



Company Water Officer Geoffrey W. (Charlie) Bennett 1914 to 2002

Early on Thursday 10th June 1993 a mini bus left Avon Fire Brigade Headquarters bound for Guildhall, London and a Reception in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen. Amongst those on board was former Company Water Officer Geoff Bennett and he, more than the rest of us, had good cause to celebrate, because he was to be presented to Her Majesty.

For those of us honoured to call Geoff our friend it may come as a surprise to learn he was not a Bristolian by birth but was in fact born in Runcorn, Cheshire. It was only when the family moved to Bristol, via Leamington Spa, that the Bennett boys (there were five, sadly, the eldest, Bert, died of his wounds during WW1) were to become synonymous with their adoptive city.

His father, Arthur, was Irish and family rumours not only claimed links to the Duke of Leinster but also of an ancestor who may have been a dancing teacher at Buckingham Palace.

Geoff attended Sefton Park Junior then Fairfield Grammar School and, although his father was a strong theologian he loved sport, especially rugby which he was to instil in his son, who often joined him at the Memorial Ground (long before it became a Stadium). Geoff and his older brothers all belonged to various organizations including the 1st Bristol Scouts and he remembered many an occasion when Robert brought home a fellow scout and school friend from Fairfield called Archie Leach (better known as Cary Grant). Robert, like his brother John, became a journalist on the Bristol Evening Post and was much loved and remembered as "Uncle Bob and his Pillar Box Club".

On leaving school with, by his own admission, "*not very good matriculation results*" Geoff helped his brother John at the Evening Post for a while before finding a permanent job as a Copywriter with the Imperial Tobacco Company, based at their printing division Mardon Son and Hall. This brought with it membership of the Imperial Athletic Club thus opening up a new world of sport including, among other things, the Firebrands Hockey Club of which he was a founder member.....but more of that later.



Norman, Robert, John & a young Geoff

It was whilst the family were living in Effingham Road, St Andrews, Bristol that Geoff met his future wife Kathleen, who lived round the corner in Belmont Road, she was the Sunday school pianist and would pass his house every Sunday morning. Geoff & Kathleen married at Old King Street Methodist Church on October 19th 1936.

Geoff had always been "*keen on the Fire Brigade from an early age*" and therefore jumped at the chance to join the Auxiliary Fire Service in October 1938, under the command of Superintendent Maunders.

By 1940 Bristol was getting used to air raid sirens announcing the arrival of German bombers heading for the Midlands, whilst some people made for the safety of their Church others made themselves comfortable in cupboards under the stairs or Anderson shelters in the garden. Sadly Sunday 24th November was different, because this time the bombers didn't drone on but circled the city dropping their brilliant flares. Searchlights came into action, "Purdown Percy" blazed away, a couple of planes were shot down but the RAF were nowhere to be seen. Geoff, a petrol lorry drivers' mate, was on duty at C1 Redland Headquarters where two squads were retained on continuous duty because a heavy raid had been predicted.

Throughout the night desperate attempts were made to save lives and property, people came running to Redland Police Station vainly pleading for help, eventually local fires were left to burn themselves out so that the city centre could be given priority.



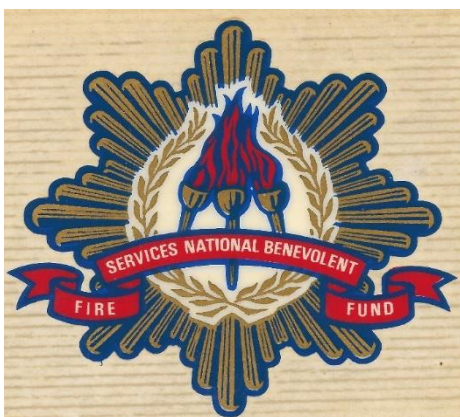
Geoff spent his time supplying petrol to pump crews up and down Whiteladies Road and described seeing Park Street ablaze, shop windows blown out, unexploded bombs on Bristol Bridge opposite St Nicholas Church and Temple Church in Victoria Street “*blazing like a torch*” with no one tackling the fire. However it was only when he was detailed to join a relief crew desperate for manpower and he found himself holding a hose directly onto No. 1 Factory Mardon Son and Hall, Temple Gate (image left) where he was employed in the Artists Department that the irony was finally brought home to him.

It was inevitable that fatalities in the Fire Service would increase and it was two early casualties, Patrol Officer Wiltshire who was killed when a bomb scored a direct hit on his trailer pump near Mickleburgh’s music shop at the bottom of Stokes Croft and Leading Fireman George Perry who perished whilst vainly trying to save two elderly ladies trapped in a blazing house in Whiteladies Road, that lead Geoff to take steps to help their families.

Initially his decision to take a collection from every serving member and make payments to the bereaved within a day or two of their deaths did not go down too well with the Chief who had Geoff “*on the carpet*” for organising a collection without official permission. Fortunately, a few days later he was sent for again to be told that not only had permission been granted for this Voluntary Fund to aid comrades suffering injuries or hardship as a result of the Blitz, but that the Chief had agreed to be its first President and thus, in December 1941, the Bristol Fire Brigade Bereavement Fund was born. Fire personnel were asked to pay a 1d a week levy into this Fund which was soon boosted by the Chiefs decision to also allow donations from businesses and members of the public, whose premises had been damaged due to enemy action, to be channelled into the new Fund.

After one raid in 1942, when ranks of buildings in Rupert Street and Victoria Square went up in flames because enemy bombs had already put most of the water mains out of action and fire crews were therefore hampered by a severe shortage of water, it was decided to erect a number of brick link water tanks around the city. Geoff found himself near Brandon Hill Police Station and close to a newly laid steel pipeline, doing his best to “*instruct*” the crews because, as he succinctly put it, he was “*keen on hydraulics*” just as Fire Force Commander Kirkup arrived on the scene and asked who was in charge of the relay. This proved to be a classic case of being in the right place at the right time as the following week, Geoff was “*summoned*” before the Chief to be told he was to be transferred to Headquarters forthwith with the rank of Company Water Officer and a monthly salary of around £27.17s.7d after stoppages.

In 1943 the Bristol Fire Brigade Bereavement Fund, along with Brigades throughout the Country, was amalgamated into The Fire Services National Benevolent Fund, under the auspices of the Home Office.



Later that year The Bristol Fire Brigade Benevolent Fund Committee met for the last time to award Grants, Loans and Christmas Gifts to 100 local widows and orphans, after which the remainder of their £3,000 assets were given to the FSNBF. Geoff played an integral part in the administration of the handover but, at the same time, firmly believed there was still a need to offer financial help to local Fire Brigade families in their time of need and therefore set up a separate Bereavement Fund by inviting members to pay a levy on the death of a colleague.

Although officially discharged from the NFS as of midnight on September 7th 1945, he was to remain totally committed to both The Bereavement Fund & Fire Services National Benevolent Fund for the rest of his life.

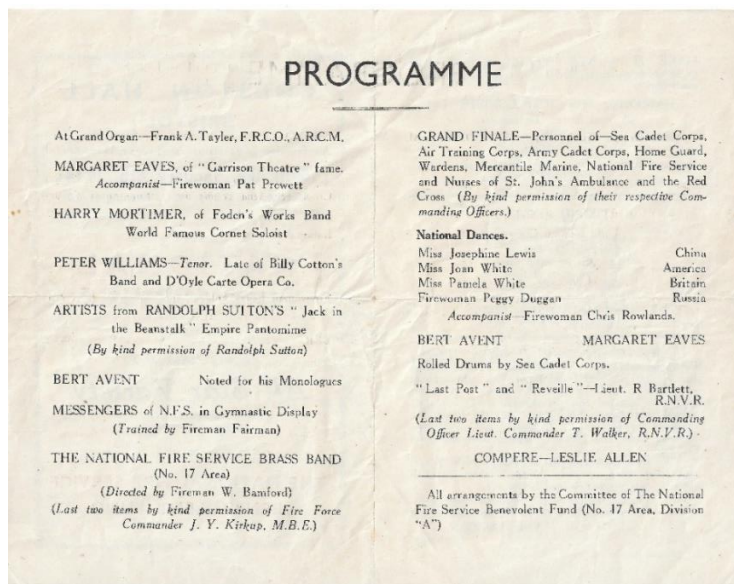


Bristol Fire Brigade Benevolent Fund Committee.

Seated: Geoff Bennett, Ald. A.L. Duggan, Fred Stallard, Ald. C.H. Smith, Hugh Lovell and Mrs Barbara Booth.
Standing: Johnny Lyne and Joe Mitchell.

Meanwhile, never one to stand back and expect others do what he believed he should be doing, Geoff led by example and, always supported by Kath who excelled at many a “Fire Station Fete Cake and Tea Stall”, began organising Fund Raising events.

Geoff was mainly responsible for this “All Star Variety” held at The Colston Hall.



And only Geoff could set himself up as “Ye Olde Bridewellian Aunt Sally, 3 Mops for 6d”.



Bristol Fire Brigade, Stoke Hill Station Fete (circa 1952)

Opened by “World Renowned Entertainer Issy Bonn” seen here in the light grey suit.

Geoff remained a very active supporter of the FSNBF and was a member of both Divisional and Brigade Councils whilst also serving on Number 7 Group Council (covering all South West Brigades) where, from searching through their old minutes, we discovered how at their AGM on Saturday 11th February 1956 he was elected Vice Chairman and Chairman the following year. He also served on the National Executive Committee until 1978 and it is a testament to his caring concerns for the families of our Fire Service Colleagues that the Bereavement Fund he founded in December 1941 continued until 2008.



On April 24th 1990 at a special ceremony at the County of Avon Fire Brigade Headquarters, Geoff was awarded a Silver Axe by Sir John Wills, the Lord Lieutenant of Avon, in recognition of his association with the Fire Services National Benevolent Fund, whilst at the same time he became the first civilian to be granted special Honourary Membership of The County of Avon Fire Brigade.

So now we have come full circle, it's June 1993 and we are on our way to London for a Royal Reception at Guildhall to Commemorate the Golden Jubilee of the Fire Services National Benevolent Fund....a Fund very dear to Geoff and a Fund which, in 1953, Her Majesty the Queen consented to become Patron.

After sharing a buffet lunch with around 160 people "touched from all sides by the Ben Fund", prepared and served by catering students from a local college, Geoff left us to meet The Queen in the less crowded surroundings of the Print Room where, with great pride and some trepidation, he thanked Her Majesty for her continuing support as our Patron, before telling her how he had been part of the Fire Brigade contingent lining the Coronation Route in Cockspur Street, her reply was *"and I expect you got very wet"*.

However when Her Majesty learned that as a member of the Firebrands Hockey Club, he played against HMS Royal Arthur, for which one Lieutenant Philip Mountbatten was also playing, she became quite intrigued and remarked how the Duke really enjoyed his hockey to which Geoff cheekily replied *"I know Ma-am, I had the bruises to prove it!"*

Geoff assumed this would be the last he would hear of it until, a couple of days later, he received a personal reply....along with a gentle reprimand.... from Prince Philip who had read an account of the Guildhall Reception in a local newspaper describing him as a Midshipman when in fact he was Lieutenant Instructor at the Petty Officers School and that he played centre forward and not on the wing as stated!! The Prince did however congratulate The Firebrands on their successful run in the 1993 Pizza Express National Hockey League and wished them luck.



The Fire Services National Benevolent Fund has now become The Firefighters Charity but its aims and achievements still remain as Geoff intended they should. However, before illness and age prevented them from devoting as much time as they would have wished to their Charitable Works, Geoff and Kath were already helping, encouraging and supporting those of us who were to follow in their footsteps. His concerns for anyone in need were legendary but so was his dry sense of humour and ability to talk about anything and everything to do with Bristol. He was a Blue Badge Guide, one time Editor of The Caxtonian (Mardons in house Journal) and a Fellow of The British Association of Industrial Editors, he could talk about such diverse things as Cigarette Cards (thanks to working for the Imperial Tobacco Company), Sporting History, The Bristol Evening Post, The Blue Notes Jazz Band (for whom his nephew played saxophone and clarinet) Badminton, Tennis (which he continued to play well into his advancing years), The Tobacco Trade Athletic Association, Archery, Mardons and of course The Fire Brigade...the list was endless.

Kath, his beloved wife of 50 years, predeceased him and Geoff passed away on 29th June 2002 aged 88. His funeral service took place at St Bartholomew's Church, Bishopston, Bristol at which his nephew, Roger, said *"He was the perfect uncle, full of jokes, kindness and boyish enthusiasm"*.

Following his death Geoff's family generously passed on all his Fire Brigade memorabilia to us for safe keeping and, whilst this article has been written from the heart through a long and personal friendship, it is from these papers that most of his Fire Brigade history has been gleaned.

Of course Geoff, as usual, lent a hand by conveniently writing his own autobiography *"mainly for family and private circulation"* just before he passed away.

He was a quiet, determined gentleman of the first degree and his legacy, though hard to follow, will never be forgotten.

Caricature of "Firebrand" Geoff Bennett by his friend Harold Packer



Penny Deverill
Avon Fire & Rescue Service Pensioners Association.