

SERVICE AND EXPERTISE

19th March 1981
 A move into another "home" on Tuesday marked the end of an era for Sawbridgeworth's fire service which this year celebrates its 88th anniversary. Its purpose built fire station for the past 75 years at Church Street is now empty of fire fighting equipment for the first time.

In a planned operation, the changeover was completed by 9.30 pm and Herts County Council's former highways depot at Station Road, with its large yard, three-bay engine shed and adjoining offices became the town's new fire station.

Divisional Commander John Read who supervised the move, spoke of the long tradition of the town's part-time firemen. They were among the best for service and expertise in the county. He complimented them on their skill, spirit and loyalty. Their new station, he said, would give them more space and improvements could include a drill tower.

The old alarm bell, which was subscribed for by the town brigade many years ago and which

hung above the fire station in Church Street, will find a home at Station Road where its ringing days over, it will go on display.

Formed with 17 volunteers in September 1893, the town brigade moved its horse-drawn pump and equipment into its own specially-built fire station twelve years later — because of a fire!

From the Observer files it is possible to trace the story which began just before midnight on February 1, 1905. A fire broke out in London Road: seven houses and shops were burnt to the ground and 22 people were made homeless.

Wrote our reporter at the time: "It was the most destructive fire which can be remembered in the neighbourhood."

Although they reached the scene in record time the brigade of nine firemen, Lieutenant Lawrence and Captain Bryan Nockolds, the commander, had to stand by almost helpless for nearly an hour because "the hydrants had been turned off for the night."

The brigade was on duty in relays at that fire for more than three days, but the repercussions were to rumble on for months with Saw-

bridgeworth Urban Council in the thick of it.

A week after the fire the council received a report from Captain Nockolds saying, the Observer reported, "Once again I apply to the council for a proper arrangement with the waterworks."

In March, 1905, we reported a Local Government Board of Inquiry into the urban council's application to borrow £550 "... wherewith to build a new fire station." Not long after the council accorded the firemen — "a hearty vote of thanks

for their services at the fire."

Later the same year, the council took a number of measures to avoid water delays in future. Among them was the purchase of a bicycle (£7 1s) to be kept at the station house so a messenger could at any time be despatched on it to the waterworks.

By July 1905 a loan had been sanctioned and tenders invited for the new fire station. In September the site was purchased and the mortgage sealed. Seven tenders for the building were received and Burton and Son, of Sawbridgeworth, who had a high reputation locally, were chosen. Their tender, third from the lowest, was for £389.

By the following year the brigade was settled in. The great days of brigade rivalry followed with Sawbridgeworth gaining many awards. There were annual church parades, and civic and social occasions... and horses gave way to steam-powered fire engines.

In 1913 the brigade hit the national headlines with Billy Collins who, at the age of 10, claimed to be the youngest fireman in the country. World War I saw many leave for active service.

In 1927 there was another major fire, at the Maltings. The brigade was on duty 24 hours and then in relays for another two weeks. Newly-joined messenger boy at this his first fire, was Mr Jack Searle. He was to retire in 1960 as No. 1 driver after a record 43 years' service.

World War II saw the brigade enlarged, a second fire engine added and the station at Church Street was redesignated Station X. After the war the brigade became part-time. In 1960 a newcomer was Geoffrey Burrell who commands the brigade today as its sub-officer a post he has held for the past eight years. His sons, Paul and David, are also local firemen.

Sub-officer Burrell, who works as a maintenance engineer with Associated British Maltsters, has two long-serving deputies: Leading Firemen Peter Roberts, 25 years, and Brian Rochester, 20 years.



Sawbridgeworth Fire Brigade, vintage 1981. From left: Firemen Anthony Kitchener, Andrew Ballasat, Gordon Clarke, Paul Burrell, Phillip Maiden and David Dellow, Leading Fireman Brian Rochester, Sub-Officer Geoffrey Burrell, Firemen David Burrell and John Wilkins, Leading Fireman Peter Roberts. Right is Mr Harold Blake who used to open the former fire station's door.

New home for town fire brigade

Its previous one was built because of a fire!

Story: **FRANK WALSH**



RIGHT: Fireman Tony Kitchener, left, and Leading Fireman Brian Rochester with the old station alarm bell which will be kept as a memento at the new station.

BELOW: Planning the move by Sawbridgeworth firemen into their new station, the former county council highways depot in Station Road. Right is Divisional Officer John Read with acting Assistant Divisional Officer Don Randall.



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