



## *Fire Constable Arthur Wale*

*1860 - 1906*

How many times have you walked through a public building and nonchalantly glanced up at the Roll of Honour hanging proudly in Reception, before passing by without giving a second thought to the stories behind those fading, long forgotten names. There's always been some form of a Roll of Honour in Avon Fire and Rescue Brigade Headquarters, not always in the same place, alterations and extensions has resulted in it being a well-travelled Memorial. One name in particular would have remained just that....a name... had a member of the public not thought to enquire if anyone was aware that the gravestone of Fireman Arthur Wale, killed on duty in 1906, had been discovered in a disused, derelict, long forgotten local Cemetery. To their eternal credit the staff in Headquarters did not dismiss that enquiry as unimportant but contacted me as they know I have a passion for Social History.

A "site visit" was arranged and three of us found ourselves at St. Mary Redcliffe Cemetery, Bath Road, Brislington, Bristol (opposite Arnos Vale Cemetery). Walking through the gates from the main road the sight that met us was one of a forgotten world, the graves that have survived are in a very poor state, sadly what was once a small Chapel of Rest was completely hidden with overgrown brambles and ivy making it a haven for wildlife. However, once through those lovely ornate gates, just turn to your left and in a far away corner Arthur will call out to you. As you draw closer there is no doubt this is the final resting place of a fallen fireman, with a Victorian helmet and two branches carved into the beautiful white marble to confirm it. So, who was Arthur Wale, what do we know about him or his Fire Service career and what act of bravery moved his employers, the Bristol Police and Fire Authority, to erect such a beautiful headstone to his memory?



Arthur was born in 1860 in Norwich, Norfolk. At the age of eleven he was living with his family in Thorpe, Norfolk where, fortunately, he was still at school when many a youngster of his age would already be out working to support their family.



By the age of twenty one he was a Fire Constable, lodging with fellow unmarried colleagues at Bridewell Police Station, living "above the shop" so to speak. Maybe it was here that he met his future wife Rachel Harris who was employed as a General Servant by John Pollard (a Pork Butcher) just around the corner in Silver Street.

**"Bristol Fire Constable Arthur Wale"  
Standing on the Merryweather Steamer top right"**

The couple, who married in 1885, soon had a growing family and, with that, the need for promotion. In 1891 Arthur and Rachel, along with their children William, Arthur, Clara and Ellen, were living in Bedminster Police Station, Nelson Parade, Bristol where Arthur was now Assistant Engineer for the Police Fire Brigade and Rachel was employed as the Police Station Caretaker, they also had a Domestic Servant living with them but, like Rachel, she may have been employed by the Police Fire Brigade.

The passing years not only saw an increase to their family but the tragic death in 1892 of their little daughter, Rosina May, aged only 14 months.

Ten years later Arthur, Rachel and their eight children William, Arthur, Clara, Ellen, Edith, Elsie, Florence and Esther were living in married quarters in Silver Street, Bristol



where Arthur was now a Police Fireman. Both his sons were out at work, William was a Hairdressers Assistant whilst Arthur Jnr. was a Post Office Errand Boy, leaving their sisters (with the exception of Esther who was only 2 years old) at school.

On March 27<sup>th</sup> 1906 began a fire in Derhams Boot and Shoe Factory, Barton Street, St James, Bristol that was described in The Western Daily Press as *“a fire that no water could touch”*. Further reading mentions *“high winds and the cottages surrounding the factory being in jeopardy”* resulting in the area being evacuated and people housed in The Central Police Station for safety. Measles was also prevalent amongst some of the local children, causing more headaches for the overstretched police, because of the need to keep them isolated.

The Bristol Constabulary Occurrence Book indicates the severity of the incident with *“29 firemen, 6 river police, 3 steamers, 1 chemical engine, 2 escapes, 5000ft of hose, Brigade in attendance 84 hours”*.

It was during those fateful 84 hours that Fireman Arthur Wale lost his life, crushed to death and his colleague Sergeant Charles James Harrison seriously injured, when *“a front wall fell out”*

On 30<sup>th</sup> March Arthur’s coffin, draped in The Union Jack, bearing floral tributes, was borne on a horse drawn



fire tender from Bedminster Police Station to St Mary Redcliffe for his funeral service.

He was described in one local newspaper as *“a man of ripe experience whose long service in the Brigade had commanded the esteem of his Officers and Comrades”*. The depth of that esteem is borne out by the citation at the foot of his marble headstone,

*“This stone was erected by the Officers and Constables of The Bristol Police Force and Members of The Fire Service as a tribute to his memory”*

The tragic consequence of March 27<sup>th</sup> left Rachel, a widow at forty three, with eight children to raise and expecting another baby. Their daughter, Beatrice May, arrived towards the end of 1906 and was to grow up not knowing her father. Rachel never remarried and, along with five of their children, lived in Gladstone Street, Bedminster which is where she died and was finally reunited with her beloved Arthur on August 25<sup>th</sup> 1929. Her name, under which her children lovingly added the words "*a devoted mother*", is carved beneath his and that of Rosina May on that fine marble headstone.

St. Mary Redcliffe Cemetery faces an uncertain future, it's been "closed to burials" for some time and in the care of Bristol City Council since 2006. However, in view of the present "financial climate", it's upkeep could never be high on their list of priorities leaving it dependent on the support of a very small band of volunteers to whom we owe our gratitude for the new wrought iron gates and the renovation of Arthurs stone, which was discovered "*toppled over on its side, sunk and in a poor state*". Now, it would appear, the Cemetery may have new owners with controversial plans for the site and, judging from all the comments in the local press, it remains to be seen what will happen to Arthur, Rachel and Rosina May, not to mention all the others who rest there.

So, should you be passing the Roll of Honour, just take a moment to think about the lives, families and sacrifices of those behind the names and don't forget to say hello to Arthur....you can't miss him, his name is up there, the very first one on the list.

Penny Deverill  
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