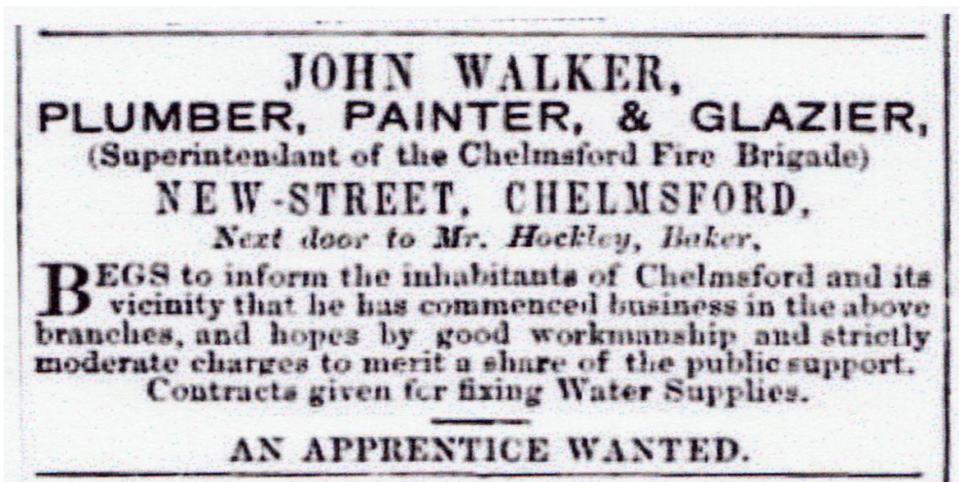


The Ups & Downs at the Top of the Ladder Part Three

The employers of senior officers in Essex fire brigades were for the most part supportive and greatly valued the work these dedicated officers, and men, did for their communities. There were exceptions to the rule as the next three subjects from the seemingly uncompromising Chelmsford Borough Fire Brigade (CBFB) show. They all, without doubt, had difficulties during their tenure at the heart of the Brigade. All three superintendents served under chief officers who held senior posts with the Chelmsford Borough Council – the Chairman of the Board of Health or the Borough Engineer.

John Walker – Chelmsford Borough Fire Brigade (in post from 1866 – 1872)

The CBFB was formed in 1866 and its first superintendent was John Walker, a Yorkshireman, who was born in Topcliffe in 1836. Superintendent Walker made a good deal of capital from the fact that he was superintendent of the Brigade, as was evident from the many advertisements he placed in the local press for his New Street plumbing business, an example of which can be seen below.



(Chelmsford Chronicle, Friday 8th February 1867)

As might be expected the fledgling brigade experienced teething troubles, nonetheless, the Borough went to some lengths to equip the Brigade and it paid its small band of firemen a fee for attending practices and fires. In early 1870 a catastrophic fire broke out at Messrs Beach and Sons' chamois leather mill. This was possibly the first major blaze the Brigade had to deal with. The mill was situated at Bridge View on the River Can in what is now Admiral's Park. There was much criticism of the late attendance of Walker's brigade and the manner by which the firemen tackled the blaze. A number of theories for these anomalies were cited at a meeting of the Chelmsford Board of Health at the Corn Exchange on 28th January, namely, that there were two sets of hose, one belonging to the Board's appliance, the other to the appliance donated to the Brigade by the Essex Economic Brigade (an insurance company) the previous year. The hose had been mixed up and the couplings were not compatible which took time to remedy. Steps were taken to rectify this anomaly but a long shadow had been cast on the efficiency of the Brigade as the mill burnt down. There was also a problem relating to the Brigade's attendance at fires outside Chelmsford's boundary and who should foot the bill for its attendance. It was common practice, at that time that Brigades refused to attend fires outside their boundary if a suitable financial arrangement was not in place and Chelmsford was no exception to this concept. Problems persisted and in September 1872 Superintendent Walker announced that he wished to resign. It was apparent that there had been disagreements with the turncock and it was reported, in the local press, that "there is hardly a single member of the brigade who likes to act under Walker". Following vitriolic condemnation he wrote a letter to the *Chronicle* in which he stated that his position had become untenable due to the fact that he had not got the support of his superiors and he felt that he had never had the willing cooperation of some of his men, thus making his position untenable.

This was to be the first example of a number of disputes between the Borough and the superintendents of the Chelmsford Borough Fire Brigade.

Superintendent Walter Farrow – Chelmsford Borough Fire Brigade (in post from 1892 – 1907)

Walter Farrow was born in Chelmsford in 1854 and like a number of Essex senior fire officers was a plumber and gas fitter. His wife Mary bore him three children – two girls and a boy. In 1889 he replaced Superintendent Johnson as second in command of the Chelmsford Borough Fire Brigade under Chief Officer George Henry Sasse. Farrow must have had a previous interest in the Brigade when in 1887 he wrote to the *Chelmsford Chronicle* suggesting a fitting tribute to celebrate Queen Victoria's Jubilee would be to "build a proper fire station ... and that a proper volunteer fire brigade be formed." He expanded this idea when he suggested, "Let the fire station be built on a piece of the new market ground ... It can be built so that the two engines (manuals) and hose can be kept on the ground floor, and with rooms above to be used by a man, say one fireman, to live there rent free, to take charge of things kept there, and also to be on the spot at night if required." (*Chelmsford Chronicle, Friday 4 March 1887*).

His ideas obviously bore fruit, as the single bay fire station was eventually constructed on corner of the Market Road and Threadneedle Street where a number of the council's cottages also stood; these were taken over to accommodate firemen and their families. The Market Road fire station was opened in February 1890. Farrow was also responsible for acquiring a new Rose Bray escape ladder for the Brigade, and by 1904 the brigade was the proud owner of two splendid Shand Mason steam fire engines. Bearing all this in mind it could be argued that Walter Farrow was the "father" of the Chelmsford Borough Fire Brigade. There is little doubt that he fashioned a very efficient and dedicated fire brigade, but all was not plain sailing. On 6 July 1906 a serious fire broke out at Godfrey's Rope Works, Moulsham Street and the Brigade was unable to obtain a reasonable water supply which created difficulties, and to make matters worse there was a councillor on the scene who was not impressed. It was a blaze that would be a catalyst for controversy as questions were asked about the Brigade's performance requiring Superintendent Farrow to write a report necessitating the formation of a subcommittee to scrutinise it. The outcome was far from complimentary and it was resolved that the Brigade, and its "arrangements", should be reorganised. Farrow and his lads were not going to take that lying down and he penned a letter, on 7 November 1906, to the Council saying that he had:

"decided in reference to certain statements given to them and the public referring to the fire at Messrs Godfrey's, Moulsham Street by Councillor Howell, that at any future fire, should he [Councillor Howell] interfere with any member of the Brigade, as he did on that occasion, no matter how serious the fire may be, they had one and all, decided to leave at once".

This in turn drew a good deal of indignation from the Mayor, his response being:

"that they [the Council] are of the opinion that the letter is of a most insubordinate character and that unless it is withdrawn by 12 o'clock at noon on Wednesday 12th December the Chief Officer [Cuthbert Brown] be, and is hereby authorised and directed, to dismiss such members of the Brigade who still adhere to it".

Perhaps not expecting such a vehement response Farrow partially backed down and offered to withdraw the sentiments contained in his letter on the proviso, "that the men would not be interfered with again". Due to the proviso the letter's contents were seen only as a partial retraction and were not accepted. To make matters worse Councillor Howell, at a dinner at the Hearts and Oak Hotel, later in November made it plain that he was of the opinion that: "at the last three fires that the Brigade attended they were not efficient". This very public condemnation of the Brigade prompted an extremely firm public reply from Superintendent Farrow, in the form of letters to the local press in which he gained a good deal of support including that from some of Howell's colleagues on the Council, but Howell stuck to his guns and before long an advertisement appeared in the *Chelmsford Chronicle*, in April 1907, asking young men to apply to become firemen in the new fire brigade.

This was too much to take and Farrow and his men resigned *en masse*. The resignation of the Brigade took effect from Sunday 28 April and the ‘old Brigade’ was unceremoniously replaced with the ‘new Brigade’.



Final moments of the “old” Brigade as Walter Farrow (second left) and his men prepare to hand their kit in. (Essex Fire Museum (EFM) archive)

Ironically Walter Farrow had the last laugh, a few months later he stood for the Chelmsford Borough Council - was duly elected and subsequently became chairman of the Fire Brigade Committee serving with distinction throughout the Great War in that and other capacities.

James Charles Diaper – Chelmsford Borough Fire Brigade (in post from 1907 – 1909)

Arguably another of Chelmsford’s superintendents who was shabbily treated by the Borough Council was James Diaper, a Londoner, who came to Chelmsford from Catford in 1907. In an autobiographical account of his life written in Jack Wild’s book *Fire! Fire!* Diaper recalled that having been made an orphan at the age of nine he embarked on a career at sea when he was made cabin boy on his uncle’s South Shields collier which was shipping coal to Germany, via the port of Hamburg during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). From colliers he progressed to ocean-going sailing ships plying the Peruvian guano route which invariably meant rounding the perilous Cape Horn. In 1877 he witnessed a sea battle between the Peruvian rebel warship *Hueska* and H.M.S. *Shah*, an encounter that was cut short by heavy mist. In the same year he and his crew survived the catastrophic Iquique earthquake and following tsunami which, according to Diaper, accounted for the lives of most of the sea captains of the 30 ships that were at anchor as they had been invited to a ball on a large American ship that sank, at anchor, with all hands. The few ships that survived put into Valparaiso for repairs; his ship eventually limped down the River Tyne fit only for the breaker’s yard. Further adventures were in store for the young Diaper including being “shanghaied” in New York and forced to serve on a German vessel. Eventually deserting the ship in Canada he tramped around, as a virtual hobo, for months before ending up in Montreal where he joined the steamship *Plain Miller* bound for Antwerp. In 1881 he found himself on the *Orient* – the ‘champion ship of the world’, as he described it. When in port this state-of-art vessel engendered a great deal of interest from the general public as they could tour the ship for a shilling, (5p). From its home port of Tilbury she would sail the Australian mail run and it was during this time that Diaper acquired an interest in firefighting when he was put in charge of the ship’s fire appliances. In Sydney the *S.S.Orient* was berthed close to H.M.S. *Bacchante* from which the two Royal Princes, the Dukes of Clarence and York, were engaged on a world tour. They visited the *Orient* and it was during their visit that Fate again showed its hand. The Duke of York knowing of his father’s enthusiasm for all things fire brigade, and having just watched Diaper putting on a firefighting display, said to him, “I would strongly advise you, if you are seeking a future career, to join the London [Metropolitan] Fire Brigade”. His Royal Highness was aware that the policy of that brigade was only to recruit sailors as firemen because many of the attributes gained from working on ships were required by

firemen. James took this advice to heart and once back in Blighty joined the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) on 14 February 1881.

He had forged a successful career with the MFB which was renamed the London Fire Brigade (LFB) in 1904. As a professional fireman he attended many large fires in the capital. He was acutely aware of the unforgiving conditions of service that London's firemen were expected to adhere to. They were required to live on site and be on duty twenty four hours a day with perhaps a day off a week, if they were lucky. The question of leave hardly ever arose. It was an exhausting regime and tested the stamina and fortitude of all. Diaper agitated for 'time on and off', effectively a two watch system, and became the leading light in a move to make life much more acceptable for his colleagues. Diaper's efforts fell on stony ground and the system whereby men effectively were on 24 hour call, day in day out, remained in place some fifteen years after his retirement. But, eventually, after much deliberation, it did change and the watch system, which still exists, evolved thanks to the efforts of men like Diaper and the eventual Fire Brigades Union. One can't help but wonder, with a degree of cynicism, whether or not his determination to improve colleagues' working conditions had a detrimental effect on his own career.

At a fire in Haydon's Square, when partially overcome by smoke, he was compelled to escape from the building by sliding down a hose as his colleagues had removed the ladder from the building. Unfortunately he fell from the hose and seriously injured his back. Following a lengthy spell in hospital he was deemed medically unfit for service. He retired from the LFB in April 1907 with a weekly pension of £1.7s.6d and the 25 years Long Service & Good Conduct Medal. Coincidentally Chelmsford was looking for a new professional superintendent in 1907 to replace Walter Farrow who with all of his men had resigned and obviously there were no internal candidates to assume the role. James, with a recommendation from his ex Chief Officer, applied for the post and as the first choice candidate declined the position because the salary offered was not acceptable, James in turn was offered the job and he too declined for the same reason, but after reconsidering he changed his mind. He was appointed on a weekly salary of £1.10s.0d, rent free accommodation for himself and his family, a uniform and ten days holiday *per annum*. His primary objective was to fashion the totally inexperienced fire brigade into an efficient and effective firefighting entity. This he did in conjunction with Chief Officer Cuthbert Brown, the Borough Surveyor, with whom he initially worked well.

In 1908 things started to go badly wrong; an accusation was made that the fire station was dirty and a number of his men had complained that "special duty" payments had not been paid. In late June 1909 Chief Officer Cuthbert Brown informed the Fire Brigade Committee (by letter) that in his opinion "... Mr Diaper is absolutely incompetent to discharge the duties of 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 should be called upon to resign his office of Superintendent of the Brigade", (*East Anglian Daily Times, Thursday 29 July 1909*). This was possibly fuelled by Diaper who had publically criticised the state of the horses that were supplied to the Brigade under the horsing contract to pull its steamers. He subsequently received a reprimand for his lack of diplomacy. Cuthbert Brown also complained that Diaper, would at times, leave the town without informing him. On one occasion he attended the Fire Brigade Congress in London on 20 June 1909, without leave to do so. Diaper argued that in his time with the LFB he had never been required to inform his Chief Officer when he went on excursions and that he had always informed his deputy on such occasions. Nevertheless, he was censured, by letter, from the Town Clerk. The knife was further twisted when certain councillors questioned his ability to maintain Steamer No 2 and as an experienced engineer he was expected to undertake these maintenance tasks.



Superintendent Diaper standing at the rear of Steamer No 1 with Steamer No 2, the appliance he was accused of neglecting, in the background c. 1908. (EFM archive)

On 7 October 1909 a motion was passed that unless Superintendent Diaper gave an undertaking to resign within three months, he would be given a month's notice. Unexpectedly, at the following council meeting on 29 December, Councillor Howell took a more conciliatory view and backed Diaper, stating that, "The Council had been told that Diaper was incapable but he was not incapable. He has been badgered from one thing to another maliciously". (*Essex Chronicle, Friday, 31 December 1909*). Subsequently, a motion was tabled to rescind the 7 October resolution to seek Diaper's resignation but it failed by seventeen votes to eight. Resignation therefore was inevitable and both Diaper and his family were literally thrown out into the cold! Diaper, much aggrieved threatened legal action against Cuthbert Brown. In April 1911 the matter was eventually settled, out of court, in his favour but by then he had been appointed chief officer of the Holloway Sanatorium Fire Brigade, Surrey.



Royal Holloway Sanatorium 1884 (Illustrated London News 5 January 1885)

Nevertheless, he asked for his old job back a request that fell on stony ground and it is unlikely that he ever received compensation from Chelmsford for the way he had been treated. He remained at the Holloway Sanatorium for some four years, residing at Heath Villas, St Ann's Heath, which is still adjacent to the sanatorium (now private accommodation) and by complete coincidence only half a mile from the author's grandson's primary school.



Heath Villas the home of James Diaper c.1912 (author's photograph July 2021)

In April 1915 his “King and Country” needed him and he dutifully volunteered for service in the Queen’s Royal West Surrey Regiment having been passed A1 fit. He was 54 years old and incredibly survived the gruelling basic training – one of only seventeen from his battalion that “stood the strain.” He was soon transferred to the 24th Battalion, the Rifle Brigade for Foreign Service and departed, on a trooper, from Devonport bound for the Middle East. He was to serve both in Mesopotamia (now Iraq) and India. He attained the rank of corporal when he transferred to the Mechanical Transport Section of the Royal Engineers operating in Persia (now Iran). The heat took its toll and he was repatriated on a hospital ship from India and conveyed to Wandsworth Military General Hospital, being certified later as unfit for service.



Superintendent James Diaper (post CFBF) c1912 (EFM archive)

After convalescence he was appointed by the Office of Works as a fireman at Whitehall and served in the Fire Protection Department until he reached the age-limit and was compelled to retire. Not to be outdone he was appointed chief officer of the Strand Theatre and finally retired in 1940 having been in uniform for over 70 years which was thought to be a record! James Diaper died in Sidcup, Kent in 1942 and was buried with his wife in Firemen’s Corner, Highgate Cemetery. It would seem that some in the hierarchy of Chelmsford Borough Council, for one reason or another, could well have had it in for him. Nevertheless, he was without doubt a very experienced fireman and a courageous and honourable man who, like many of us, could at times

be difficult, but this did not detract from the fact that he was one of the most interesting characters to ever to grace the Essex firefighting community.