The History of Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service. A talk by Alan House to the Worthys Local History Group

Alan had served 42 years in the Fire Service latterly as Deputy Chief Fire Officer for Hampshire and was now the voluntary archivist and historian of the service. Alan gave the group an interesting history of the service through the ages.

He began in the Roman era: we know that the Roman empire had an organised fire fighting group from the 300s BC. although some parts of a water pump from Silchester have been found in Britain. The Normans enforced a 'curfew' more rigidly, making sure people covered their fires – couvre feu or curfew - before bed at the sound of the bell. Although these measures did not prevent a great fire in London in 1212, with 3000 deaths.

For a long time fire fighting equipment was quite basic, buckets of water were used, but often letting them burn out was the main method. From the 1680s the first Fire Offices appeared, as a part of the Fire Insurance companies that grew up after the Great Fire of London. They only attended to houses of course that had the fire mark of the insurance company, showing they had paid their premiums. Their water pumps as such were essentially big buckets on wheels with pipes to shoot out the water, They had to get very close to the fire. Pumps were sometimes kept in churches for local use.

Some landowners in the 1800s started to provide fire brigades to protect their property and their workers. Many villages demanded their own fire brigade (although not in the Worthies) after large fires and usually around 12 men were recruited for that purpose. The first Local Authority Fire Brigade was in 1860, in Edinburgh and then London. The first hoses were introduced in this time: made from leather with copper rivets they were very heavy but did provide some distance from the fire. They were exhausting to pump and often policemen recruited members of the public to pump the handles with the promise of beer tokens in return! Escape ladders were also developed so that loss of life in a fire could be prevented.

Gradually at the end of the 1800s, we see a patchwork of Fire Brigades and companies who supplied them with uniforms and equipment. Water was often obtained by drilling directly into a mains pipe and then plugging it till next time it was needed, often with a sign above ground, FP for fire plug, to indicate where the water access was.

Steam engines, with a really good jet of water came in the 1800s. The heavy engines needed specially trained horses to pull them. 1904 saw the first motor engine, to get to the fire quicker. Alan illustrated these innovations with plenty of photographs.

World War 1 devastated many Fire Brigades, as they had often recruited ex-military men and reservists, which were immediately called up. In 1921 there was a Royal Commission which recognised the need for standardisation and co-ordination between the different fire brigades. Another Act, the Air Raid Precaution Act, in 1937 recommended the recruitment of men and women for an Auxiliary Fire Service to train and equip for air raids. In 1938 small fire brigades were combined to rural district and city Fire Brigades. When the Second World War broke out they quickly had to organise to fight wartime fires and the fire brigades were quite overwhelmed by the Blitz, and in 1941 they were nationalised to co-ordinate this effort. Luckily the bombing ceased soon after that. After the war, local authorities once again took over responsibility, but this time at a

county level, with national standards, inspections and pay etc. It's then we see the form we see today, Hampshire, Southampton and Portsmouth Services (with Bournemouth). The Auxiliary Fire Service continued until 1968, after the war, preparing for nuclear war. They were mobile columns of firefighters often with green engines.

Hampshire was the only fire service to actually build their own fire engines and this took place in Kings Worthy. There was the B Division HQ here and the area workshop, until 1954. They continued to do their own repairs and maintain a lot of skills though. Taking the story up to the present day Alan told us how there are new fire engines designed for terrorist attacks and how the fire service, although attending fewer fires since the introduction of smoke detectors, still has a lot of different work, especially on the 'rescue' side, including car accidents, chemical spills and floods, none of which were part of their original remit. Alan also told us about the excellent education programme that the fire service run in Hampshire, which contributes to decreasing accidents and fires as well.