

## James Charles Diaper. Superintendent at Chelmsford 1907-1910

James Charles Diaper was born on 17th April 1861 at Mile End, London to James Diaper (a Seaman) and Sarah nee Levett. At the age of 12 he went to sea and rounded Cape Horn several times in a Windjammer. In 1881, he joined the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. After 1 year, he could also claim acquaintance with Royalty as in December 1882 he attended the Alhambra Theatre fire. King Edward VII, then Prince of Wales who was a volunteer fireman at the time and also attended that fire in uniform, helping with the appliances. The Firemen enjoyed the attendance of the Prince of Wales, as when he attended 'shouts', he would always attend with a box of cigars for which he was famous for smoking, and would always provide the crew who attended with a cigar each, for which the crew were more than grateful!!

On 1st July 1884 he married Mary Ann Castleman at the parish church of St Paul, Canonbury, Islington, London. In 1891 he is living at the Metropolitan Fire Brigade Station West India Dock Road, London and by 1901 he has moved to 3 Park Terrace, Deptford, at which time he has a family consisting of 5 Daughters, Dorothy L 15 yrs, Mary Ann 11yrs, Rosina A, 7 yrs, Blanche L, 4 yrs, and Winifred P, 2 yrs and 2 sons, James Charles 7yrs and William H, 10 months. In 1906 he retired from the Metropolitan Fire Brigade after 25 years and having received a good conduct medal, and at this time he was living at 162 Killearn Road, Catford S.E. London and was in receipt of a pension from the Brigade.

On 2nd August 1907 he was appointed as Superintendent of the Chelmsford Brigade with pay of 30 shillings per week, with house rent free, uniform, clothing and boots when needed. During World War 1 he joined the 24th Rifle Brigade and was promoted to Corporal. His regimental number was 206248 and he served in Mesopotamia. He died on 21 February 1942 at the age of 81 whilst living at 371 Blackfen Road, Sidcup, Kent.

Whilst he was Superintendent at Chelmsford, Diaper was quite a controversial character, and this started shortly after his appointment, when in October 1908 he attended the annual dinner of the Chelmsford Brigade. During his reply to toast to the Fire Brigade proposed by chairman of the fire brigade committee, Superintendent Diaper eulogised the activity of his men, however there was always difficulty in getting horses. He referred to a recent fire in Stock on the 20th September. He stated that he thought the council would like the fire engine to go faster than 4 mph and on the occasion of this fire they had two horses. It was said that one of the horses had been at a funeral the day before and it evidently thought that it was going to a funeral then! (Laughter). The other horse had been at Southend the day before and was to go to the same place that day, so they could not drive it hard. In fact things had got so bad that he had to order his men to get off the engine and help shove it along.

Unfortunately for Diaper, his comments were reported in the newspaper and came to the attention of the horse owners, Messrs TA Holland and Son, who complained in writing to the Fire Brigade Committee stating that statements made by Diaper were incorrect, and also complaining about the retaining fee for the provision of horses and requesting the cancellation of the agreement unless the Fire Brigade Committee increase considerably the retaining fee of £5.00 per annum. Diaper, who was present at the meeting, admitted making the observation complained of and stated that he had only repeated information given to him by other people. The Fire Brigade Committee reprimanded the Superintendent and cautioned him not to make statements in public in relation to brigade matters.

However at the meeting of the full council to which the Fire Brigade's Committee report was submitted it was noticed that the report was not signed by the Chairman of the committee or by anyone else. As this was the case an alderman pointed out that the report should not be considered by the council, a point to which the Town Clerk agreed. The mayor proposed acceptance of the report when the chairman of the Fire Brigade Committee, Councillor Gowers, stated that the committee did not reprimand the Superintendent and so he refused to sign the report.

Councillor Gowers then withdrew his motion and the Mayor proposed acceptance of the motion and was seconded by Councillor Farrow "in order to get on with it"

Councillor Lunney then spoke and said, "What Councillor Gower says is quite correct. A cruel wrong has been done to our Superintendent. He has done his duty and because of this you want to get rid of him. I can prove that his life is a misery owing to the way he has been treated by members of the council. He was not asked to come there to be reprimanded. He was locked outside and brought in like a convict." After further fiery discussions the council agreed to accept the report with the word 'reprimanded' being deleted.

It is obvious that things were not good between the council and the Superintendent of the Fire Brigade..... and this was to remain the case.

On the 17th June 1909, Superintendent Diaper, together with Councillor Franklin attended a meeting of the Professional Fire Brigade Association in London.

At the meeting of the Council, on the 30th June 1909 the Chief Officer of the Brigade submitted a letter of complaint reporting Diaper, a) for breach of discipline in that he, Diaper, had absented himself on the 17th June without permission and attending the Fire Brigade Congress on that day and b) referring to the complaint made by some members of the Brigade to the Chairman that special duty for which payment is made is not given to members in rotation.

Diaper, at a later stage of the meeting attended by request and admitted that he had not received permission from the Chairman to be absent. The chief officer of the Brigade, Cuthbert Brown, stated that he is of the opinion that Diaper is absolutely incompetent to discharge his duties as Superintendent of the Brigade and that Diaper is always doing something beyond his duties and upsetting everyone. It was proposed by Councillor Clarkson and seconded by Alderman Taylor "That in the interests of the Borough it is desirable that Mr Diaper be called upon to resign his office of Superintendent of the Fire Brigade".

An amendment was proposed by Alderman Thompson and seconded by Councillor F.G. Smith "That the question and whole of the issues arising from the Chief Officer's letter of the 30th June be referred for special consideration, with the Chief Officer at a special committee". This was approved. The Superintendent was informed of the opinions expressed by the Chief Officer and was given the choice of taking time to consider the matter. He elected to reply at a further date. It was also recommended that the Town Clerk notify Mr Diaper of the allegations made.

October 27th 1909

As a result of reports of a committee which was held in camera, it was decided that Superintendent Diaper be requested to attend an adjourned meeting of the council and that meanwhile particulars be given to Diaper as to the charge brought by the surveyor for the first time that evening (October 1st) as to No.2 Steam Engine. Diaper attended the adjourned meeting of the council and presented a written reply to the Borough surveyor's report as to the engine.

After a lengthy discussion of the matter in council, it was ultimately resolved that unless Mr Diaper voluntarily resigned the position of Superintendent of the Fire Brigade within 3 months from that date (October 7th), the Town Clerk at the expiration of such 3 months should give him one months' notice in writing, terminating his engagement.

31st December 1909

Councillor Hewell moved to rescind the resolution passed on the 7th October that unless Mr Diaper resigns his position within 3 months he should be given a months' notice. Councillor Hewell said that he was very much surprised to hear the Chairman of the Fire Brigade Committee say that the Fire Engine was thoroughly satisfactory. He (the speaker) had examined it and it was dropping between 18-20 times a minute. It was very dangerous to work a boiler leaking to that extent and to say it was perfectly satisfactory was perfectly ridiculous. The council had been told that Diaper was incapable, but he was not incapable. He had been "badgered from one thing to the other maliciously". Councillor Lunney seconded the motion and said Superintendent Diaper was a man of unblemished character and was going to be sent out into the winter with his wife and family for no reason whatsoever. He was being tried behind his back. Councillor F G Smith said that Diaper was being well looked after by those upon his side. The charges against him had been narrowed down to one small point - whether the engine leaked. Diaper said that it was and the Chief Officer said it was not. He (Councillor Smith) believed the boiler inspector had found it was leaking and reported that it was leaking and ought to be repaired. Diaper was quite competent to repair it, but was not allowed to do it. Cr. Franklin (chairman of the Fire Brigade Committee) said Diaper came before the council and had had a fair hearing. No one charged him with being incompetent. The motion to rescind was lost.

In a meeting on the 28 Jan 1910, the deputy Mayor stated that in his opinion, Diaper lost his situation because certain members of this council had tried to run him against the Surveyor. There has been an endeavour to set our Superintendent above the Chief Officer and that he believed that those who do this are responsible for Diaper losing his job.

In January 1911, Mr James C Diaper, the late Superintendent of the Fire Brigade brought an action against Mr Cuthbert Brown, Borough Surveyor and Chief Officer of the Brigade, for damages for alleged slander and libel consisting of statements

- (1) made in a meeting of the Fire Brigade committee on the 11th July 1909 and
- (2) In a report subsequently presented to such committee by their definite request.

The action has been settled before it went to Court, upon the following terms  
"All imputations withdrawn on both sides. Record to be withdrawn and action to be discontinued and no costs to either side".

However the matter did not end there. It later emerged that the solicitors fee for the Borough Surveyor Cuthbert Brown came to £243 3s 7d and the Fire Brigade Committee recommended that the council pay this amount to Mr Brown, Solicitor. Again another fiery discussion took place in council during which it came to light that Diaper wanted and received £50 in order to drop the action against Brown. It transpired that an alderman and a councillor paid the money between them.

During the following year Diaper re-applied to the council for his job as Superintendent of the Fire Brigade, but his letter was not replied to.

It was difficult to keep Diaper away from being a fire fighter so he obtained a position as Fireman at the Strand Theatre in London from which he retired in January 1938 at the age of 76yrs. At this time he was living in Sidcup.

He died on 21st February 1942 in Sidcup, Kent

### References

British Newspaper Archive