

## **My First Shout**

By Murray Beale

Much against my father's wishes, as a teenager I had set my mind on joining the fire service as soon as I could, once I had left school. I went to a grammar school, not far from where we lived, in south east London. I didn't exactly shine, but managed to get 4 GCEs before we moved out to Chelmsford, Essex, in the summer of 1963. Dad was a commercial traveller for Imperial Tobacco Company, but had been promoted to become the Area Sales Manager for East Anglia. It was his intention that I would follow in both his and my grandfather's footsteps and become a commercial traveller. Unfortunately, I was going to disappoint him!

Chelmsford came as quite a shock to me, having come from the Elephant and Castle, in the heart of London. The town was so different to what I had been used to in so many ways. There was a cattle market every Friday and occasionally cows and bulls were to be seen being chased through the town having escaped from the cattle pens!

I was given the option to continue with my schooling, but I decided to get a job instead. No London wages in that part of Essex! I found a job in a motor works near to the railway station. Every now and again, a wartime siren would wail across Chelmsford, heralding the sound of two-tone hooters and bells as the Essex County Fire Brigade came roaring through the town! Not only that, the machines had silver sides! One day, whilst on my lunch-break, I ventured to Rainsford Lane where I found a modern fire station with five appliance bays, each with a gleaming fire engine in it. I rang the front door bell. A rather disinterested fireman leaned out of the watch room window and informed me that they were having lunch, so what did I want? Having told him that I wanted to join the brigade, he went back inside, soon to return with some leaflets, said goodbye and returned to his lunch.

I knew I couldn't join as a full-time fireman until I was 18, but, browsing through the leaflets, I was surprised to see that I could apply to join the Auxiliary Fire Service when I was 17. Not only that, I didn't need parental permission! I wasn't quite 17, but I thought the paper work would take a while to go through the necessary channels.

I completed the form and took it down to the fire station, where I was shown into an office to see the 'guvnor'. He obviously hadn't got much time, but told me to come back on Friday night, when the AFS contingent came in for their drill night.

I now had the problem of telling my father. As expected, he wasn't exactly pleased, but said I better get on with and get the fire service out of my system!

On the next Friday evening, I cycled into the yard of Chelmsford fire station. There was a Bedford 4x2 'Green Goddess' pump parked by the tower and a small group of men in fire tunics and caps, standing by it. I walked over and introduced myself. I was taken to meet a regular Leading Fireman (LFm)

instructor, who asked if I could pick up and carry a man in the traditional 'Fireman's Lift' for 25 yards. I was over 6ft tall and reasonably fit, but it was something I had never done before. Fortunately, and with wobbling knees, I managed to do it. The Leading Fireman then asked if I had any ailments, which I didn't and that was that.



**A very green Auxiliary Fireman Beale, aged 17.**

I explained that I still had another month until my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, but he just said that I needn't worry and that I could start that night! I was given a tour of the station with its 5 appliances, a Dennis F28 Pump Escape, a new Dennis F33 Pump Salvage Tender, an AEC/Merryweather Turntable Ladder, a Bedford RL Hose Laying Lorry and a Dodge Water Tender for the retained crew. In the AFS garage was another Green Goddess pump, a Commer 'Bikini' Unit, a Bedford Recovery Vehicle, two Matchless Motorbikes and a Wartime Austin K2 Canteen Van. All in shiny dark green. I was then told to come back on the next Friday night, by which time there would be some uniform for me.

Sure enough, on the following Friday evening I reported to the station and was given a large cardboard box, which contained a boiler suit, a pair of rubber boots, a pair of black leggings, a peaked cap and a

cherry red steel helmet! I also found out why I was so quickly enrolled. There was an AFS exercise coming up soon and Chelmsford's AFS were expected to provide two Green Goddess pumps, a Dispatch Rider and a Bikini Unit. They needed 11 riders and until I had turned up, they only had 10! The exercise was quite interesting, as there were AFS appliances from several fire brigades, with most of the crews wearing normal fire helmets with the letters AFS on them. I was somewhat embarrassed in my cherry red tin hat (I should have held on to that!) and there was a lot of hose to run out and make up. At least I was gaining some experience.

By the late spring of 1964 I had completed the requisite training and received yet another cardboard box containing a black cork helmet with AFS in red above the Essex County Fire Brigade badge, a fire tunic with AFS badges just below the shoulder on each arm, a pair of thick 'fire-trousers', a battle-dress jacket, light blue shirt, with separate collars, and black tie. I was also entitled to ride to fires! Bearing in mind that I was only 17, it became necessary to tell my father that, if there was a fire on drill night, I could be called out to ride to a shout. His view was that it was very unlikely I would be allowed to do so and if I did, I must still be home at a reasonable time!

Some months later, it happened! It was a Friday 'drill night' in September. At about 8.45 in the evening Chelmsford fire station's bells began ringing and their Dennis Pump Salvage Tender turned out.

Moments later the ADO and staff officer came running out into the yard and got into a staff car. The ADO called our Leading Fireman over and said something to him and then drove off in a hurry. The Lfm came back to us and called for us to get our fire gear on as we were going out on a shout!

We were going as a salvage crew to a thatched house fire at Southminster. I was one of the five AFS men chosen to ride the Green Goddess, with our LFmin charge. We set off, with our driver racing the Bedford pump as fast as it could go, out of Chelmsford. No blue lights on our machine and no two-tone hooters, just a pair of amber flashing lights above the windscreen and a bell on the roof, being rung by the Lfm.

Once we had left Chelmsford, the light began to fade as we travelled on and on. At one point we could see, far in the distance, a blue light flashing, which, we decided, was Chelmsford's Pump Salvage Tender, a couple of miles in front of us. So, we still had a long way to go. The amber flashing lights of our appliance were reflecting on the hedges and trees as we raced along the country lanes. After what was probably another 15 minutes we came to some houses and turning into a side street, we had arrived.

Blue lights of several fire appliances and search lights were illuminating the scene. The thatched roof of a large old house was alight and ladders were up. Firemen were on them, pulling large lumps of the thatch off and dropping it down to the ground. Hoses were running through the front door of the house and water was beginning to run down the stairs.

Our task was to help the Chelmsford crew to spread large salvage sheets over the furniture on the first floor and then the ground floor. There was plenty of smoke around, a lot of it from the thatch that had been thrown down to the ground.

We must have been working for a couple of hours at least. A welcome cup of tea was provided by a family further along the road and then we helped to set up a light portable pump to work from river some distance from the fire, as the local hydrant was not supplying sufficient water to the job. Although I hadn't realised it until then, it was getting close to one o'clock in the morning.

Eventually we were told that we could go back to our station. The journey back took about 40 minutes and then we had to clean the Bedford and refuel it before we were able to go home. Cycling back from the station to home took about 20 minutes, as there was no traffic at all on the roads. I even stopped at a set of traffic lights until it dawned on me that there was no point!

I got home at about 2.30am. Quietly, as I thought, I put my bike in the garage and went indoors. Although I crept up the stairs to my room, my father came out of my parent's bedroom and proceeded to give me a rocket for being home so late and by the way, what was that dreadful smell of smoke?

Needless to say, the next morning at breakfast, I came under heavy fire from my parents for coming home in the early hours and not letting them know what I had been up to! I told them that I was 'on duty' and had to go. Dad was not convinced and was mumbling about coming down to the station and talking to someone about it! But he need not have worried, as the next time I rode to a shout, about 10 months later, it was on a red machine and I was a wholetime fireman in the Essex County Fire Brigade.

M. Beale

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