

# *Divisional Commander Morgan “Monty” Britton B.E.M.*

## *B.A.C. Fire Brigade Filton 1949 to 1986 County of Avon Fire Brigade*



My story begins at a time prior to joining the Royal Air Force in 1946, when I first met my darling wife Jean, whose father George Frape was a Bristol Firemen during the war and someone who was happy to talk to me about the job, his experiences through the blitzes and stories of the major fires he had attended.

There were tales of sadness and outstanding heroism but, most important of all, it was about the comradeship of those who had survived during the war years that made me determined to become a fireman and now wish to share with you some very happy memories of my time in the Fire Brigade.

I first applied to join Bristol Fire Brigade when I was demobbed from the Royal Air Force in 1949 but, unfortunately, there were no vacancies as the Brigade at this time were in the realms of changing over from AFS/NFS to Local Authority Brigades.

Undaunted, I therefore applied and was accepted to join the BAC Fire Brigade at Filton, attached to their domestic Fire Fighting Squad. I met some lovely people up there who, like my father-in-law, had served during the war and in particular had experienced the many bombing raids on the works and airfield.

After about two years I moved over to the recently commissioned Ministry of Civil Aviation Fire Service Department at Filton which was, quite frankly, paying better money than the BAC. Our main task at this time, was to look after their BOAC aircraft, especially those landing and taking off during the night.

In 1952 I received a letter from Bristol Fire Brigade to say there were vacancies on a new Training School and would I like to apply. With Jeanie's support I naturally jumped at the chance, although this would mean a reduction in wages from about £9 down to £4.15s for a 60-hour week. My interview at Brigade Headquarters was a success and I was delighted when awarded a place on the next Brigade Training School at Speedwell.

My first posting was to the Brigade Headquarters Station, Bridewell Street in the city centre. Bridewell was one of six stations within the Bristol City boundary, the others being Stoke Hill, Avonmouth, Brislington, Ashton Drive and Fishponds, with an overall establishment of between 230 and 250 personnel.

I remember ***“Station One & Brigade Headquarters”*** in Bridewell as being of three floors and a basement, with an enclosed drill yard and tower to the rear. On the other side of the yard, we also had a fully equipped paint shop and Brigade workshops with its own forge, where Reg James used to do a lot of the fire appliance repairs and make things for the stations.

On the third floor of the main building was residential family accommodation for the Deputy Chief Officer, Mr Fred Revelle, and the Third Officer, Divisional Officer Wookey, with other staff officers living further along the Veranda. Also on the top floor was Taffy Burrell (who was the Chiefs chauffeur at that time) and his family, whose children could often be seen looking over the railings watching the firemen on drill down in the yard below.

Brigade Headquarters was on the second floor, where all the non-uniformed staff, typists, clerks etc. carried out the administration of the Brigade, as well as the offices of Operational Staff Officers, who came in during the day.

The station living quarters were located at first floor level, including dormitories, kitchen, mess room, lecture rooms and offices, with the Station Officers office overlooking the appliance room and the appliances.

In the basement area we had Brigade Stores and the Hose Store, where Bung Leatherby taught us about the weft and the weave and how to repair the old canvas hose with patches sewn on by needle and thread.



I was soon made to feel very welcome at Bridewell, where I was put into a group of seven. There were three groups of that nature, making a total of twenty-one personnel on duty at any one time, thus ensuring sufficient numbers to man all the appliances and the Fire Boat.

Many of the personnel holding ranks had been Officers and Firemen with the former Bristol Police Fire Brigade during the blitzes but few were able to tell you all about their experiences. You could tell by their attitude that the Officers had responsible positions and liked to be treated with some respect, particularly by those of us in our probationary period.

At that time we paraded in full dress uniform at 8 o'clock in the morning and in the evening at 5 o'clock for inspection by the Officer in Charge, before being temporarily dismissed to return appropriately dressed for work parade, when jobs were allocated to all the personnel. A lot of them were mundane such as cleaning the windows and, of course, the mop out was a regular function but at the end of the day these tasks predominantly ensured the Brigade was presenting a good clean and tidy appearance to the public.

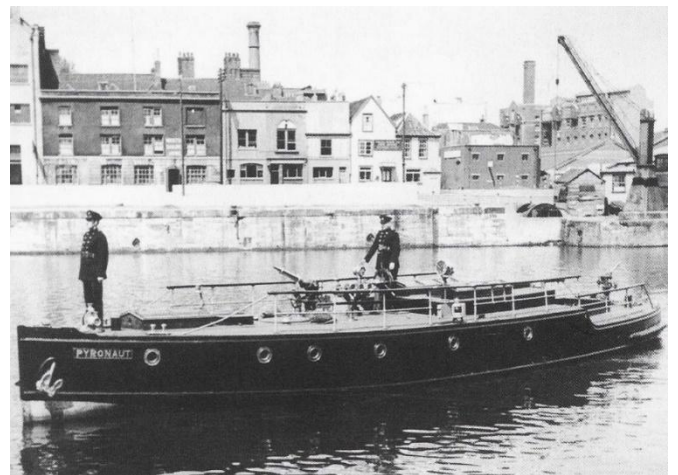
The first priority following work parade was to drill out in the station yard which, because of parked vehicles, had somewhat restricted access and in particular when training with the Bailey wooden escape. This was extremely heavy and really did require four men to manipulate and move about into position when carrying out rescues from the tower.



Our courage was truly put to the test however with our friend the hook ladder, with which we all had to be proficient. This was the only means of gaining access up the vertical face of a building in order to save a life which could not be accessed by any of our conventional ladders. We could use the hook ladder either on our own or with a colleague, enabling us to go from one window sill to the next one above. I must admit we had some chaps at Bridewell who were really good and made it look like a spectacle when called upon at fetes and open days to demonstrate their skills.

When the opportunity presented itself, we would go down to the Bristol Dock area and engage in drills with the "Pyronaut" moored up at the fire boat station near the General Hospital and manned by a coxswain and crew from Bridewell.

I personally used to enjoy the shipping inspections, which were very interesting with regards supplying water from ship to shore. At that time, of course, Bristol was an extremely busy active dock with ships sometimes double berthed and carrying all sorts of merchandise, including coffee, rum and many other customs items, but in the main it was building materials and timber.



The appliance room fronted onto Bridewell Street, with Brigade Control situated near the main station entrance. I must admire the control room staff for the way they served throughout the Second World War, when all the fire and flames were flying around during the Blitz.

The wireless car was kept in the first bay next to Brigade Control. In the early days, this was driven by the Deputy Chief or Third Officer and was also the only means of radio communication between the fire ground and the control room. Accompanying the duty officer would be a nominated fireman who would find in the car, a sixpenny Wakeland Street Guide of Bristol and a torch which had to be checked every day to see the battery was topped up. It was sometimes a bit of a problem at 3 o'clock in the morning to read these map books so it was very important those selected for the job were up to date with not only the streets in the Bristol area but some of the surrounding areas as well.

At this time fire appliances were not fitted with radios so communication between the fire ground and control were sometimes very difficult and if we were at an incident without the wireless car in attendance we had to find alternative means of getting messages back to Headquarters. In and around the centre of Bristol there were a number of Police boxes for emergency use or, if we were in the Bristol Dock area, we could use fire alarm boxes. Other than that we would look for overhead wires to locate someone with a telephone and knock on their door to ask if we could use their facilities. Happily, that didn't happen too often.



A large variety of vehicles occupied the Bridewell appliance room at that time, some of which I would like to give particular mention including the first attack pump ladder HHT183, a well-known appliance, which had an enclosed cab and was quite comfortable to ride in. Carrying forty gallons of water, this short wheelbase appliance was ideal for inner-city work and responded to most fire calls, regardless of what station turned out, but always with the ladders to support them.

The Leyland Pump Escape had wooden running boards on which we stowed our fire kit in readiness for the next call. This caused quite a few hairy moments for us as we were expected to get dressed one handed on our way to the incident, whilst desperately trying to hold on tightly with our other.

It took a bit of practice and, in some instances, firemen did manage to get thrown off into the road just as we were turning out from the station into Bridewell Street and pulling away. I have personally seen three firemen doing what we called the "Goose Step" along the pavement, having been thrown off the machine.



The Turntable Ladder was kept in the far end bay but due to its size, had to be reversed into the appliance room rather than try to negotiate the narrow gate from Silver Street around the back into the yard, which was very restricted.



Turning out on a shout from Bridewell was an art in itself and required two firemen with green flags, or lights if it was during the hours of darkness, to stand out into the street to stop the oncoming traffic. This was also a particularly hazardous exercise for the drivers, who were taught to wait for the rear wheels of the appliance to bump down into the gutter near the front door and then turn rapidly to avoid hitting the premises opposite. One of these premises was a Pub which, although you liked to go in under normal circumstances, they certainly didn't like people bashing into and entering in that way. Just a little

aside on that, we are talking here about heavy ponderous appliances with crash gear boxes but no power assisted steering or hydraulic brakes, which proved very difficult to handle until they started moving.

The original building at "**Station Two**" Stoke Hill was previously owned by the Theological College who had vacated the area just before the outbreak of war. The site was initially developed as a one pump station housing an Escape Ladder and built on the Durdham Downs in the Clifton area of Bristol, well positioned to provide a backup pump for many of the fires in the city, together with those in nearby Avonmouth. The station was also used for some time as the Brigade Training School where the officers would make full use of the tower to test the recruits taking part in escape and ladder drills.

I was sent to Stoke Hill on the occasional detached duties and remember the appliance room being on a raised platform alongside which was constructed the accommodation hut comprising of kitchen, mess room, office and dormitory. The only drawback was that between the accommodation and the appliance room there was an area open to the elements, the surface of which was covered with stone chippings and gravel.



As a Bridewell fireman it was my habit to put my leggings and boots by the side of the appliance and get dressed on-route to the incident. However, if you did that at Stoke Hill you would have to run in across these chippings and they used to stick to your bare feet and was not very comfortable.

One thing that comes back into my memory about Stoke Hill is they were rumoured as being the very first station to have a television set provided anywhere in the Brigade. I understand it was about a foot square and to enable everybody to see it, they put a magnifying dome on the front so the picture was enhanced somewhat.

Avonmouth Docks were looked upon as a high risk, with the oil basin and a major port taking in cargo from all over the world. In the early part of my career, **“Station Three”** at Avonmouth was a very smart twin bay station on the end of Green Lane which, in fact, was the former Police Fire Station prior to the war.



For a while they had a Dennis Cub on the run, together with a Salvage Tender but, due to limited space on the station, approaches were made with the Bus Company who kindly agreed for some of the fire appliances to be stowed at their nearby depot whilst on standby. Unfortunately, the pigeons and seagulls liked to leave their deposits at will and therefore appliances came out of there looking rather more-white than they did red.

There was not much there in the way of accommodation so, to overcome the manning problems, personnel attached to the station lived in their own houses in adjacent to the station, all of which were fitted out with call



bells. In the event of a shout, they would be alerted either by Brigade Control or from the alarm system which was fitted in the docks at that time. *“Because of their unique situation, the firemen living in Green Lane were fondly known as Homers”.*

The personnel from Avonmouth also manned the fire boat station, situated on the end of the Eastern arm of the dock, where the single prop sea going vessel, the “Endres Gane” was tied up, the photograph here being taken in around 1943.

**“Station Four”** at Hemplow House was a very substantial old building of four floors which stood on its own at the junction of Talbot Hill and Brislington Hill, just on the outskirts of Brislington Village.

The site was taken over in the early days of the AFS/NFS and later became a full-time station with a Leyland Water Tender and an Escape Carrier. Another thing I should mention because this was an elderly station, one Chief Officer was known to say *“It was the worst Fire Station in the British Isles”*, due mainly to the poor condition of the building.

Alongside the house was a large grassed area of about eighty feet by forty feet, underneath which was the former wartime air raid shelters. In my time the shelters proved an ideal facility for breathing apparatus training. Firemen from Hemplow House were responsible for lighting fires down there where, with Proto or Minox sets, we would access the smoke-filled chamber through a manhole cover and down vertical ladders.

I have very fond memories about the staff there who had a superb garden and used to supply all their own produce for the kitchen, not forgetting the couple of elderly gentlemen who also won quite a few prizes for their efforts.





The original **“Station Five”** was built on the Winterstoke Road by Fire Brigade personnel during the war and was a five-bay appliance room with steel stanchions covered by an asbestos roof, along with large metal doors. Appliances on the run at this time were the first pump, water tender, escape carrying appliance and a turntable ladder. The end bay was made over to the Brigade carpentry workshop with two carpenters working to repair the wooden ladders and any jobs on the stations.

I think it fair to say this station was built with somewhat Spartan conditions in that the wash house was a large brass tap mounted about

two foot above a large slate slab so, if you didn't have a bowl underneath when you turned the tap on, you would end up with yourself getting soaking wet.

The area of land surrounding the building was covered in shingle so we were not able to use it for drills or any other purposes. As there was no open water supply nearby, we would put a large forty-gallon steel tank on the patch of grass opposite the station, which would then be filled with water, or we would take our appliances down to the Bristol Docks to carry out pump drills from open water.

The new four bay appliance room at **“Station Six”** Speedwell was operational from 1953, when personnel were transferred from their temporary accommodation at nearby Channons Hill. The new station also provided good facilities for the new Brigade Training School with its brick-built drill tower and large drill yard backing onto Speedwell School playing fields. This also proved useful on several occasions as, with kind permission of the Headmaster, we were able to hold our Annual Fete and many other fund-raising events in aid of the Fire Services National Benevolent Fund. Pictured right is “Uncle Bob” from the Evening Post “Pillar Box Club” judging the fancy dress competition at one such event.



Being situated on the Bristol City and Gloucestershire Fire Brigade County boundary, Speedwell proved to be one of our busiest station grounds, as it not only covered areas such as St. George, Fishponds and Whitehall, but also supported neighbouring Kingswood crews on calls throughout their South Gloucestershire turnout area.

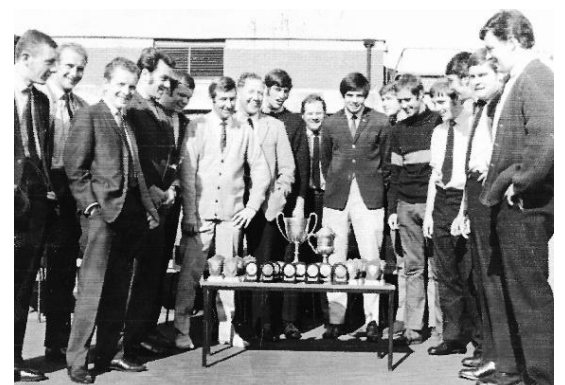


In the 1960s, plans were put forward to replace the old Bridewell Fire Station and Headquarters, with a brand-new complex at Temple Back in Bristol, to include Training School, Brigade Control and Workshops. This transfer was completed in 1971 and look back with pleasure on this time, as I was fortunate to be promoted to ADO as the Officer in Charge of the new Headquarters Fire Station. Under Government reorganization in 1973, Bristol became the County of Avon Fire Brigade, with the boundary being extended to include parts of North Somerset, Bath City and South Gloucestershire Fire Brigades.

Away from the Fire Ground, there are two areas which have given me great pleasure. Throughout my career I was involved with the South West Sports Association and in particular our Brigade football section, where some of our members reached National and International level.

This picture taken in 1970 shows just a few of the many wonderful players, whose names appear from left to right below: -

**Ricky Fear, Mel Rogers, Barry Hook, Mark Vardy, Phil Dean, Rod Priddle, Monty Britton, Roger McKeown, Arthur Kent, Paul Brown, Colin Powel, Pete Owen, Steve Bull, Alan Perry, Dickie Green, Lyn Lloyd**





For over sixty years, I have also been an avid supporter of the Fire Services National Benevolent Fund, (now called The Fire Fighters Charity) and through our Brigade Welfare Support Group, continue to work with colleagues to look after the interests of my extended “Fire Brigade Family”.

I hope my reminiscences about my time in the Fire Brigade have brought back some memories and also a few smiles. My thirty seven year career was a wonderful experience, at times most demanding but nevertheless rewarding. Most important of all however are the marvellous people I have worked with over the years, many of whom have become lifelong friends.

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In July 2015 and in recognition of his “Long Service and Exemplary Work on behalf of the Pensioners Association in Avon”, Monty was presented with a “Lifetime Achievement Award” by Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Jon Day.

When presented with the award Monty expressed not only his gratitude and appreciation of the Honour bestowed upon him but added how he would cherish it for many years to come.



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### ***Morgan “Monty” Britton B.E.M.***

Monty was named in the 2020 Queens New Year’s Honours list and, in recognition for his services to the Fire and Rescue Service and to the community of Bristol, he was awarded the British Empire Medal (Civil Division).

The award complements his exemplary commitment and dedication to his family, the Fire Service, voluntary support to the Fire Services National Benevolent Fund (FSNBF), voluntary support work for local Fire Service Pensioners Association and his local community is outstanding, enthusiastic and without parallel. Monty was an active and enthusiastic member of the Fire Services National Benevolent Fund serving as Chairman of the Divisional, Brigade and Group Councils for over 14 years and is

still today, at 92 years, an active member and supporter of the Firefighters Charity, and the Avon Fire & Rescue Service Welfare Liaison Team.

Upon retirement in 1986 Monty became the chairman of AF&RS Pensioners Association and continues to regularly communicate with members in their time of need. He has become a vital contact point for many former fire service colleagues, his recall of comradeship, incidents and knowledge of the service is invaluable. Since losing his wife five years ago he has kept strong and maintained his voluntary commitments and contacts whilst overcoming a serious illness. Forming the Neighbourhood Watch in 1990 he signed up 20 neighbours which, by 2005, had grown to over 400 and has been instrumental in bringing together his neighbourhood, especially at time when there is a need to help out at times distress and some hardship.

Monty’s big day was expected to be held at the Leigh Court Lieutenancy Offices in Bristol, but due to Covid-19 restrictions, the presentation was rearranged to take place at Southmead Fire Station on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020.

With social distancing safely observed by those invited, Monty was proudly presented with his British Empire Medal by the Lord Lieutenant of Bristol Peaches Golding who, in the presence of Chief Fire Officer Mick Crennell and some of Monty’s closest friends, presented Monty with his award.

Monty expressed how honoured he felt and reminisced about his time in the Service, the great experiences he shared and spoke fondly of the people he’d met throughout the years, most of whom he classes as his family.

Chief Fire Officer, Mick Crennell said: “Monty really is a true example of someone who has dedicated themselves to the communities within which they work and live, this honour is greatly deserved.

