

Ups & Downs at the Top of the Ladder Part Two

Part One of this series of articles concluded with a tragedy, Part Two will commence with a tragedy.

Chief Officer John Edward Windus – Epping Fire Brigade (in post from c. 1887 – 1909)

A predecessor of Chief Officer Harold Woore was Chief Officer John Edward Windus of the Epping Fire Brigade. He was born in Theydon Garnon, Epping in 1869 and like his father John William Windus was a local solicitor. John Edward had a number of interests. He was an officer in the Essex Regiment and by 1909 he was appointed lieutenant colonel and put in command of the 4th Battalion Essex Regiment (Territorial Force). He was appointed captain of the Epping Fire Brigade in 1897, a role he relinquished in 1909 to take command of the 4th Essex. He was unmarried and lived with his mother Emma and two younger siblings William and Emily in Theydon Garnon, Epping.

On his retirement John and his brother William went on holiday to Salcombe, South Devon in September 1913. After breakfast, on the morning of Wednesday 17th they left their lodgings and decided to go for a swim at Rickham Sands near Prawle Point.



Rickham
Sands

Prawle Point, Salcombe, June 2021 (*author's photograph*)

Not long after entering the water both brothers were carried out to sea by a strong swell. Both John and his brother William got into difficulties and John shouted to William to give him his hand and they swam hand in hand until they were separated by a wave. Despite the gallant efforts of a bather Mr E. G. Wragg, a Sheffield banker, who was close by at the time, he was unable to reach John but did manage to save his brother and returned with him to the beach exhausted. John's body was later found floating face down in the water and was recovered by a motor boat. Mr Wragg later stated that after saving William he was unable to assist further as there was no lifesaving equipment or boats available and distressingly was forced to watch John making a valiant attempt to save himself for around half an hour before he lost his fight. A large crowd looked on which begs the question – what did they do to help? John was only 46 years of age when he died. It is ironic that the element which John relied on in his role as a fireman ultimately became his nemesis.

By 1914 the brigade that John was so proud of had somewhat fallen into decline. A critical report from a chief officers' inspection stated that: the premises of the Epping Fire Brigade were not ideal, the men showed lack of confidence and hesitancy, the escape was not sufficiently used, the engine, when taken out to a "supposed" fire, had stopped functioning yards from it because an offside wheel had seized through lack of grease, and finally there were simply not enough practice drills. The Council subsequently resolved to hold a special meeting to consider the report. What the Brigade obviously lacked was a bit of the Lieutenant Colonel's military discipline.

Captain John Farmery MBE, KPM – Ilford Fire Brigade (in post from 1914 – 1932)

When appointed to command a fire brigade opportunity sometimes arose when chief officers could not only demonstrate their leadership qualities, at brigade level, but also further develop their organizational abilities at higher levels.

John Farmery was one of those few chief officers who started his career as a professional fireman with the Sheffield Police Fire Brigade. Police fire brigades were reasonably commonplace particularly in larger cities such as Liverpool and Hull. Therefore, technically John was a policeman. Born in Louth, Lincolnshire in 1873 he had a very humble start in life and spent his formative years in the local workhouse. Moving to Yorkshire in 1901 he joined the Sheffield Police Fire Brigade which had an enviable reputation of being a very high-tech brigade. Interestingly the men wore, for a short time, sailors' uniforms akin to those worn by ratings of the Royal Navy. It was there that he cemented a life-long interest in engineering when he was tasked to maintain the Brigade's steamer, a role he must have assumed when Engineer Abraham Brookes retired in that year. He also developed an interest in his widowed landlady whom he finally married. From Sheffield he progressed up the promotion ladder and was appointed, in 1904, chief officer of Barking Fire Brigade until 1906 when he gained a similar position with Port Sunlight Fire Brigade and from there he moved to Derby and was with them from 1911 to November 1914. A vacant position came up in that year with the Ilford Fire Brigade. He was the successful candidate having fought off 25 other possible contenders. With the job went a weekly salary of £3 rising to £3.10s after two years service, a house with heating and lighting thrown in plus a uniform. It was a precarious time to come into a new job as the Great War had just started. Little is known about the role he played during this conflict until 1917.

At that time a significant, but little known, German bombing offensive was in full swing and the capital was bearing the brunt of it. To the credit of the authorities a comprehensive countermeasures strategy was rapidly being developed and by July, 1917, it was time to invoke that strategy. One of its prongs was instigated by the Home Secretary who appointed Sir James Restler, Chairman of the Metropolitan Water Board, to chair the Greater London Fire Brigade Coordination Committee which 'advised him to coordinate all fire brigades in the Metropolitan Police Area for service in London during air raids.' On 25 September, 1917, the Secretary of State ordered (under regulation 55b of the Defence of the Realm Act) that a special fire brigade area, encompassing 750 square miles containing 90 local authority fire brigades, including the LFB, to be known as the Metropolitan Fire Brigade Area (MFBA), should be constituted. The MFBA included the City of London, the Metropolitan Police District and a number of urban districts. The committee comprised: Mr S. G. Gamble, divisional officer, London Fire Brigade; Mr F. B. Willis, senior superintendent, London Fire Brigade; Mr E. J. Bell, chief officer, Kingston Fire Brigade; Mr J. W. Dane, chief officer, Croydon Fire Brigade; Mr W. Danzey, superintendent, Hornsey Fire Brigade; Mr A. T. Overall, chief officer, Acton Fire Brigade; Mr A. Robinson, chief officer, West Ham Fire Brigade and Mr John Farmery of the Ilford Fire Brigade. (*The Scotsman*, 27.07.1917.) The committee was to report directly to the Home Office and had the responsibility for producing a system whereby fire brigades from outside London could be drafted in to assist the LFB in times of great need. It was a mutually supportive and a vital initiative which ultimately paved the way for the system of

reinforcement widely used during the Second World War, and beyond – remember Buncefield when the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service had a significant “out-of-area” role? There is no doubt that John Farmery had a very influential position on this committee. In 1920 he was awarded the M.B.E., presumably for work done during the Great War.

John Farmery’s ability to innovate was unquestionable he was a prime mover in the drive to mechanise fire brigades and it is no coincidence that the Ilford Fire Brigade started to mechanise on his arrival in 1914. It must be appreciated that without mechanisation of fire brigades the concept of “long range” reinforcement would not have occurred, horse drawn appliances simply would not have been capable. John was also dedicated to the concept that there should be a formalisation of qualifications for British firemen. Just before the Armistice in November, 1918, he attended the inaugural meeting of a group of chief officers at the headquarters of the Leicester Fire Brigade the purpose of which was to form an institution for fire engineers based on similar principles to those of the Institute of Civil Engineers. Chief Officer Neal of the Leicester Fire Brigade proposed that a committee should be formed consisting of six prominent chief officers. The motion was passed and the first committee of the Institution of Fire Engineers (IFE) was formed. The IFE has evolved into an international organisation with over 10,000 members all thanks to John Farmery and his five colleagues.



By 1925 John’s mechanical expertise was further recognised when the Ilford Urban Council placed him in charge of all their petrol driven vehicles and in 1927 he received the King’s Police Medal a fitting tribute for someone who had started their career in the police service. John retired in 1932 and died at Ilford in 1942. It is pleasing to note that this innovative Essex chief officer had such a marked influence, not only on British fire fighting but globally as well.



*Superintendent John Farmery exhibiting his interest for motor transport in a 1908 Singer light tender, possibly purchased second hand by Ilford
(EFM archive)*

T H Mather – East Ham Fire Brigade (in post from 1931 – 1941)

It is appropriate that that Chief Officer Mather follows John Farmery as they share a link with the Institution of Fire Engineers. In 1937 Thomas Harold Mather was made president of the IFE and was the second Essex chief officer to hold office of that prestigious organisation. Notwithstanding that his career in the fire brigade is worthy of closer scrutiny. As Thomas served in both World Wars he was naturally entitled to various war service medals to add to his fire service medals. On 21 September, 2007, Dix, Noonan Webb Auctioneers of Mayfair included his medal group in their auction, namely; “British War and Victory Medals (Boatswain, M.F.A.); Jubilee 1935; Coronation 1937; Defence Medal 1939-45: Association of Professional Fire Brigade Officers’ Long Service, (Chief Officer, 1929) medal, mounted as worn from two separate wearing bars (excepting the Defence Medal), generally good very fine (6) £400-450.” It is not known how much they made at the auction.

The associated information in the auction catalogue provides a valuable insight into Thomas’s extraordinary career. Born in Port Talbot, South Wales in 1890 to a Tyneside seaman also named Thomas. Around 1905 he was indentured as an apprentice to the newly formed shipping firm Haldinsein Co Ltd which ran a small fleet of tramp steamers under the Court Line flag out of Tyne and Wear. By 1912 he was a member of the Liverpool Salvage Corps and on 28 April, he married a Liverpool girl – Florence Langharne at Bootle. From Liverpool he joined the Birmingham Fire Brigade, but as war loomed and his maritime instinct got the better of him and he joined the merchant navy, his Great War Victory medal bears testimony to this as it is inscribed ‘Boatswain Merchant Fleet Auxiliary’. After the Great War he re-embarked on what turned out to be a long and distinguished career in the fire brigade which was unsurprisingly not without incident.

Having first joined an industrial fire brigade based in Birkenhead, Thomas left the Liverpool area and returned to Wales as the professional chief officer of the Gellygaer Fire Brigade, near Cardiff. Next it was a move to his family’s ancestral home – the North East becoming an officer with the Hartlepool Fire Brigade. At 1pm on 4 January, 1922, the timber yard, near the docks, containing huge stacks of pit props destined for the local mines took light. Fanned by a sea gale the fire rapidly spread inland and by the time it was under control one square mile of the town was laid to waste with 1500 people made homeless. Thomas was in charge of a section of firemen who fought, with little success, to subdue the conflagration. He recalled how "great piles and stacks of pit-props and dock goods were blazing, and the great poles carrying overhead tramlines had buckled over like hair-pins. The fire swept through the docks and into houses ... About one square mile of the city was ablaze at one time." *The News (Portsmouth) 14.08.1970*. He recalled later that it was one of the ‘big three’ fires of his career. Whilst in that area he held the position of chief officer of the Seaham Harbour Combined Fire & Ambulance Brigade, presumably after his stint with the Hartlepool Fire Brigade.

When the chief officer of the East Ham Fire Brigade position became vacant in 1931 Thomas applied for it and was successful. East Ham at the time was a county borough in Essex. Thomas remained there until 1941 when the National Fire Service (NFS) was formed and local brigades, throughout the realm, were disbanded. Another of his “big three” fires was at Beckton the largest gasworks in the country when it was struck by German bombs during the very heavy air raid on the night of 7 September, 1940. His experiences in the Blitz stood him good stead and he was transferred to Plymouth as Commandant of the NFS Regional Fire School, a post he held for nearly a year.

From Plymouth he went to Bristol when his maritime skills came to the fore yet again. He was given charge of a flotilla of thirteen fire boats protecting Avonmouth Docks. It was during this time that the third of his “big three” fires occurred and in an interview with the *News* he recalled:

“... it was the biggest petrol fire of my whole career. It happened at Avonmouth Docks when a ship carrying 15,000 tons of petrol exploded, causing the petrol to cascade into the engine room where three engineers were drowned in petrol. The fire spread and soon the whole ship was blazing from end to end. There were fire engines on the dockside, and I had my fleet of fire-boats on the seaward side ”.



One of Thomas' fire boats – Pyronaut - now in preservation. (National Historic Ships)

On 8 May, 1975 Thomas Harold Mather passed away at Portsmouth at the age of 85, his distinguished service to many fire brigades earned him the accolade of being one of only two fire officers to have been awarded the honorary life membership of Britain's senior fire organisation, the Institution of Fire Engineers – a mark of the respect and esteem his peers had for this intrepid and long-serving chief officer.

Part Three of this series will focus on three Essex chief officers who did not always see eye-to-eye with one prominent Essex fire brigade.

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