



Inspector Charles James Harrison

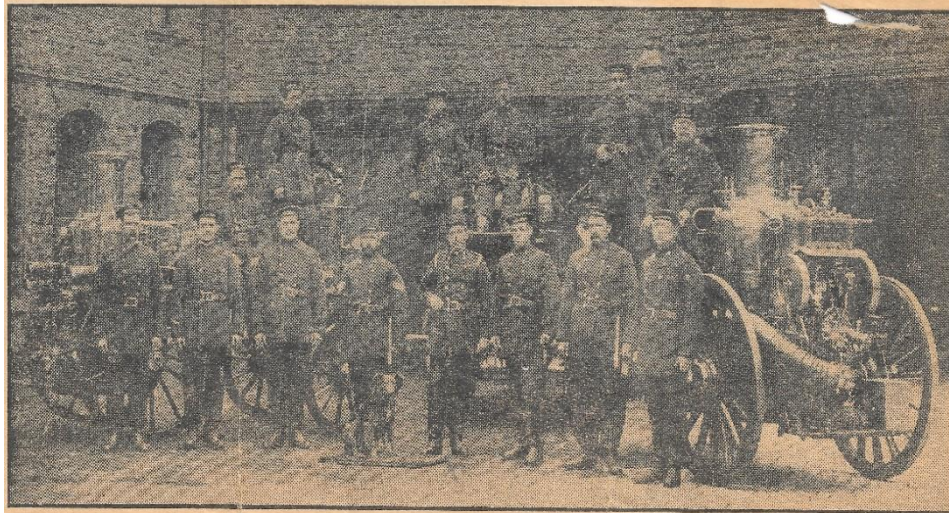
1862 - 1916

Charles James Harrison was born in 1862 at Hingham near Cromer, Norfolk and probably felt the call of the sea from childhood, so it's no great surprise he chose a career in the Merchant Navy, initially signing a four year Seaman Apprentice Indenture after which he travelled the world.

He left the Merchant Navy as a Second Officer in May 1890 with glowing references about his honesty, soberness and integrity that guaranteed him a job, first with Bristol River Police and then the Bristol Police Fire Brigade.

The following year he married Emma Mitchell, the eldest daughter of a Portishead greengrocer and the couple settled into married quarters at The Central Police Station, Bridewell, Bristol, before moving to the Fire Station in Northcote Street, St. George, Bristol with their three little girls Dorothy, Nora and Cora along with Charles' widowed mother Ann. During their time at Northcote Street Charles & Emma welcomed two more daughters, Emma and Flora and a son Charles (Charlie), into their family whilst his mother Ann decided to return to home to Norfolk.

The Police Fire Brigade in 1896



THIS is Bristol Police Fire Brigade photographed in 1896 or '97 when their officer-in-charge (Mr. J. T. Gotts), standing with hand on belt, was a young man. It is by courtesy of his son, Mr. John Gotts, now living in Manchester, that I am able to reproduce the picture.

On the right is the Cabot steam fire engine which delivered 450 gallons a minute; the smaller engine on the left delivered about 350 gallons.

Mr. Gotts eventually became superintendent. Second man from the left in the front row is Charles Harrison, afterwards an inspector, who was killed in an Old Market Street fire in 1916.

Standing at the back on the extreme left is Arthur Wale, who was killed in a Barton Street fire.

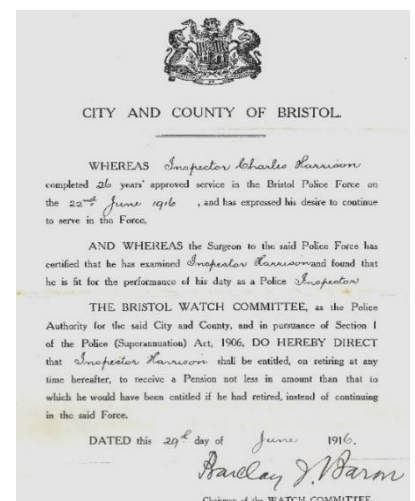
I have included another early picture of Bristol's Police Fire Brigade in this series, and Mr. John Gotts, seeing it, took his first opportunity of bringing in this one.

He tells me that the dog, honoured with a special mat in the foreground, was very sagacious, and always seemed to know just what was afoot when an alarm sounded. He would be away like a flash, anticipating the possible direction of the engine as it swung out from the station.—
F.W.B.

On March 27th 1906, now stationed back at Central (Bridewell), Sergeant Charles James Harrison and his crew attended a fire at Derhams Shoe Factory, Bristol and was seriously injured when a wall fell on top of him, sadly his colleague Fireman Arthur Wale was not so lucky and died at the scene

Emma passed away in 1911 at the relatively young age of forty five, leaving Charles and the children on their own at 5 Silver Street, Bristol where Dorothy took on the role of surrogate mother to her younger siblings whilst her father could be forgiven for thinking he'd served his time, both in the Merchant Navy and Police Fire Brigade and maybe should consider retirement.

Inspector Harrison planned to retire in June 1916 after 26 years but as there was a greater need for young fighting men in the trenches, chose to extend his service. Although he'd passed his medical and was declared fit, all parties agreed he could retire at any time with a full Pension.



The fire that totally destroyed Shipway and Sons, General Fancy Goods Dealers, Old Market Street, Bristol was to not only cost the life of Inspector Charles James Harrison but severely injured three other firemen, had taken hold long before it was first noticed around 5.40pm on 2nd August 1916 by Special Police Sergeant Edmund Dennis and tramway driver Tom Church.

First on the scene were two crews from Central under the command of Superintendent John Thomas Gotts and Inspector Charles James Harrison who were soon joined by colleagues from St George, Bedminster and Redland. The scene that met them was a very old dry timbered three story building engulfed in flames threatening to spread to Razelles Pawn Brokers next door.

By 8pm, with the fire finally under control and "*practically extinguished*", crews were preparing to leave once Inspector Harrison and three of his team, 32 year old Ernest Lear, 42 year old Edward Picton and 29 year old Thomas Atcliffe, had taken one last look around the second floor.

Bristol Fire Tragedy.

FOUR MEN BURIED IN RUINS.

INSPECTOR HARRISON KILLED.

BRIGADE'S HEROIC RESCUE WORK.

A destructive fire occurred last evening at Old Market Street, but the material damage done by the flames, serious as it may have been, became of little consequence when it was known that four of the firemen engaged were pinned down in a cellar, beneath the debris of three collapsed floors. The men were:

- Inspector Harrison.
- Fireman Picton.
- Fireman Atcliffe.
- Fireman Lear.

After an heroic struggle the Brigade succeeded in reaching them, but while the three last named were brought out alive, Inspector Harrison was dead.

The seriousness of the accident will be realised when it is stated that, after four hours' desperate rescue work, the headway made was distressingly slight—such were the peculiar difficulties to be faced—and for an hour there had been an ominous silence from three of the four victims.

It is a pathetic feature of a painfully sad accident that the firemen had practically finished their work when the floors collapsed, and the brigade would probably have returned to their Bridewell Street headquarters a few minutes later.

Without warning the floor collapsed taking the four men down into the cellar, along with a mass of flooring, furniture and other debris.

Rescuers worked in relays, desperate to free their colleagues, lit only by torches and in imminent danger of the supporting wall of the wrecked building collapsing onto them.

The St. Johns Ambulance, were in attendance under the command of Superintendent Cotton, who were sorely needed to treat firemen overcome by smoke and exhaustion.

Access to the cellar was eventually made through a back door in Barcroft Court, rubble was moved allowing fresh air and a medicinal tot of brandy to reach three of the trapped men who, rescuers discovered, were pinned down by a large beam. Tragically no contact was made with the fourth and just before midnight there were ominous signs that the fire was not completely extinguished presenting rescuers with the dilemma of whether or not to use hoses and risk drowning the four men trapped in the cellar....The hoses remained unused!

Fireman Ernest Lear was released first, followed fifteen minutes later by Fireman Edward Picton. Tragically Inspector Charles Harrison, who was found lying on his stomach trapped beneath the two men, was probably already dead by the time help arrived, never the less desperate attempts were made to revive him and, like his colleagues, he was taken to the Bristol Royal Infirmary where he was pronounced dead.

News of his death spurred his stunned crew to re-double their efforts to save their colleague who was still pinned to the floor by a large beam "*which had accompanied his descent from the top floor*". Superintendent Gotts was later to single out Firemen

George Merrett and Cornelius Kelly for their bravery. Fireman Thomas Atcliffe was eventually released around 1.30am.

By the early hours of August 3rd the premises of Shipways and Son were no more, three firemen were in hospital suffering from a combination of severe shock and broken bones, whilst their officer in charge lay in the mortuary.

Meanwhile back in Old Market Street there had been another unforeseen casualty. Earlier in the evening Mrs Amelia Lewis was trying to get home when she became involved with all the congestion and, trying to keep clear of a fire escape, had run out straight into the path of an oncoming vehicle. Mrs Lewis was also in the Bristol Royal Infirmary where she was found to have fractured her skull. Sadly, reports were now circulating that she was in a very serious condition.

Inspector Charles James Harrison was buried on August 5th with full Fire Brigade Honours. His coffin, draped with the Union Jack on which was placed his axe, helmet & belt, was carried on a Fire Tender behind twenty four firemen lead by Superintendent Taylor. Bearers marched alongside, leaving the solitary sad figure of Superintendent Gotts to walk alone. The three firemen injured at the same incident followed in a St Johns Ambulance accompanied by a nurse. Only Dorothy, Nora, Cora and Charlie Harrison attended, maybe Emma and Flora were considered too young. In front of the Central Fire Station Fire Police Officers, along with representatives from other Brigades and Organizations, waited to greet Charles one last time. The Western Daily Press described the impressive sight as “*hundreds of men lined up in Bridewell Street*”.

Although it was clear there would not be room for everyone, there was a large gathering around the grave in Brunswick Square Burial Ground as Rev. Neep, Vicar of St James, said a few words of support to those present. Last post was sounded by three buglers from The Gloucestershire Regiment stationed at Horfield Barracks, Bristol as Inspector Charles James Harrison was laid to rest beside his beloved Emma.

An Inquest was formally opened and immediately adjourned for a week after the Deputy Coroner learned Firemen Picton, Lear and Atcliffe were not sufficiently recovered to give evidence. When it resumed Fireman Ernest Lear and Fireman Edward Picton attended, however Fireman Thomas Atcliffe was still hospitalized.

The first witness, Dr. Elizabeth Stevenson Walker, confirmed Charles was already dead on arrival in Casualty and had sustained several fractured ribs, however death was due to cardiac failure exacerbated by severe shock. Superintendent Gotts, whose sombre duty it had been to identify the body, was grief stricken at the loss of a very popular Officer whom he described as “*his right hand man*”. He said they were not simply fellow officers but related by marriage, growing up together in Norfolk and that he had been responsible for Charles joining the Police Fire Brigade on leaving the Merchant Navy.

Special Police Sergeant Edmund Dennis said when he saw smoke coming from the second floor of Shipways and Sons he immediately raised the alarm before releasing the pony from the stable adding it was not long after the fire was considered under control that he heard a crash and, going to the rear of the shop, learned the floor had collapsed, burying the firemen. He remained at the scene, helping with the rescue, until around 1.30am.

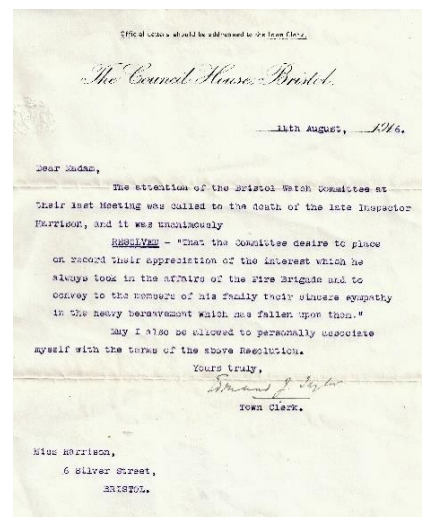
With great difficulty Fireman Picton recalled the events saying how the floor gave way whilst they were “*cooling down the place with water and as they fell how each floor went with them*”. When asked about Inspector Harrison, the distraught man said he was “*lying on his stomach, apparently dead*”

Fireman Lear corroborated his colleague’s words, however he added his Inspector was in “*good vigorous health and was joking at the time*”.

William George Shipway’s explanation for the cause of the fire suggested “*sun acting on brilliant celluloid ornaments on a glass shelf.*” adding he closed his premises at 1pm but did not leave until 5pm and was in the stable settling down the horse when the alarm was raised. However, he did himself no favours when he told the Deputy Coroner, at great length, that he was “*not insured up to a quarter of the damage*” and now “*everything was gone he was a poor man today!!!!*”

In recording a verdict of Accidental Death, the Deputy Coroner expressed a wish that the Harrison children be “*adequately cared for*” adding how he understood “*a Fund had been started in the Press*”. The Deputy Chief Constable of Bristol was to echo these sentiments by saying he hoped “*the Citizens of Bristol would see that the children were no worse off than before*”.

The Bristol Watch Committee, in their role as the Police Authority for the City and Council, considered an immediate application for financial support for the children and, to be fair, agreed that under the terms of The Police Act 1890 they were “*under a legal obligation to support any child under the age of 15 years*”. Unfortunately, only Emma and Flora Harrison qualified and, under the provision of the Act, the maximum they would each receive was £5 a year which the Watch Committee felt was “*utterly inadequate to meet the case but they had no alternative*”.



With this in mind The Lord Mayor of Bristol decided to set up his own Fund for the children and, after a meeting with The Western Daily Press who, with their sister paper The Bristol Times and Mirror, had already opened "The Harrison Fund", suggested they merge both "*subject to the warm approval of the Trustees of the Fund*"

It's interesting to note that the children chose Superintendent Gotts as Chairman of their Fund.

Money poured in from generous Bristolians and Organizations, even people with no links with the city at all. An hotelier from St. Leonards on Sea, East Sussex was a prime example, he sent £1.00 to the Deputy Chief Constable simply after reading his remarks at the Inquest.

In September 1916 the Western Dairy Press and Lord Mayor announced "*The Harrison Fund*" would soon close, bringing about another flurry of donations. The Bristol Private Fire Brigade Association, of which Charles was a member, had already donated 5 guineas, they now gave another £100, whilst the Bristol (Bird) Fanciers Association announced all profit from their forthcoming 26th Annual Show and Auction at the Corn Exchange would also go to "*The Harrison Fund*". However, two particular donations speak volumes for the real purpose of the Fund, the first one came from Mr A Raselle, Pawnbroker of 45 Old Market Street whilst on September 27th the Western Daily Press received an anonymous donation of 1/- along with a note asking it be known as "*An Orphans Mite*". By the beginning of November the Fund had reached £620.

Inspector Charles James Harrison will never be forgotten, his name is there for all to see on The Roll of Honour in the Foyer of Avon Fire & Rescue Service Headquarters, Bristol, just below that of his colleague Arthur Wale. So remember, should you be passing please look up to Charles, a brave man who served and died whilst protecting the citizens of his adoptive city during the early formative years of Bristol Fire Brigade.

Penny Deverill

AF&RS Pensioners Association