of his exploits and attributes.

From the Ballad of 1980

"The next bold exploit was most truly unique.
The Chief went abroad for his fortune to seek,
With young Jim and Roger and Fireman Peter,
He travelled for many a long kilometre.
In Brittany men shouted out: 'Sacré bleu!
Merde! Zut alors! Attention! Feu!
Then donning his helmet without more ado,
Our Chief took the lead and rallied his crew
of motley French peasants, disorganised lot,
And showing them all the credentials he'd got,
He led them to triumph, a proud victory,
And now he is known as a great S.O.D."

From 'The Song of Higher Water' by Henry Wadsworth Shortfellow (1982)

"When the braves are all assembled,
Gathered at the annual banquet,
Sitting round the Chief, the Great One,
He whose bushy eyebrows bristle,
He who once did single-handed,
Singing 'Land of Hope and Glory',
Armed only with his pen-knife,
Slit a throat from ear to earhole,
Saying, 'This beats artificial
Respiration quite completely'."

From 'Geddington Tales' by Geoffrey Chaucer (1983)

"There was a Chief, a most distinguished man,
Who from the day on which he first began
To ride abroad had smoked a score a day.
On Parish Council oft he had his way.
He was of sovereign value in all eyes,
And though so much distinguished he was wise.
Speaking of his appearance, he possessed
A helmet, but he was not gaily dressed."

From 'The Ode of 1984', read at the Memorial Dinner for The Chief

"That all of this had happened, it is my firm belief,
Because of one man's vision: God Bless our dear old Chief!"

