

THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

Reminiscences by Jock Humphrys

Whilst it is not my intention to write an autobiography it is essential that a personal note will now and again creep in for which I hope I shall be forgiven Also I hope that any references made to any persons will be accepted in the right spirit and as perhaps the title of these ramblings indicates, I must try as far as possible to give facts as seen by myself.

Again one must get into the atmosphere when recording reminiscences, bearing in mind that we are looking back, a hell of a long way back, searching for amusement and at the same time welding together a set of circumstances that has developed comradeship and is the reason for our forming an Association which brings us together at least twice a year thus enabling us to remember that we have all played rather an important part in the formation of one of the best and well respected Police Fire Brigades in the country, and in Britain's hour of need provided a substantial number of officer material for the National Fire Service and - later on - the new Fire Brigades.

As I see it, our original Bristol Police Fire Brigade had three phases, i.e. the old Brigade under Supt. Gotts, the continuous system under Supt. Fred Cade and finally the 24-hour system in 1926, again under Supt. Cade plus Supt. Winteringham and Supt. Maunder.

Of the first phase I know little, except that I came into the Brigade in 1922 when the changeover from horses to mechanical vehicles was almost complete. and of course I had to live and work with all the 'old school' as well as the 'new school' under Fred Cade. Most of us had seen military and naval service abroad, had returned to this country to a land fit for heroes to live in but after 18 months of civilian life had been properly disillusioned and had suffered months of depression and unemployment, and who now by virtue of a new policy designed by Fred Cade (to introduce into the Fire Brigade, tradesmen, who while awaiting calls of fire to be employed as engineers, coach painters, carpenters and general handymen) found themselves now policemen acting as firemen in the Bristol Police Constabulary, serving on a soul destroying system of continuous duty, but on a reasonable salary of £3 10s 0d a week rising to £4 10s 0d., plus various allowances, and above all a pension of two-thirds of your salary - if you survived 30 years.

Now one also has to get the atmosphere of the time and of the type of building one was to exist in. One cannot do better than to remember it was roughly at the end of the Victorian era with the old gas lit streets, paved with cobblestones, and the building the old town prison or gaol known as the Bridewell. A stone built prison with underground cells, entrances under stone arches with massive great green doors, kept always closed, with small wicket gates inserted, and men and families living over and around in 'houses', half boarded up windows and sanitary conditions generally bad. To make way for married firemen people had been 'turfed out' of quarters, which had been used to house organ grinders complete with monkies [monkeys] and also the type of person who used to 'eke' out a living with performing bears in Old Market and Castle Street. A fire bell was installed and , as Charlie Marsh and Harold Hunt will bear out, men and women started to make these 'hovels' their homes. Right opposite the green doors in Silver Street lived Inspector Hyett and Sgt. Wilkins, also Firemen Weeks, Hooper and Pincott. They will tell of the difficulties in bringing up a respectable family.

Now let us proceed into the prison itself and pass the window where a couple of 'sons of toil' are waiting at the window for tickets to enable them to obtain a night's sleep at Eastville or Fishponds workhouses. At the appointed time either the Inspector, Sgt. Wilkins or Pony Moore will 'dish out' these tickets. We enter this 'office' through a wicket gate and find the 'administrative' department of the Fire Brigade. I expect it will be Pony Moore who will welcome us. This is the 'bloke' to stick to as he everyone and everything. Easily recognised, as he is always carrying a piece of paper; he is the 'general factotum' or handrag of everyone; qualifications, he is the only one whose handwriting is legible.

As we cross the yard to the stone stairs in the corner leading to the three-storied building, we see a brass pole which we guess to be the sliding pole from the mess room and bedrooms of the 'single' men, and it is from these quarters that most of our 'tales' originate.

The large room at the top of the stairs houses the twelve single men of the Brigade. Lets enter and we see twelve single beds complete, all in line with neat counterpanes etc., a large wooden box at the foot of each bed and a 'member's mug' underneath each bed. Along the side walls twelve wooden chests of drawers. A brass sliding pole in the centre on one side of the room with a foot-operated trap door and a dim naked flame gas jet over same, kept burning day and night at a 'certain height'.

At the end of the dormitory is the wash house with a large bath (capable of holding three at a time), a boot hole and an outside 'ashbin'. Another room adjoining is the single men's Rest Room and Billiards Room.

Back down into the yard we find stables with the Horse Master above (Sgt. Bees) and a small room adjoining known as the Harness Room. This is a mysterious place and only certain people are allowed in. I suspect it is something to do with M.I. 5. or Scotland Yard, although we are told it is solely for the use of 12 hour men who do Float Duty. It is from here that Arthur Leek, John Crossman and Jimmy Sanders move in and out, always in 'civvies', vanish for hours and, as far as we can see, never do any work and appear to be well in.

Moving across to the Engine House we pass the Workshops. Now this is the place which appears to be the cause of a lot of disruption as the men employed there are the 'cream', special entries and referred to as the 'untouchables'. Inside you will find in the corner a delightful chappie who is a real 'chippy chap', Arthur Bradley by name and an expert wood carver. In the middle of the shop is a small treadle lathe operated by another delightful male known as Len Hobbs. Whatever you do don't touch the machine as he keeps a 5/8 x 1/2 spanner always handy and has been known to use it. Over on the bench will be found two mechanics. One is Bert Maunder, the first engine driver and senior mechanic, and the other, a young, full red-faced boy, good looking (and knows it) with a roar instead of a laugh. He is also a bit of a mechanic and nicknamed 'Mutt' Holman. Over in the corner is a fellow who knows all about electricity, and operates a blow-pipe from an oxygen cylinder. He is new here and, as such, is thought to be a 'bighead' known as Jock Humphrys.

Out to the rear we have the Blacksmith Shop with Fireman Charles Marsh (educated at Eton) in charge aided and abetted by a 'striker' known as 'Topper' Brown. Both have been known to work, but not very often, and they have a big advantage over everybody else as it is quite a long walk to the forge and Wilkie can't get there unnoticed.

Back to the other side of the yard we have the Paint Shop where Percy Fitzjames and 'Soldier' Jones operate behind closed doors and what goes on in there we shall never know.

The rest of the 'gang' operate in the engine house under the skilful guidance of Sgt. Wilkins and later aided and abetted by Sgt. E. Smith. If you survive this torture chamber and finally go on pension you are bound to be a raving lunatic.

Of course at this stage I am a recruit, not the latest however, as I joined a day before Percy Fitzjames. This seniority of mine caused undying hatred from Percy to myself as he had to do all the menial jobs until three years later when 'Gillie' Cains joined us. One of the menial jobs Percy had to do was to collect the 'Evening Times' and 'Evening News' from the newspaper offices and, much to his disquiet, place one of each under the Officers' doors. This onerous duty was particularly hard to Percy apart from the indignity; when we had a lie-in of an afternoon after being out all night, many is the time that we observed Percy sneaking around the corner to buy eight copies from the man on the corner. When Percy was sick or on leave I had to do this little chore and I remember one Saturday I put on a collar

and tie and my favourite mackintosh and trilby hat. I was proceeding to the paper office in St. Stephen's Street and I observed a large crowd around the office. I pushed my way through and all of a sudden I was accosted by some fellow about 6ft. 6ins., demanding £5 stating that I was Lobby Ludd! I denied this and the rest of the crowd took it up and I was rough-handled proper. I took the bloke inside and after some long while managed to convince him that I was not the Lobby Ludd who was giving away £5 to anyone recognising him from the photo in the paper. When I looked at the photo afterwards in the paper, I'm damned if I wasn't like him, trilby, mackintosh and all.

As single men we all lived, ate, worked and played together, existing on the continuous system, and of course a lot of things happened. In the bedroom of twelve beds were 'Pony' Moore, Jock Humphrys, Percy Fitzjames, 'Mutt' Holman, Harold Hunt, Len Hobbs, Paul Bush, Bob Packer, 'Aggie' Webber, Bill Hooper, Jimmy Bowden and Gilbert Cains. Each had his own peculiar habits etc., and of course there had to be 'golden rules'. One of these was 'lights out' and 'silence' in the bedroom after 10 o'clock. This didn't affect many of us really but in deference to the wishes of some this rule was strictly observed and, as such, caused a lot of amusement. Now some people go to bed to die and no noise or anything will wake them. Now Len Hobbs was one of the other kind The least tinkle, sneeze or cough, Len was up and into his boots and I am afraid we played poor Len up a bit over this. But he was a good watchdog for us and many is the time he heard the first 'ding' of the old Gamewell 'beefing' it out and was able to give us all the call, enabling us to nearly beat old Fred Cade on the night call.

'Mutt' Holman was a nuisance to this golden rule and particularly annoying to Len Hobbs. Godfrey in those days was 'courting' strong and used to emerge at 5 p.m. on evening leave absolutely faultless with pin, gold watch, signet ring, homburg, walking stick or umbrella, key rings, loose change, wallet and well 'the lot'. We didn't mind this, in fact we liked to see Godfrey showing the poor married 'scrubs' that we had substance in the single men's quarters. The trouble was that when he came back at 11 p. m. when the only light allowed was the naked gas (very low) (specially for Bob Packer's benefit - he was liable to go anywhere when asleep) Godfrey would creep in, fall over everything and titter. By this time everyone was awake and listening. Out came the bunch of keys, every drawer in his chest was unlocked and there was a special box for everything. We could hear Len Hobbs breathing heavily so we waited for it. Out it came full of venom from Len and a retort, equally venomous from Godfrey and more tinkling. By this time all were awake and sometimes accompanied 'Mutt' by all reaching out and under the bed with the very effective tapping of thumbnails on the side of the chambers by all and sundry.

Bob Packer was also a nuisance, but he usually returned off a day's leave about midnight usually with a 'load' on. He did try to be quiet but usually fell over everything, got bad tempered and then tried to turn up the gas jet. He would try several times to find the tap but never succeeded and with muffled oaths he would chuck his stuff everywhere and fall into kip.

We all tried our best to creep in but most failed and poor Len Hobbs had to be resigned to no sleep until all the beds were occupied.

Of course, over a period of years most of us fell for the 'love stakes' and although we were not entitled to marry under 4 years' service and the permission of the Chief Constable, we attempted to console ourselves with 'courting'. Our leave days were only about one day in eight on 'long daps' and one in four on 'short daps' with a weekly evening leave of six hours. Fred Cade was very understanding, however, and allowed us to parade within earshot of the bells up and down Silver Street, usually on a Sunday evening and we used to take it in turns to use the various vantage points where a couple could rest, on a spiked railing for instance, or the laundry doorway where one could get into a 'clinch' in the semi-darkness.

Of course, we were all trying to save money for 'the day' and it brings to mind a little incident in which I was involved. My time for the big event was getting near and being very careful at the time I had

invested my all in the Post Office Savings Bank in Broadmead. My fiancée and myself had decided on a special bedroom suite in a shop in town and a day when I was on evening leave was arranged for the purchase. I decided to seek permission of Sgt. Wilkins to draw the money (about £30) during the lunch hour and having done so took same up to my chest of drawers and safely locked it away. Pony Moore and Tich Hatcliffe decided to scare my wits so about 4 p.m. while I was at tea in the mess room, the large ash bin was taken into the bedroom, stuffed with brown paper, set alight and when a good old 'fug' of smoke was created someone shouted in the yard 'the single men's bedroom is on fire'. I looked up and saw the smoke and tore up the stairs and through the blinding smoke, rushed to my chest and rescued my £30. I tried to find the seat of the fire (this of course had been removed and damped down) but found Pony Moore fast asleep (so say) on his bed with his pipe in his mouth. I shook him and tried to get some sense into him but he acted dumb etc. and then I realised it was all a joke.

Harold Hunt was also a very precise type of individual and a creature of habits. One was nightly to brew a concoction to be taken the last thing while in bed. This was done one night and Harold placed it on his chair by the bedside. The lights were out and Harold repaired to the 'boot hole' to clean his teeth etc. While he was away someone 'removed' the basin of broth and replaced it with a 'chamber' half full from under the bed. Harold came in and we waited in the dark. Up went a howl from Harold but we never did know if he took a good gulp or no, as it was too dark.

Quite a number of incidents occurred in the Billiards Room or Rest Room and most evenings were spent with 'the broads' (52 of 'em) and the favourite game was Nap. We were often joined by members of the C. I. D. Department, Reg Yandell of the Waterworks, and now and again one of the married men would find some excuse to 'visit' us.

It was while waiting for the school to be made up one Saturday evening that Percy Fitzjames, the 'intelligent one', was reading a copy of the 'Green 'Un' and taking up a large portion of the fire space. All was quiet and the few chairs occupied by sleeping or dozing individuals. One person, not engaged in like manner and looking for excitement, struck a match and applied same to the 'Green 'Un'. Before you could say 'Jack Robinson', the whole paper was in flames, and it was then discovered that Percy also was asleep behind the paper. I believe Bob Packer knew something about this.

Jimmy Bowden used to cause a lot of laughs and he used to do some peculiar things. At one period we all had a craving for motor cycles and one or two were actual owners. Len Hobbs had rather a smart Royal Enfield two-stroke, and Jimmy Bowden felt that there must be other joys in the world besides beer, so he got together with Len Hobbs, bought a small two-stroke also, and Len agreed to teach him to ride it. They used to meet at certain places well out of the town and Len would put him through his paces. When he was able to keep on the thing and Len felt he was able to go straight, Len would ride side by side on his own machine and advise Jimmy on the delicate art. One day they were riding along, side by side, when all of a sudden Jimmy crashed into Len and both finished up in a heap amidst the wreckage. Len called Jimmy a 'crimson fool' and enquired what he was doing at the time. Jimmy admitted that he had noticed Len from time to time bend down and touch something with the result that the 'bike' would shoot ahead. Jimmy had decided to try this but instead of 'tickling the carburettor' had put his finger on the 'sparking plug'. Hence the pile up.

Percy Fitzjames was always in trouble and I remember an occasion when the Annual Meeting of our Social Fund was held in the 'office' when we all sat around on the lockers and it was 'the event' of the year when the Superintendent took the chair and decisions were made as to what would be done at Christmas for the Adult and Children's Parties. We had a fund to which we all contributed about 2d. a week and we relied a lot on the Insurance Companies to give us a 'Fiver' or so for good work done during the year. It was quite a ceremony starting with the Secretary (Sgt. Wilkins) reading the minutes. Now Wilkie couldn't write so Pony Moore used to write the minutes for him, and as Wilkie had a job to read as well, one can imagine the comments and 'asides' whilst this caper was on. Now Percy was a well-meaning fellow and often said what he thought but of course it doesn't always pay. Percy rose to

his feet and suggested that it was wrong to spend all this money on 'the dear little children' and 'what were the single men getting out of it'. Of course Percy was 'hung, drawn and quartered' but give the lad his due he stuck to his point and it was agreed that £5 should be given to the single men's quarters' and it was decided to spend this on gramophone records and Percy was nominated to go out and buy them. Now Percy was an intellectual, had a keen desire to raise the culture of the single men, and he did know something of music. Back he came with a pile of records and needles and we all sat down to listen. The first was a screeching soprano singing 'Love's Cigarette' followed by a piano concerto in 'B' Flat Minor etc. Of course you can imagine the comments and when it was seen that Percy was 'hurt' (which was fatal) the lads plagued his life out for weeks after. Needless to say the records were only used on special occasions as when Jimmy Bowden used to come in with a 'load on 'at midnight. He would play the whole lot through back and front with the ignition fully advanced doing about 150 revs to the minute, and change the needle with each side, throw the needles over his shoulder and dance around in his socks. He could never understand, why from time to time he used to give a piercing yell as he trod on a needle!

(This article was written by Henry Edward (Jock) Humphrys, MBE, G I Fire E. He was born in Bristol in 1897, and joined Bristol Police Fire Brigade as a Fireman-Mechanic in 1922. He was promoted to Fire Sergeant in 1935 and was in charge of the fireboat 'Endres Gane' when this entered service at Avonmouth in 1936.

'Jock' gained further promotions in the National Fire Service from 1941 onwards and in 1945 became a Sub-Area Commander, based at Taunton. He joined the newly-formed Somerset Fire Brigade in April 1948 as Divisional Officer I, and was promoted to Assistant Chief Officer in 1955.)