

SUTTON PARK

The Land of Fire and Flood

Dramatic Events in the Early 1920s



Dennis and Merryweather Fire Tenders dating from the early 1920s – ex Bass Brewery, Burton-upon-Trent

A two-part account of fires and floods in Sutton Park

Roy Billingham

Part 1 - SUTTON PARK: The 1921 series of fires

The General Weather Picture for the U.K. in 1921

In 1921 the Country was gripped by a major drought the duration of which extended from the autumn of 1920 to early 1922¹. High pressure weather systems from the Azores remained stationary over England and Wales for almost the entire year, leading to clear skies and extreme shortages of rain. The second-lowest 6-month and third lowest 12-month rainfall totals were recorded in both England and Wales resulting in a very severe drought. At the time, it was the driest year ever recorded in the south of England since 1788. Rivers and tributary streams dried up because there was so little ground water percolating into the river systems. Examples were the River Emms in Sussex, the River Kennett in Wiltshire which was 16 miles shorter by December 1921, and the River Mole which was dry from Box Hill to Leatherhead.

The month of July 1921 was remarkable for the heat and drought which prevailed during the greater part of the month, except for the extreme north-west of the British Isles. In every district in England and Wales it was the seventh month in succession during which the temperature was above normal, and the fourth month during which precipitation was deficient. In the Midlands, Edgbaston weather station recorded the highest temperature for a July month. Tenbury in Worcestershire recorded the driest July since 1906. Notwithstanding the drought, the Worcestershire town reported that “the winter wheat is an excellent crop, but the summer wheat is very poor. Root crops are a complete failure”. At Hodsock Priory in Nottinghamshire it was reported that the mean temperature was higher than in any previous month in the last forty-two years, this excess being much the largest in the day readings.

There was a great deficiency of rainfall over England and Wales generally, and extensive areas in the Midlands and the southern counties received less than 20% of the average rainfall. The total amount was less than 25mm to the south-east of a line from Plymouth to Hull, and less than 6mm over a large area in the Thames Valley and Thames Estuary. At Timsbury in Sussex there was no ground water recharge from February 1921 and at other sites there was negligible percolation into ground water. Springs failed to provide adequate water supply for mid-Glamorgan. Stratford had to rely on one well for the town.

The heat and drought continued throughout September 1921 and October carried on as if summer had never ended thanks to persistent anti-cyclones. October was the sunniest on record and crowds flocked to the seaside in temperatures hitting the high 20°C's, peaking at an extraordinary 29°C in London on October 5 and 6. The highest known Christmas Day temperature in 1920 was recorded on the Killerton Estate, six miles north of Exeter in Devon, where the temperature was 60°F (15.6°C). 1920 is regarded as a ‘notably’ mild Christmas period in the U.K., and Kew Observatory, then in still fairly countrified environs to the south-west of London,

¹ Monthly Weather Report of the Meteorological Office-December 1920, Vol. XXXVII (New Series), No. XII
 Monthly Weather Report of the Meteorological Office-July 1921, Vol. 38, No. 7
 Monthly Weather Report of the Meteorological Office-December 1921, Vol.38, No. 12
 Royal Meteorological Society, Weather-April 2007, Vol. 62, No. 4, - *Major Droughts In England and Wales*.
Science Report: Major droughts in England and Wales from 1800 and evidence of impact.

recorded 53.8°F (12.1°C) on Christmas Eve and 53.6°F (12.0°C) on Christmas Day; on Boxing Day a temperature of 60°F (15.6°C) was recorded at Raunds in Northamptonshire and at Winstantow in Shropshire. This weather was thought to have originated near the Canary Islands and drifted northwards to arrive on Christmas Eve over southern counties and central areas of England on a strong, gusty but mostly cloudy wind moving northwards overnight to affect all areas on Christmas Day. This warmth lasted right through to January 1922.

Sutton Park in the Summer of 1921

During the early summer of 1921, Sutton Coldfield, like the rest of the British Isles, experienced very hot weather. There had been very little rainfall for some time resulting in the ground being extremely dry and the heathland of Sutton Park being susceptible to random outbreaks of fire. The Borough Council's Park and Estates Committee initially took the view that the fires were started deliberately but later their attitude changed when they realised that the extent and frequency of the fires was largely due to natural causes. Outbreaks of fires in Sutton Park were first reported as occurring on 17th and 25th June 1921.

Council Reports of the events

As prime sources the following Council Reports are reproduced in full because they illustrate most succinctly the pressures that were imposed on the local authority due to the persistence of the fires, mainly in Sutton Park, but also elsewhere within the Borough, and how they reacted to the problems which created this natural disaster. The Reports are presented as follows: -

Park and Estates Committee Report

One fire was started on Friday, July 17, about 1.00 pm, amongst the gorse and ling between the lower end of Gumslade and Pool Hollies Wood, near the road leading to Bracebridge Cottage² (Photo 1). The Fire Brigade was called out and with their assistance and that given by several gardeners, kindly sent by residents in the Hartopp Road, the fire was confined to an area of 3½ to 4 acres.

On the same date, and at about the same time, a fire was started amongst the rough grass near the track leading from Rowton Well to Banners Gate. It was beaten out, but owing to the hot, dry weather, it remained smouldering in the peat. On Saturday, July 25, it broke out afresh, and the Brigade was again called out, and before the fire could be finally extinguished it had swept over an area of between 30 to 40 acres of rough grass, short ling and a few clumps of gorse near the old race course, the Fire Brigade and Park Keepers being at work on it until midnight. The portions of the ground where it was not drenched with water from the fire hose were still smouldering.

Another small fire was started on the evening of Saturday, July 25, near Holly Knoll, where a large clump of old gorse, about ½ acre in extent, and a few clumps of large holly were destroyed. Your Committee are of the opinion that the cause of various

² Bracebridge Cottage is now better known as *The Boathouse Restaurant*.

fires happening was due to lighted matches or cigarette ends being carelessly thrown away while still alight and appealed to general public to take the utmost care, especially during the continuance of the draught.



Photo 1 – This magnificent coppiced beech tree stands on the corner of the Park boundary road and the road to Bracebridge Cottage and Pool. The Hartopp wall is on the far side of the road which, to the left, leads to the lower end of the Gum Slade. (Author's photograph: 22/04/2012).

July 6 – Further extension [of fire is spreading] to near Rowton Well and on ground near Rowton Cottage.

July 8 – Ditto.

July 9 – Longmoor [Valley] fires spreading to Westwood Coppice and Warden's Belt.

July 10 -

- Holly bushes and gorse, near Holly Knoll, extension of fire from near Rowton to Keepers Hill, to outside Hollyhurst touching Hill Hurst.
- New outbreak near tail-end of Bracebridge Pool.

A month later it was recorded in the official Borough Council Minutes that extensive fires in the Park, due to the drought, had assumed very alarming proportions.

The following is a diary of the principal outbreaks and extensions of the fires since those reported on 17th and 25th June.

June 28 - Clump of large hollies in Far Hollyhurst [is on fire].

June 29 – Extension of fire in Longmoor Valley touching Westwood Coppice without damage to trees but fencing burnt.

July 3 – Gorse bushes outside Hollyhurst and on the hill above Foxglove Valley.

July 5 – Fire outside Hollyhurst, extends to tail-end of Longmoor Pool.



Photo 2 – Rowton Well, Longmoor Valley looking westwards towards the old peat pits.

(Author's photograph, March, 2013)

- Patch of old gorse near Streetly Lodge and near Streetly Wood on Golf Course.

July 11 –

- Keepers Hill to Hill Hurst passing through the latter to the side of Far Hollyhurst.
- A large area of old gorse between the higher end of Gumslade and Streetly Lane, and several large clumps of holly in the Gumslade Valley.
- The fires on the hill above Longmoor extend to Foxglove Valley³, and the fire on the Golf Course (see Photo 3).
- Further spreads to the main track⁴, leading to Rowton Cottage.
- The fire from Bracebridge Pool tail extends to Pool Hollies woodside; it was prevented from entering the woodland, but the fencing was damaged.



Photo 3 – Was the area immediately in front of the camera called Foxglove Valley? The view is looking from the north side of Rowton Bank, overlooking the golf course at Streetly.

(Author's photograph: 08/01/2012)

July 12 –

- The fire on the Golf Course spreads to the sloping ground at the back of Rowton Cottage (see Photo 4).
- The fire near Westwood Coppice still spreading slowly towards the wood.

³ **Foxglove Valley:** This name was often quoted in the Park & Estates Committee Minutes in the early years of the 20th century but, to the author's knowledge, does not appear on any map. From the Reports, the author is inclined to think that it is most probably the valley that lies on the northern (Streetly) side of the old Rowton Cottage site overlooking the Sutton Coldfield Golf Course (see photo 2).

⁴ This must refer to Lord Donegal's Ride which extends from the Royal Oak Gate on Chester Road North to Blackroot Glade. In medieval times this track was probably a major east-west route connecting the Chester Road North with the town centre allowing ease of transit for livestock.

- A new outbreak between Midland Railway bridge and Holly Knoll is destroying all the gorse surrounding the circular spinney without damaging either the fence or the trees.



Photo 4 – Rowton Cottage, which stood at the top of Rowton Bank alongside Lord Donegal’s Ride, overlooked Longmoor Valley and Rowton Valley to the south (right of picture) and the Golf Course to the north. The Cottage was demolished in 1946.

(Photograph by courtesy of Sutton Coldfield Reference Library)

July 15 – A large clump of gorse near Holly Knoll shelter [is on fire].

July 17 –

- A fire in the cutting near Midland Spinney between the two railway bridges. It spread up the bank of the cutting but was not allowed to enter the young trees. (Caused by a spark from a passing train).
- At midnight of the same date a small clump of holly standing among the gorse near the shelter at Holly Knoll was severely burnt and the gorse destroyed.

(Page 5153 of the Council Minutes) – “Your Committee (Park, Estates & Buildings Committee) report with regret that their attention has been taken up with the extensive fires in the Park, caused by the drought. They visited the Park on several occasions with the view of ascertaining whether any further steps could be taken to prevent the spread of the fires. The Committee arranged with the Chairman of the Highways Committee for the help of men usually engaged on the roads, to assist the Fire Brigade and Park staff and to patrol the Park.

During the three weeks, apart from the attendants at the principal entrances and at the Baths (Keepers Pool), the whole of the remaining staff has been engaged in

the work of attending to, or preventing the spread of fires, which at times assumed very alarming proportions.”

It is apparent from the diary of events that the fires gradually spread in a north to north westerly direction suggesting that the prevailing hot, dry air was being drawn from southern Europe and the Mediterranean areas.

The Town Council never met during the month of August, the traditional West Midlands holiday period, and resumed their monthly meetings in September.

October 5, 1921

The Park fires, as reported up to July 19, continued smouldering and breaking out afresh almost continuously until July 30, after which date no further outbreaks took place. Rain fell on August 2 and 3 which helped considerably to put out the smouldering fires in the peaty ground, but at Longmoor and at the other end of Bracebridge Pool the peat was burning up until August 10. Over much of the areas burnt, the vegetation is making a rapid recovery, the grass is coming up strongly, the gorse and ling are again making new growth, and some of the large hollies, which were not severely charred, are showing signs of breaking out afresh. The damage done to the woods is in most cases inconsiderable, as very few large forest trees have been injured, the one exception being Hill Hurst, where some sixty young Scots Pine and Spruce trees of 30 years growth have been completely killed by the fire which swept through the wood on July 11. A large number of the Rhododendron shrubs in this wood will also spring again from the roots and will make useful plants in time.

Your Committee have decided to set aside £100 for remunerating the Firemen and others engaged in the Park fires, and the matter will be dealt with in conjunction with the Fire Brigade Committee.

Repairs are being done to the fencing and gates round the woods, but much requires still to be done as long stretches of fencing, both posts and rails, have been damaged by fires.

It is interesting to compare the foregoing report from the Park & Estates Committee with the Chief Fire Officer's report to the Fire Brigade & Hackney Carriage Committee below, which illustrates quite starkly the nature, frequency and persistent nature of the fire outbreaks, as well as the hard work and long hours employed by the Sutton Coldfield Fire Brigade. It is worth bearing in mind that the Chief Fire Officer's job during this crisis was by no means desk-bound and his Report to the Council would have been typed up from hand-written notes he would have compiled each day of the crisis during his rest periods.

Following the resignation of Charles Browning as Captain of the Sutton Coldfield Volunteer Fire Brigade the Borough Council decided to advertise for a full-time professional Chief Fire Officer. Mr. W.H. Dean was appointed on July 14, 1913. Previously, Mr. Dean had been Station Officer at Reigate Fire Brigade where he had been stationed since 1894.

Chief Fire Officer's Report

To the Members of Fire Brigade Committee

Central Fire Station,
Sutton Coldfield
July 15th, 1921.

Gentlemen,

I have to report to you that since the last Meeting of your Committee your Brigade has been fully occupied in dealing with fires in the Park and other small outbreaks.

Thursday, June 23rd – At 5.20pm a telephone message was received from New Oscott that a fire had broken out in hedge by roadside, but well in hand. From enquiries made it was outside the Borough area.

Friday, June 24th – Telephone message from Miss Dugard⁵, fire in Park. On arrival found the grass at Longmoor was again on fire. The same was beaten out. Time of call was 2.50pm, left Station at 2.53pm, returned to station 4.30pm.

Saturday, June 25th – At 9.05am a telephone message was received at Fire Station that a field and hedge was on fire at The Driffold. Brigade left Station at 9.08am, arrived at fire 9.11am. Upon arrival found a field and hedge close up to a rick of hay on fire. A line of hose was laid out and fire extinguished. 350ft hose used. Brigade returned to Station at 9.50am. On the same date at 2.50pm, a telephone message was received from Golf House that the fire between Longmoor and Royal Oak Gate had broken out again. Brigade left Station at 2.53pm. Upon arrival I decided to try and stop the fire with water. The brook near Rowton was dammed up and Turbine⁶ set to work. 3,500ft of hose was laid out in all, and water poured on to the fire for a period of 8½ hours. Brigade returned to Station at 12.10am.

Sunday, June 26th – The Brigade returned to Park to collect up the hose left over; found another small fire in the same locality.

While at the fire at Longmoor a message was received at the Fire Station that a field was on fire at the rear of Oakhurst in Anchorage Road, the property of G.E. Lowe Esq. This fire was dealt with by Fireman Gough.

⁵ **Miss Dugard:** Her name crops up frequently in the Chief Fire Officer's Report. It is almost certain that she was employed at the Sutton Coldfield Telephone Exchange and was responsible for relaying incoming telephone messages from the local emergency telephone boxes to the Sutton Coldfield Fire station. She probably also relayed messages to the Sutton Coldfield Police station in Station Street.

⁶ **Turbine:** It is clear from the Chief Fire Officer's Report that by 1920 the Brigade had got rid of the Merryweather horse-drawn steam fire engine and replaced it with a motorised Leyland fire engine which had a water storage tank but no integral high-pressure pump. Instead, the Brigade used a turbine fire pump which would have been trailer-mounted, capable of being towed. It would have relied on drawing water from either a hydrant or a fixed reservoir like a large tank or a large pool such as those in Sutton Park.

Tuesday, June 28th – At 3.39am a telephone message was received from Miss Dugard that another fire had broken out in the Park. Brigade left Station at 3.41am. This was a continuation of (the) fire at Longmoor which could not be reached with water. Returned to Station at 4.30am.

At 3.05pm a telephone message was received from Miss Dugard that a fire had broken out beyond Barr Beacon. Brigade did not turn out as fire was outside the Borough area. At 6.50pm a message was received from Councillor Showell that another fire had broken out in the Park. Brigade left at 6.53pm. Found fire in progress near Foxglove Valley. The same was extinguished by beating, and Brigade returned to Station.

Wednesday, June 29th – At 11.30am a message was received from Police that a motorist had reported to them that a number of barrels of tar were on fire at Shenstone. Brigade did not turn out, the fire being outside the Borough area.

Friday, July 1st – At 2.40pm a message was received from P.C. Castle, at Four Oaks Station Box, that a field at the rear of Mr. P. Trentham's and Mr. Watson's in Hartopp Road was on fire. Brigade turned out at 2.43pm, arrived at 2.47pm, and extinguished the same by water from main in Hartopp Road. 500 feet hose used. Brigade returned to Station at 3.30pm.

At 4.38pm the Brigade was again summoned by the Park Forester to a fire in the Park at Foxglove Valley. Brigade left Station at 4.50pm and extinguished the fire by beating. Returned to Station at 5.45pm.

Saturday, July 2nd – At 1.50pm a message was received from Miss Dugard that a fire had broken out in the Park. Brigade left Station at 1.52pm. Upon arrival found the fire had broken out again near road leading to Longmoor. The same was extinguished by beating. Brigade returned to Station at 4.30pm.

At 5.50pm the Brigade was again summoned to a fire in the Park in the same locality as the one earlier in the day. After much difficulty the fire was beaten out and Brigade returned to station at 8.56pm.

Sunday, July 3rd – At 12.08pm a message was given in at Station by Miss Felix Jones that the hedge was on fire in Little Sutton Lane near the Lodge of Moor Hall. Simultaneously, a telephone message was received for the same fire. Brigade turned out at 12.10pm and found the hedge on Coppice Farm, for a distance of about 20 yards, on fire. The same was extinguished with the first aid, and Brigade returned to Station at 12.40pm.

At 4.20pm on the same date the Brigade turned out on sight to a fire in the Park and found a small fire which had been almost extinguished on top of hill near the Glade. Returned to Station at 5.25pm.

Tuesday, July 5th – At 12.57pm a message was received from Miss Dugard that another fire had broken out in the Park. Brigade turned out at 1.00pm. Upon arrival

another small fire in same locality. Extinguished by beating and returned to Station at 2.10pm. Tender used⁷.

At 2.58pm turned out again on sighting a fire and found another had started in the same locality and, as the fire was gaining such a hold and travelling in the direction of Longmoor Farm, I decided to bring the Turbine into action and despatched Lieutenant Vallance and Motor Driver Higgs back to Station for the Turbine and all available hose, and on their return got to work from Longmoor Pool and arrested the fire. Pumps were in action from 5.15pm till 9.45pm. 3,700 feet of hose used. Returned to Station 10.30pm.

Wednesday, July 6th – At 12 noon the Brigade again turned out on sighting a fire in the Park. On arrival found a large fire in progress in the same locality. A small fire in Plantation was extinguished with the First-Aid Machine; the Machine was again charged up at Keepers Well and the ground fire cooled down. The fire that the Brigade turned out to was not stopped until 6.00pm. Brigade returned to Station at 6.10pm.

While the Brigade was dealing with these fires, a message was received at Fire Station to a field fire at Little Green Lanes, but was dealt with by others. A message was sent back that it had been extinguished.

Thursday, July 7th - At 6.00pm a message was received per Miss Dugard that another fire had broken out in the Park. Brigade left Station at 6.03pm. In the same locality the fire was beaten out and Brigade returned to Station at 7.20pm.

Saturday, July 9th – At 11.43am a telephone call was received from the “Parson and Clerk”, Chester Road North, that a fire had broken out afresh in the rough grass near Westwood Coppice and the Warden Belt. Decided to try and stop the fire with water from the Brook, which we dammed up and line of hose laid up the path leading to Royal Oak Gate. Telephoned back to the Station for the Tender and available hose, and sent on for hose at Chester Road Sub-Station. The fire travelled very rapidly and caught some of the hollies and other trees in Westwood Coppice, but was arrested before getting far away, about 30 feet front being burnt. The fire also travelled up to and into Warden Belt and burnt a few trees. The Turbine was in action for a period of 10½ hours.

While at this fire a message was received that a fire had broken out in in hedge and fields in Boldmere Road. I despatched Lieutenant Vallance and four men, with Tender and hose, to deal with same. Two Chemics were used in extinguishing the fire. Amount of hose used 4,500 feet. Brigade returned to Station at 1.15am.

Sunday, July 10th – At 10.30am called by Park Forester to a fire. Brigade left Station at 10.33am. Turbine worked from Keepers Pool to top of Plantation and

⁷ **Fire Tender:** The motor tender would have been an auxiliary vehicle with its own integral water tank with a finite capacity which would have been sufficient to enable small fires to be extinguished. Where bigger fires were involved the Brigade would have used the trailer-mounted turbine pump which would draw its water supply from an external reservoir, like a lake or canal, to provide a greater volume of water to the seat of any fire.

Hollyhurst and Keepers Hill. While at work, a message was received that the woods were on fire near the Golf House. The hose was made up as quickly as possible, and the Brigade proceeding at once, got to work from Hydrant near Golf House and damped down round fire near large trees and hollies. While still at work on this fire another large fire was seen between Streetly Lane and Bracebridge. The hose was again made up as quickly as possible and proceeded to Streetly Lane and got to work from Hydrant and long line of hose, and prevented the fire crossing the path. Brigade returned to Station at 1.15am.

Monday, July 11th – At 11.18am the Brigade was again summoned by the Park Forester to Keeper's Hill. Brigade left Station at 11.21am. Turbine put to Keeper's Pool and line of hose laid up to the left-hand side of Keeper's Hill, and a stream of water brought to bear on the fire nearest the Plantation to prevent fire getting into the woods. While at work an urgent message was received to go to a very serious fire at the top end of the Gumslade and very near to some houses. In company of Fireman J.H. Higgs and the Park Forester I took all the spare hose and standpipe in the Ambulance and proceeded there and got to work from Hydrant at the top of Streetly Lane. Held the fire in check until the arrival of more hose. While still at work a message from the Town Clerk was brought to me by Mr. Judge that some hose was required at the Streetly Gate. I took a few lengths of hose and Standpipe in the car, leaving Mr. Vallance in charge at the Gumslade, and got to work from Hydrant at the Gate Entrance. I was then called by Mr. Freeman to the Plantation and Hollyhurst and continued to pour water on same until 12.15pm.

Tuesday, July 12th – At 9.30am the Brigade left Station and proceeded to Keeper's Pool and continued with the work of flooding the Plantation. While at work a message was sent over from Rowton that the fire was coming rapidly towards the Cottage. The hose was made up as quickly as possible and the Turbine taken to the Brook and got to work and stopped the fire.

It was reported to me by the Chairman, Mr. Councillor Beach, that the hose, which had been left at Streetly Gate, had been taken to Little Aston. After making up at Rowton I made enquiries at Streetly Gate and found that the Town Clerk, Mr. Reay Nadin, had sent the hose to Little Aston Wood. I proceeded there and found the hose and standpipe, but they could not use it as there was not a standard hydrant but, fortunately, I had one on the Tender to fit the hydrant. As the situation was serious I got to work with the assistance of Mr. Franks and Fireman Ham and stopped the fire on the Railway side of the residence of Mr. Hill and removed the hose on the other side of house, and leaving Mr. Franks in charge, returned to Park where I had left the Brigade making up hose from Plantation. I decided to return to Little Aston with a few more men and finish the job as far as possible. The Brigade prevented the fire getting nearer to the residence of Mr. Hill, also prevented it travelling in the other direction to the Woods adjoining the residence of Dr. Phillips and others. Brigade returned to Station at 3.15am.

Wednesday, July 13th

The Brigade left Station at 10.30am and proceeded to Little Aston to collect hose left there and found a small patch (of burning undergrowth) still creeping up towards Mr. Hill's, and extinguished same, flooding it with open end hose, and returned to Station via the Park, putting out small fires on the way. Returned to Rowton Cottage at 3.00pm and got to work from Brook. While there, Mr. Franks sent for more hose at Streetly Gate. I despatched Firemen Ham and Chapman with same and line was laid to Railway embankment where a fire had started, and extinguished same. After stopping operation at Rowton, I went to Streetly Gate where I found it was fairly quiet. Brigade returned to Station at 10.30pm. At 7.20am a call was received from Boldmere Road Fire Alarm Box to a fire in field and hedge in Boldmere Road in the occupation of Mr. Cadwallader, Grosvenor House. Mr. Vallance attended this fire with four men.

Thursday, July 14th – The Brigade left Station at 9.30am and got to work at the Brook at Rowton (Sutton Park) and worked on same until 3.00pm After making up, proceeded to Keeper's Pool and got to work with a line of hose on to Keeper's Hill where a fire was creeping towards the Woods. Brigade returned to Station 9.30pm. A small fire was also extinguished with First-Aid Pump on the road to Streetly.

Friday, July 15th – At 4.10pm the Brigade turned out on sighting a fire in the Park. On arrival found a patch of gorse near Blackroot Shelter on fire. The same was beaten out and Brigade returned to Station at 4.50pm.

- The Turbine has travelled some 125 miles during these series of fires.
- The Turbine was in action for approximately 50 hours.
- The Tender and Ambulance has also been in use.
- Hydrants were brought into action on four occasions.
- The damage to hose is considerable but will report on this at your next Meeting. 1,000feet of new hose has been ordered.
- On the occasion of fire in Park on July 5th, the hind tyre of Tender burst. The same has been replaced, and while at fire at Park two other calls were received from Walmley and Coles Lane; hedge on fire. On the return from the Park Mr. Vallance and I drove down to Coles Lane to see all was right.
- The Brigade has worked splendidly through the times we have passed through.
- Mr. Franks of Streetly has rendered great assistance in taking charge of the Streetly Gate end of the Park.
- The Ambulance has been used on two occasions only, for the conveyance of a patient, on both occasions for Education Committee.
- On Thursday, July 14th, a message was brought from Chester Road that there was a ground fire at Oscott College.

- The Birmingham Brigade attended but left same. New Oscott firemen in attendance. Fire was caused through burning rubbish, and fire travelled towards the Woods.
- I estimate the amount of water poured on to the Park to have been 894,540 gallons, a weight of 3,904 tons.

Yours obediently,
W.H. Dean
Chief Officer

This Report was followed the following month by a further Report from the Chief Fire Officer to the Park and Estates Committee, whose Chairman, Councillor Beach, submitted it to the Borough Council to illustrate the work done by the Brigade since the last meeting. as follows:

To the Chairman and Members of Fire Brigade Committee

Central Fire Station,
Sutton Coldfield,
September, 1921.

Gentlemen,

I have to report to you that since the last Meeting of your Committee your Brigade has been fully occupied in dealing with fires in Sutton Park and other small outbreaks.

Sunday, July 17th

4.00pm - Called by messenger to a fire in Midland Belt, presumably caused by sparks from a railway locomotive. The fire was extinguished by water from hydrant in Hartopp Road Corner. 750 feet of hose used. Brigade returned to Station 6.00pm.

11.30pm – Called by telephone to a fire near Blackroot Shelter. On arrival found a small patch of gorse on fire. The same was extinguished by beating. Brigade returned to Station at 12.50am.

Monday, July 18th

4.00pm – Called by messenger to a fire near Keeper's Hill. The Brigade proceeded with Motor tender to spot indicated but found no fire; observed a fire on top of Sandpit on road to Blackroot and proceeded there. On arrival found the fire had been got under (sic) by Park Keepers. Whilst there, smoke was seen rising from Hollyhurst Wood. We made our way there and found a fire had broken out at top of Wood just off the path leading from Keeper's Pool. I despatched Fireman G. Higgs back to Station for the Turbine and a line of hose was laid out from Keeper's Pool. The machine got to work and the fire was extinguished. 750 feet of hose was used. Brigade returned to Station at 6.00pm.

8.10pm - Called by telephone per Princess Alice Orphanage to a fire in hedgerow and field near Banners Gate in occupation of Mr. O. Wells. The fire had been held in check by Mr. Wells and others. A line of hose was laid out from hydrant near Banners Gate and fire finally extinguished. 800 feet of hose was used. Brigade returned to Station at 9.55pm.

Tuesday, July 19th

1.30pm – Called to fire in Lower Nuthurst per Park Forester. On arrival found fire in progress in Nuthurst Wood. Turbine worked from far end of Blackroot Pool through 1200 feet of hose.

Whilst at work, a message was received from Council House that a call had been received from Little Aston Hall to a fire in fields surrounding the Hall. I proceeded with some hose and standpipe etc. in the Ambulance to the spot and found that fire had been got under control and services of Brigade not necessary. Lieutenant Vallance was left in charge of operations in Park.

On my return to Park another message was received that another fire had broken out in the Gumslade. The fire at Nuthurst having been extinguished, I left Lieutenant Vallance and men to make up hose and get to Gumslade. In company with Fireman H. Higgs I went with Ambulance and hose etc. to Hartopp Road and connected up to hydrant in front of Major Turner's house and laid a line of hose through his grounds and extinguished fire. 2,000 feet of hose used.

After making up and ready for home a pin in the road driving wheel of tender broke, which necessitated towing the Machine home. The same was put in order. Brigade returned to Station at 11.00pm.

Wednesday, July 20th

11.00am – Called by messenger per Park Forester to a fire in Gumslade. Line of hose laid from hydrant in Hartopp Road through the grounds of Mr. W. Heaton and fire extinguished. 1,900 feet of hose used. Brigade returned to Station at 2.00pm.

3.50pm – Called by telephone to a fire in the Park (Streetly Lane). On arrival found a large area well alight and a strong wind blowing. A line of hose was laid from hydrant in Streetly Lane and brought to bear on fire, but it travelled so rapidly that we could not keep up with it. The fire doubled back on the Brigade and before the hose could be removed three lengths of hose were burnt through. With some difficulty some seven or eight lengths were got out, the Brigade having to go right into the fire to disconnect and pull out hose. This was the largest fire the Brigade had to contend with in the Park. The fire extended from the top of Gumslade to the Milking Gate in Streetly Lane. Mr. Clary sent out more men to assist the Brigade. 3,000 feet of hose was used. Brigade returned to Station at 11.45pm.

There was also a small fire in a field in Jockey Road in the occupation of Mr. A. Crees which was attended by Fireman H. Higgs.

Thursday, July 21st

10.45am – Called to a fire by Park Forester at Gumslade. A line of hose was laid out from hydrant in Streetly Lane and brought to bear on fire.

Whilst at work, a message was brought out by Mr. Grainger that a fire had broken out in Foley Road and houses were in danger. I left a few men in the charge of Fireman E. Higgs in the Park and proceeded with the remainder of Brigade, taking the Turbine and all the available hose to Foley Road. On arrival found a field on fire running to a copse. I found that I could not be of use with the quantity of hose we had with us, the hydrant nearest the fire being of a different pattern (meant) we could not get to work.

The Perry Barr Brigade having been sent for, I returned to the Park, and the Brigade finally extinguished the fire.

The Chief Officer of Perry Barr Brigade sent a messenger for the loan of 500yards of hose as he could not reach the fire. I did not think it advisable to loan any hose as we possibly might have occasion to want all hose out. Brigade returned to Station at 8.45pm.

Friday, July 22nd

9.15am – Called by telephone per Mr. Lister to fire in Park, Streetly Lane. On arrival found a large area of grass and ling on fire. Water was obtained from hydrant in Streetly Lane and fire apparently extinguished.

The Brigade had made up hose and ready to return to Station when a message was brought that some ricks were on fire at Lichfield Road, the property of Mr. A. Hancox. On arrival found three fields with surrounding hedges in close proximity to two hay ricks on fire. Water was obtained from hydrant in Lichfield Road and field extinguished. 900 feet of hose was used. The property belongs to the Exors. of J. Fawdry and Mr. Rogers, of Lichfield Road. Brigade returned to Station at 1.35pm.

The Brigade left the Station again at 3.00pm to visit the Park and found another fire had broken out in the Gumslade. A line of hose was laid out through the grounds of Major Turner from hydrant in Hartopp Road. 1,500 feet of hose was used.

Whilst at work, a message was brought by Lieutenant Vallance that the services of the Brigade were required in Lower Nuthurst Wood. We quickly made up and proceeding to Blackroot Pool Dam got to work through 2,000 feet of hose and extinguished the fire. The line of hose from far end of Blackroot through the wood was left until morning in case it was wanted again. Brigade returned to Station at 11.45pm.

Saturday, July 23rd

The Brigade left the Station at 10.30am to pick up hose in Park and returned to Station at 11.45am.

At 6.20pm a call was received from the Park Forester to a fire near Gumslade. A line of hose was laid from hydrant in Streetly Lane. 1,600 feet of hose was used and fire extinguished. The hose was left laid out for the use of men on night duty in the event of a further outbreak. Brigade returned to Station 1.30pm.

Sunday, July 24th

The Brigade left the station at 10.30am to pick up hose in Park and found that the fire near Gumslade was creeping towards a large area of gorse, otherwise untouched. I decided to make up and get to work from hydrant in Hartopp Road and give the fire a good soaking. Brigade returned to Station 1.30pm.

At 2.20pm a call was received by messenger that a fire had broken out on roadside and field, the property of Mrs. H. Ansell, Hollyfield Road. The Brigade left Station at 2.23pm and on arrival found hedges on both sides of road and Mrs. Ansell's field on fire. Water obtained from hydrant and fire extinguished. 100 feet of hose used. Brigade returned to Station at 3.15pm.

At 3.30pm same day, was called by telephone to another Park fire in Streetly Lane. Water procured from hydrant in Streetly Lane. 2,100 feet of hose used. Brigade returned to Station 9.45pm.

Monday, July 25th

11.55am – Called by telephone per Mrs. Lester and others to fire in Streetly Lane, and on arrival found a fire in a clump of gorse and hollies up to roadside in Streetly Lane. The boundary fence was also on fire, some twelve lengths of rails being burnt, and trees and shrubs on the opposite side of road – the property of Mr. Ridsdale – were very much scorched.

Whilst at work on this job, a message was received from the Park Forester that the services of the Brigade were required near the Gumslade. The hose was made up as quickly as possible and re-laid again from the hydrant at the top end of Streetly Lane and fire extinguished. Brigade returned to Station 8.20pm.

At 8.23pm the Brigade was again called by Mr. Franks to Streetly Lane. A line of hose was laid out from hydrant and fire damped down. Owing to the fact that the fire crept so close to hollies and other trees near roadway I decided to leave two men on duty, the line of hose being left down. The Brigade returned to Station at 12.00pm midnight.

Tuesday, July 26th

10.00am – The Brigade left the Station to pick up hose in Park and returned at 11.30am.

Thursday, July 28th

At 9.40pm a telephone message was received from Mr. Palethorpe that the fire had broken out again in Park near Streetly Lane. Brigade left Station at 9.45pm and on arrival found the grass and ling between Streetly and Little Bracebridge had broken out again. A line of hose was laid out and we damped down the fire. Returned to Station 2.00am.

This brought to a close the series of fires attended by the Brigade in the Park, and which commenced on Friday, June 17th, 1921.

The damage to hose has been considerable, some 500 feet being damaged beyond repair. Several lengths have been cut into small lengths and repaired.

MILEAGE OF MACHINES:

Turbine: 95 miles in addition to the 125 miles as per my last report, making a total of 220 miles.

Tender: 125 miles. [This was the motor vehicle purchased in April 1918].

Ambulance: The distance the ambulance travelled I am not in a position to say as there is no speedometer attached to same, but it must be considerable as the machine was in use during the whole time.

The petrol consumption for the whole period is approximately 288 gallons.

The turbine was in action for a period of 62 hours. The Brigade was at work for 209¼ hours in fighting fires in the Park. I estimate the amount of water poured on the Park, including that reported in my last report, was 1,812, 540 gallons, a weight of 8,359½ tons.

The members of the Brigade have worked splendidly throughout the whole time we were engaged in dealing with the outbreaks. The turbine worked splendidly and did all that was asked for, oft-times pumping water through long lines of hose.

Great assistance as rendered by the residents of Streetly Lane. To mention only a few of those, I would mention Messrs. Franks, M. Pellow, Palethorpe, and Allday.

Assistance was also rendered to the Brigade by R. Corbett of 3 Church Hill, C. Goodwin of Holland Street, and C. Moore of Riland Road.

At 1.25am on **Sunday, August 7th**, a call to fire was received to Lea Farm, Moxhull, in the occupation of Messrs. Spiers and Neild. The Brigade left station with turbine at 1.30am and on arrival found one wheat and two hay ricks in a Dutch barn on fire. The turbine was put to the lake in Old Moxhull Park and 1,500 feet of hose laid out to fire, and with a breeching two jets of water were brought to bear on same, and after some hours of hard work the fire was extinguished. Considerably more than half was saved. The property was insured in the Legal. The turbine was at work for eight hours, and the petrol consumed, including travelling and pumping, was 35 Gallons. The Brigade returned to station at 12.30pm.

On **Sunday, August 21st**, at 12.30pm, a call to fire at Drayton Bassett, on farm in the occupation of Mr. Foden.

On **Sunday, September 4th**, at 10.35pm, a call was received through New Oscott fire alarm to a fire at College Farm, New Oscott, in the occupation of Mr. Wells. The new Oscott section of Brigade got a line of hose laid out from hydrant in Chester Road. On arrival of Brigade from central station found that fire was outside Borough area and the Erdington Section of the City Brigade were on the spot but had connected up to Sutton hose. I requested the officer in charge to get his line laid out and disconnect our line; made same up and, after replacing the hose in hose cart, returned to station at 12.30am.

Sunday, September 18th, at 5.10pm called by messenger to a fire in the Park. Turbine left station at 5.13pm, and on arrival after a long search, found that there had been a small fire in Gumslade, near the old gravel pit, but same had been extinguished. The fire had presumably been caused by some person or persons making tea, as there was evidence in the form of fresh tea leaves lying nearby. Brigade returned to station at 6.20pm.

The ambulance had been used for the conveyance of patients on 11 occasions as per the ambulance book.

The fire alarms have been tested and visited by Police, Borough Surveyor's Staff and Brigade on 833 occasions. Faults have been reported on 10 occasions. No replies were recorded on 13 occasions. Lines have been in contact with other lines on 5 occasions.

The pressure of water as registered on gauge in fire station has been well maintained.

On Wednesday, August 17th, in company with the members of the Chester Road sub-station and a squad from the central fire station, I visited the Princess Alice Orphanage to test the appliances there and found the hose not sufficient in quantity to be able to reach all parts of the buildings on the Orphanage grounds.

On Wednesday, September 14th, I visited the New Picture House, Parade, and found everything satisfactory.

Your obedient servant,
W.H. DEAN,
Chief Officer.

Local press description of the Great Fire

The preceding official Council Reports are very matter-of-fact, largely being diaries of daily events, presented in a logbook format and therefore somewhat impersonal although very illustrative of the extent and persistence of the fires, as well as giving some indication of the equipment used by the Fire Brigade.

However, after the fires had been raging for about a month, an article appeared in the Saturday, July 23, 1921, edition of *The Birmingham Weekly Post* which had the headlines "FIRE HAVOC IN SUTTON COLDFIELD PARK – AN UNPRECEDENTED SPECTACLE OF RUIN". This article, although somewhat florid in its journalistic presentation, does give a much more personal outlook on the effects of the fires and included features that somehow failed to appear in official information, particularly that concerning the Sutton Coldfield Golf Club course. This is what the article had to say:

"Probably never within living memory has Sutton Park – the largest public open space in the Midlands – suffered so severely from fire as now. Hundreds of acres of long grass, ling and gorse have been destroyed. During the present week the flames have caused sad havoc among the beautiful firs and hollies, and in one instance, at least, they have reduced to ashes 500 or 600 young trees in the plantation adjacent to Keepers Pool. Every day during the past five weeks the fire brigade has been occupied for hours in putting out fires, and yesterday the park presented an unprecedented spectacle of ruin.

On Thursday night the brigade was engaged continuously on the Streetly side of the park, which on Wednesday was the scene of a remarkable blaze stretching for half a mile from Streetly Lane to the woods which skirt Bracebridge Pool. The whole countryside thereabouts was one mass of red flame, and here and there were enveloped tall trees which caused tongues of flame to shoot a hundred feet upwards. For many hours the brigade and hundreds of residents were engaged in an effort to prevent the spread off the fire – a hopeless task owing to the density of the undergrowth – and as evening wore on the fire practically burnt itself out, though small outbreaks were constantly recurring.

In this part of the park, as indeed, on the huge belt of common land stretching from Powells Pool to Rowton Cottage, smoke is issuing from the ground in numerous places. The fire is smouldering in the peaty soil. Exactly the same conditions obtain among the long grass close to Longmoor Pool. From this spot the smoke is rising in a continuous white cloud, but in the other areas mentioned the smoke spurts from the ground as from myriads of miniature fountains. For over an area (sic) of two miles at least the park looks like one black, charred mass, whereas usually at this time of the year the vegetation presents a beautiful combination of colours, yellow and bright green, interspersed with patches of the purple and gold of heather and gorse.

SOME AREAS CONSIDERED DANGEROUS

Hundreds of thousands of gallons of water are poured daily on the worst places, and long trenches have been dug in many areas to prevent the fire spreading. It is clear that if the park had been intersected with more roads the devastation would have been less severe, for generally the extent of the fire is limited by pathways or roads. Streetly residents have worked like Trojans, and so too have many members of the Golf Club. The links have suffered acutely, and at the moment six holes are out of commission. Several of the Fairways are still on fire and the herbage which surrounded several of the greens has disappeared⁸. Cases can be quoted in which golf balls driven from the tee have been almost roasted when found.

The view is taken by many persons that it is unsafe for young children to visit the park and other areas, as a fire may break out at any moment. Residents have forbidden their families to cross the moorland areas.

The fires are attributed in the main to the concentration of the sun's rays on pieces of broken glass. It is feared, too, that mischief has been caused through smokers throwing lighted cigarette ends into the bracken.

During the last few days many "live" fires have been caused by the fanning of the peaty soil by the wind, and several miniature whirlwinds have scattered burning branches of gorse over wide areas, thus causing great havoc.

Sutton Parks Committee are doing all they can to prevent the spread of the fires to the woods. It is clear that nothing but a heavy downpour can deal effectively with the smouldering land fires. The Committee have pooled the whole of their man power, and these employees, 50 in number, are co-operating splendidly with the fire brigade. Every night men are posted at different spots to deal with minor outbreaks, and promptly to alarm the brigade in the event of a conflagration which threatens serious mischief."

It is quite clear from the preceding article that the problem faced by the Sutton Coldfield Fire Brigade over the period of these fires was that the ground in the Park was severely parched and needed to be extensively soaked with water, which they appear to have done. However, an inherent problem with heathland and moorland in severe drought conditions is that the soaking from the water had not penetrated the ground sufficiently to quench those areas of underlying peat and this material, very much like a lighted cigar which continues to smoulder, smouldered underground and when sufficiently hot combusted into flames. Consequently, the Brigade were constantly being called out to the same areas of fire that they had previously been extinguished.

⁸ **Sutton Coldfield Golf Club:** After the First World War, the Club approached the internationally renowned golf course architect, Dr. MacKenzie of Leeds, to revise the course to enhance its popularity. After several modifications to his original design, his final plans were adopted but the project did not proceed quickly due largely to a serious grass fire in 1921. This fire burnt deeply into the peat in places and contributed to a crippling financial debt only being avoided through the generous efforts of its members. In 2015, the refurbishment of a bunker uncovered a layer of ash dust that had lain undisturbed since that fire 94 years before. [www.suttoncoldfieldgc.com/history, accessed 08.08.2018].

By mid-September the fires appear to have abated, having raged since mid-June, a period of around thirteen weeks. Compared with the fires in the Park during the very hot summer of 1976, these began on August 15, and continued until September 17, a period of nearly five weeks, a considerably shorter time than in 1921. However, the intensity of the 1976 fires was possibly greater than those in 1921 and were fought by the combined West Midlands Fire Service which was able to mobilise equipment from around the region⁹, unlike the inadequate resources available in 1921.

Although the fires caused immense damage in Sutton Park, it is a fortunate fact of life that both heather and gorse show remarkable powers of recovery after fire and can regenerate successfully from charred stumps. The heat helps to stimulate the germination of the dormant seed-bank. Also, the bare areas of soil exposed by fires are attractive to ground-nesting birds which will often move onto a heath shortly after it has been burned.¹⁰ Trees can be and were replaced where necessary so with the help of careful management the heathland repairs itself in time.

The Aftermath of the Fires

The fires in the Park which occurred during the summer of 1921 had been devastating and much damage had occurred. Repair was an arduous and prolonged procedure, as well as expensive. It took time to repair the damage and was dependent on financial and manpower resources. There is evidence of this from the Council Minutes recorded twelve months after the event.

November 9, 1922 – The ground between Pool Holies Wood and Streetly Lane, which was burnt over in 1921, is now being cleared of the large quantity of pebbles which were exposed, those latter are being carted to Blackroot ready for breaking¹¹.

At the same time that clearance from the fires was taking place, there was a large quantity of pebble stones, cinders, broken bricks and concrete that had been collected from the sites of the First World War military camps at Wyndley and Boldmere which was carted off the ground to a site near Hollyhurst Cottage (see Map 1).

December 6, 1922 –

8. The repairs to the old racecourse near Westwood Coppice are being continued, about ½ mile has now been made good.

⁹ Details contained in commemorative booklet - “Sutton Coldfield Fire Station – 30th Anniversary 1963-93”, Chapter 7, “Fires in Sutton Park – 15th August to 1st September, 1976”.

¹⁰ Parry, J., “Heathland” – *Living Landscapes Series*, (2003), National Trust Enterprises Ltd., London, pp.22 & 123.

¹¹ There was for many years a stone-breaking mill in the quarry at Blackroot Pool for processing stone and gravel which was a steady source of income for the Council’s Park Committee.



Map 1 – Holly Hurst Woodland. In the south-east corner can be seen an area of waste disposal which was made in late 1922 to accommodate the waste material from the demolition of War office property in the Park. Hollyhurst Cottage occupied part of this space from 1825 – 1953.

9. The pebble stones exposed by the fires in the Park side of Streetly Lane are still being collected.

October 3, 1923 –

10. A substantial larch pole or cross (finger-post) has been fixed near Rowton Well to replace the one burnt during the fires in the Autumn of 1921.

11. The forest tree nursery at Lodge Oak¹² is being cleared and dug over to be ready for the reception of small seedlings which will be required for future plantings.

These fires were to have long-standing effects on the landscape of Sutton Park and it would take some years for remedial work to take effect.

¹² **Lodge Oak** is marked on several old maps of Sutton Park, including the 1779 map. It was located on the western edge of Upper Nuthurst and Darnel Hurst opposite Stoney Glade. The tree nursery, comprising one acre of ground located on the north western edge of Upper Nuthurst, was established in January 1890 by the first Park Forester, Charles Morwood.

The Equipment used by the Sutton Coldfield Fire Brigade in 1921

When the Sutton Coldfield Fire Brigade was set up in 1886, its first equipment was a Shand Mason horse-drawn manual pump fire engine which was soon found to be inadequate for many of the types of fires experienced by our local Brigade. In 1901 they exchanged their manual pump for a Merryweather horse-drawn steam fire engine, which was a step-change improvement. The big drawback to this mode of fire-fighting was the provision of horse power. The Council, who at that time did not own any horses had to hire suitable animals from those local owners who were in close proximity to the fire station in Mill Street. On some occasions not all of the available horses were fit enough to haul the fire engine which compromised the ability of the Brigade to offer an efficient service and caused much frustration.

The First World War witnessed the introduction of motorised transport in warfare and its rapid adoption in favour of horse-drawn equipment. This move to motorised transport extended eventually to fire engines. The Chief Officer was very keen to see the Brigade utilizing the latest equipment and worked hard to persuade the Borough Council that they needed to adopt the latest technology.



Photo 5 - The Sutton Coldfield Fire Brigade parading their horse-drawn steam fire engine at the official opening of the new fire station in an extension to the Town Hall at the top of Clifton Road on September 19,

The Minutes of the Fire Brigade & Hackney Carriage Committee state that in late April 1918 the Committee had placed an order for a motor chassis costing £90, and that they had accepted the tender of Messrs. Cassidy & Stephens for £50. 12s. for "fixing Motor Body, etc.". This motor tender was delivered in July and inspected by the Council. Although the Committee Minutes give no reason, the purpose of the tender was undoubtedly to replace the slower horse-drawn steam fire engine and get rid of the need to hire horses with their attendant lack of availability and unreliability. The tender was used for the first time to answer calls to a fire in Sutton Park on August 19 and a fire in Broomie Close on September 4.

By the end of 1918 the Committee had under consideration the question of purchasing a motor fire engine with a view to reporting thereon to the next Council meeting. At the next meeting the Committee recommended the acceptance of the tender of Leyland Motors Ltd. for the supply of a motor fire engine and escape (ladder) at a cost of £1,562. 10s and an order was placed in May, 1919.

Sutton Coldfield's Leyland motor fire engine and escape would have been similar to that shown in Photo 6 except that it had solid tyres. The example pictured was one of six such Leyland appliances ordered by Liverpool Fire Brigade from 1929. It had an open body on which six firemen could sit sideways, three on each side. This particular model was fitted with a de-mountable escape ladder and a rear mounted Rees water pump. It also had a 4-cylinder petrol engine and was originally supplied with solid front wheel tyres which were exchanged for pneumatic ones in 1931.

By April 1920 it was found necessary for the Council to secure a loan of to meet the cost of the new motor fire engine and the Committee recommended accordingly that an application be made to the Ministry of Health to borrow £1,700 for this purpose.

In the following month, Mr Dean, the Chief Fire officer, visited the Chorley works of Leyland Motors in order to inspect the progress in manufacture of the motor fire engine on order but he



Photo 6 – Leyland Motors Ltd. Pump-Escape Fire Appliance from 1929. This would have been similar to the one supplied to the Sutton Coldfield Fire Brigade in 1920.

reported favourably on the machine. In October the Committee reported that the motor turbine had been out for drill or test calls on five occasions. The Committee also placed orders for the supply of Pompier ladders¹³, etc., with Messrs. Shand, Mason & Co. at a cost of £7. 14s. 6d. together with Pompier belts and lines. In the same month, Sutton Coldfield's redundant horse drawn Merryweather steam fire engine was advertised for sale at £350, although no offers had been received at that time

he reported back to the Committee that work was not very far advanced, although he was able to satisfy himself that the best material was being used in its construction.

Two months later, on Thursday, June 3, 1920, the new fire engine was delivered to the Sutton Coldfield Fire Station in King Edward Square. Leyland's representative was in attendance to instruct the firemen in the driving and management of the vehicle and its pumps.

Twelve days later on Tuesday, June 15, the official test of the appliance was made before members of the Fire Brigade & Hackney Carriage Committee as well as Chief Officer Tozier of the Birmingham Fire Brigade who

¹³ **Pompier Ladder:** This is a hook ladder that can be attached to a window sill or similar ledge by the use of a "gooseneck" projecting from the top of the ladder. The ladder was developed to access buildings via enclosed alleys, lightwells and yards to which other types of ladder could not be taken. The British version was a conventional 2-string ladder, made from ash, around 13ft (4m) long and around 10 inches (250mm) wide.

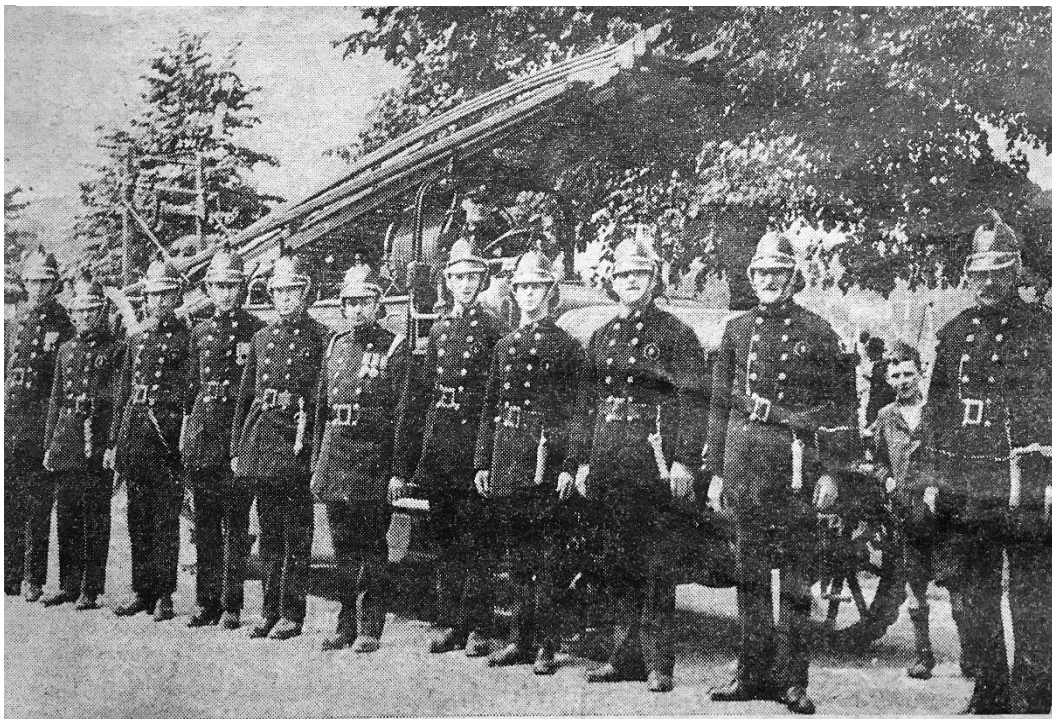


Photo 7 – This photograph of the Sutton Coldfield Fire Brigade on parade in Sutton Park was published in the *Sutton Coldfield News* in the early 1920s and is the only photograph the author has come across of the Brigade’s first motorised fire engine.

In 1921 the Borough Council issued a booklet, the “Rules & Regulations of the Sutton Coldfield Fire Brigade”¹⁴, and Rule 4 stipulated that the Brigade shall consist of:-

- Chief Officer
- Lieutenant
- Assistant Mechanic
- 8 x Firemen
- 2 or more reserve Firemen

However, we know from alterations made in this booklet that in 1921 the Brigade comprised the following personnel, plus details of their scale of pay or allowances:-

- Chief Officer.....30/- per week on appointment in July 14, 1913, plus a house.
- Lieutenant.....£15 per annum, payable Quarterly
- 3rd Officer.....£12 per annum, payable Quarterly
- Driver Mechanic.....£10 per annum, payable Quarterly
- Firemen (each).....£ 9 per annum, payable Quarterly
- Reserve men (each).....£ 5 per annum, payable Quarterly

¹⁴ “Rules & Regulations of Sutton Coldfield Fire Brigade, 1921” issued on April 12, 1921. [Sutton Coldfield Reference Library, Ref. SH 45.61].

All members shall receive the sum of two shillings and sixpence (half a crown) for each tour of duty.

As a bonus, the sum of £150 was allocated each year from which deductions were made for non-attendance at drills. The balance at the end of the year (Christmas) was divided amongst the members of the Brigade. Residents and companies, who needed the services of the Fire Brigade were expected to contribute to the cost of their attendance and there was a schedule of charges for call-outs.

Although the Sutton Coldfield fire engine had its own integral pump and water reservoir, this would have been used for dealing only with small fires. Where more serious fires were concerned and where there was access to a water supply from hydrants, pools or canals, the Brigade would have called into use their new trailer-mounted turbine pump. It is evident that this turbine pump was used frequently to fight the extensive Park fires where the seat of the fire was relatively close to one of the Park's pools so that water extraction could easily be obtained.

The Sutton Coldfield Ambulance

The Council Minutes for 1921 make frequent references to the use of an ambulance. This vehicle was almost certainly surplus ex-military stock, having previously served in France during



Photo 8 – A Ford Model T field ambulance from 1916.

Was the Sutton ambulance similar to this?

The Committee thereafter reported that they had since used the ambulance on several occasions for the conveyance of patients to hospital and that it would be made available for private use at a small charge. The Council Minutes record the Council's thanks to the persons instrumental in getting the ambulance "returned to Sutton Coldfield".
