

TENBY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

This month's jottings is a reprint of a recently rediscovered article detailing the history of Tenby Volunteer Fire Brigade from its foundation in 1874 to 1901. The article was originally published in the *Tenby Observer* for December 26th, 1901 and was rediscovered during indexing work being undertaken at Tenby Museum and Art Gallery. To make the Museum's local newspaper collection more accessible to researchers the Museum's collection from 1854 to 1902 has been indexed. If you would like to make use of this new index please phone the Museum (01834 842809) to make an appointment.

The Tenby Volunteer Fire Brigade was funded entirely by voluntary contributions made by businessmen, tradesmen and private citizens of the town. Regular lists of these subscribers appear in the Victorian editions of the *Tenby Observer* newspaper. The article below would make a useful starting point for anyone interested in researching the history of the brigade. There is a wealth of material already indexed including reports of fires, committee meetings and annual suppers.

Tenby Volunteer Fire Brigade 1874 - 1901

The Tenby Volunteer Fire Brigade was established in 1874, when about a dozen local gentlemen, prominent amongst whom were the late Dr. J. Griffith Lock and Mr. Robert Lock (the Justices Clerk), originated the movement and took part in its working. The following year the Brigade, which from the outset was well supported by the inhabitants of the town, was composed of working men under the captaincy of the late Mr T. Hugh Thomas, and consisted of 18 men, a meeting being held in the Town Hall for the purpose of enrolling volunteers. Eighteen were asked for, and this number at once came forward. From that date down to 1878 no emergency arose necessitating the employment of the services of the Brigade, who had, however, during that period kept up their drills; but on May 28th of that year a disastrous fire broke out at Belgrave House on the Esplanade, then in the occupation of Mr John Henton. The fire originated on the top floor, and the whole premises were well alight before the firemen were summoned. At that time the members of the Brigade had no uniforms, this departure coming later, however, and upon their arrival at the scene of the conflagration it was a somewhat difficult matter to distinguish them from the large crowd which had assembled. In addition to this their efforts were much hampered owing to an altogether inadequate supply of water. Owing to the serious nature of the outbreak and the apprehension that it might spread to the adjoining houses, those in authority secured the services of a detachment of troops from Penally Barracks with the primary object of keeping the crowds back, but, unfortunately, owing to the members of the Brigade being un-uniformed, the military also kept them back, with the result that they were at the onset prevented from rendering the fullest possible service, the building being completely gutted. The firemen, recognizing that anything they might be able to do as regards the burning pile would prove ineffectual, wisely turned their attention to the adjoining property, which they succeeded in saving. A fatality occurred at this fire, Mr Joseph James being the victim, and was carried out dead from the burning house by firemen Frederick Thomas, Thomas Morris, and John Mason.

The seriousness of this outbreak was the means of drawing the attention of the public to the necessity of a properly equipped Brigade, and the late Dr. Lock very spiritedly took the matter in hand with the satisfactory result that every member of the Tenby Volunteer Fire Brigade was provided with a suitable uniform. In 1879 [*sic* - October 1878] a valuable engine was presented to the Brigade by the Sun Fire Office, and although the pattern of the machine has now become obsolete, it has proved very useful. This engine was presented by the Sun Fire Office in recognition of the gallant manner in which the Brigade battled with the Belgrave House fire with only hoses, it being generally admitted that this equipment was insufficient in the case of such serious outbreaks.

The next fire which engaged the attention of the local Brigade occurred at No. 24 Victoria Street. The outbreak originated under the staircase in the basement, and before the arrival of the firemen the house was almost completely gutted in consequence of the melting of the whole of the gas pipes. This being the case the attentions of the Brigade were directed towards saving the property on either side of the burning house, and in this they were successful.

A most serious fire was that which broke out at the Royal Gate House Assembly Rooms [April 1880], and in connection with which the Brigade played a prominent part. The fire was discovered late at night, a theatrical performance having previously taken place in the rooms, and was of such a fierce nature that within half an hour from the outbreak the whole building was one seething mass of flame. Some exciting incidents occurred at this fire, one being of a particularly sensational character, in which a well known local gentleman was buried in the debris of a ceiling which collapsed before he could make good his escape. Fortunately, he was rescued before sustaining any very serious injury. The firemen fought the flames with great determination, and ultimately the conflagration was got under control, but not before serious damage was done to the Assembly Rooms, which had to be practically re-built.

The next fire occurred at the Old Baths [June 1889], then in the occupation of the late Mr. Charles Smith Allen as a fine art gallery and bazaar. The Brigade on this occasion earned great credit for their smart performance in coping with the flames, the late Mr. J. B. Hughes (who succeeded the late Mr. T. Hugh Thomas) being in charge as captain. Both these gentlemen made excellent captains, and enjoyed the highest confidence and esteem of the men under them. After the death of Mr. Hughes the Brigade was for some time without the services of a captain, although its affairs were carried on under the able superintendence of Messrs. Frederick Thomas and Thomas Morris, both of whom have all through taken a great interest in the welfare and development of the Brigade. In due course Mr. A. P. Lewis, then manager of the Tenby branch of the London and Provincial Bank, was appointed captain, and during his tenure of office proved a most excellent official. Whilst he was captain the Brigade enjoyed many pleasant outings, including two trips to London in connection with the Lord Mayor's Show, and a trip to Weston-super-mare to attend the Firemen's Competition, in which they competed with a number of crack Brigades and came out very creditably.

During Mr. Lewis's captaincy the Brigade were called to Penally Parish Church [January 1892], where a serious fire had broken out, and succeeded in saving the ancient edifice from destruction. Captain Lewis, on receiving promotion elsewhere, was succeeded by Captain H. J. Gregory, who proved himself a popular and efficient officer.

During his term a somewhat serious fire occurred at No. 14 Norton [March 1893]. Upon the arrival of the Brigade the premises were found to be enveloped in dense smoke, so much so that it was impossible to locate the fire. Superintendent Frederick Thomas, who was at the time in charge of the Brigade, crawled into the room where the fire was supposed to be and finally located same under the hearthstone, but was almost overcome by the fumes; fortunately a medical man was near at hand, and the Superintendent was soon restored to consciousness.

A fire which gave the Brigade a good deal of hard work was that which broke out in...Manchester House [Tudor Square, August 1898] then a furniture warehouse in the occupation of Mr. Frank B. Mason. This conflagration was a serious one owing to the inflammable contents of the building, and was not got under control for some considerable time, the resources of the Brigade being taxed to the utmost. It will be remembered that upon this occasion a naval man nearly lost his life, a roof falling upon him, from the debris of which he was extricated with considerable difficulty.

The last fire of any importance at which the Tenby Brigade rendered service was that at Penally Abbey, the residence of Mr. T. D. S. Cunninghame. In this case Superintendent F. Thomas arrived upon the scene in advance of the Brigade, and accomplished much good work pending its arrival. At this fire Captain Gregory unfortunately contracted a severe chill, from the effects of which he never recovered, his untimely death being a great loss to the Brigade. During the illness of Captain Gregory the Brigade was under the able charge of Superintendent F. Thomas, who has been associated with it since its formation, and carried out his duties in a most satisfactory manner.

Through the death of Mr. H. J. Gregory the Brigade was compelled to seek a successor, and for a time considerable difficulty was experienced in getting a suitable gentleman to fill the position. Eventually, however, the choice fell upon Mr. R. F. Fishwick, and upon the unanimous invitation of the members he was prevailed upon to accept the captaincy, the duties of which he has, since his appointment, carried out with great efficiency, his efforts having been directed towards the re-organization of the Brigade and the setting of its affairs, financial and general, upon a sound business like footing. In this he is ably assisted by Mr. C. B. Davies, the hon. secretary, and between them the Brigade gives promise of entering upon a new lease of usefulness and greater efficiency than ever, which is saying a good deal, as the past performance of the members whenever the emergency has arisen have always given satisfaction, as well as earned for them the warm appreciation of the general public, by whose voluntary contributions the Brigade is supported.