

1831-1894

Before Malpas Parish Council was formed, following the 1894 Local Government Act, the affairs of the town were controlled by the local ratepayers who met together as the *Town or Vestry* meeting. In those days the rates were collected by the church, for such purposes as maintaining the roads, relieving the poor and keeping law and order. The ratepayers' meeting was also under the control of the church and one of the two Malpas Rectors was Chairman, by right. Records of early Vestry meetings (which were originally held in the church vestry) can be found in the Malpas Churchwardens' Account Books, which survive from 1692.

A major step forward in helping to provide public fire services was taken in 1830, with the passing of An Act to make Provision for the Lighting and Watching of Parishes in England and Wales, usually known as the *Lighting and Watching Act* for short. This Act gave local authorities, such as vestry meetings, the powers (but not the obligation) to raise a local rate for the purposes of financing fire protection provision. It was this act which gave the authority for Malpas to take a major step forward the following year.

The first surviving separate minute book for the Malpas Vestry Meeting, entitled Minute Book of the Meeting of the Ratepayers of the Township and Town of Malpas, starts in 1831. The Meeting was responsible for undertaking or supporting many improvements to the town, including laying the first sewers, improvement of the water supply and introduction of gas lighting for the streets.

Among the minutes of the first meeting recorded in the book, on 9 January 1831, there is a copy of a letter in which the ratepayers of the Parish of Malpas requested the churchwardens to call a meeting of the parish *"for the purpose of taking into consideration the best method of supplying Engines for the use of the Parish"*. This shows that, in those times, the churchwardens had a number of 'civil' duties in addition to their work in looking after the church's affairs and its building.

No time was wasted and the meeting of the parish was called for 18 January. At that meeting it was agreed to place an order with Messrs Tilley & Company, of Blackfriars Road in London, for *"2 Engines of the Second Class of twelve men power upon the improved principle, with six lengths of improved pipe ... One dozen of leather buckets at £5.20s.0d per dozen for each Engine. The Engines to be upon Block Wheels"*. Mr Tilley himself acknowledged the order, in a letter dated 21 January. His letter suggested certain modifications, including steering gear due to *"the inconvenience of moving engines on the Roads made only to run in a straight direction, also the probability of their being thrown over in turning corners as they must be lifted round"*, and cast iron spoke wheels, since *"the former are more durable and are not liable to get oval as those of wood are"*!

Although the cost of the engines would have to be met mainly from the parish rates it was decided also to invite subscriptions from all the local landowners, with the exception of Lord

Cholmondeley. A circular letter was sent to them, requesting *"Aid and Generosity ... on this Occasion"*. Some of the letters received in reply to this appeal are still preserved in the parish church records, including those from Sir Philip Grey Egerton at Oulton Park, Lord Kenyon and Sir John Hanmer. Encouraged by the response, the churchwardens then wrote to Lord Cholmondeley, to let him know that *"several replies have been received expressing an interest to subscribe.....may we take the liberty of requesting the name of your lordship at the head of the list, mentioning any donation your lordship may be pleased to contribute"*. Tactical fund-raising is nothing new!

A revised order, agreeing to the recommended modifications, was quickly despatched to Tilley & Company. They were requested to deliver the engines to Wheelock Wharf near Sandbach, from where they would be brought by road to Malpas. The churchwardens' accounts tell us that the two fire engines cost £158.19s.0d (£158.95). Transport charges were £4.13s.0d (£4.65) for the canal journey and £1.19s.5d (£1.97) paid to *"Mr Phillips for carriage of the Engines from Wheelock"*.

It was agreed that the engines should be based at Malpas and the Broxton Inn (now the Egerton Arms). Mr Joseph Huxley, the Malpas builder, was paid a total of £7.5s.9d (£7.29) for some work on the engines and for building the Malpas engine house. Mr Richard Bourne was paid (£9.14s.0d (£9.70) for building the Broxton engine house and for other expenses. Mr Jones, a local painter, was paid 4s.6d (22.5p) for lettering the buckets with the parish name.

The engines were horse drawn and had to be pumped manually, by men working a long pump bar which ran the length of the engine. This explains the specification *"of twelve men power"* in the original order for the engines. The men would either go out with the engine or be recruited at the scene of the fire. For their assistance they were paid either in cash or in beer. The engines appear to have been heavily used with the result that in 1834 the Vestry meeting was asked to approve expenditure on new wheels and axles for the Malpas engine. This also seems to be when some sort of uniform was first provided: *"... flannel dresses [uniforms] to be provided for each engineer"*.

The Vestry/Town Meeting minute book tells us little more about the parish fire service after 1834. Some information can be found in the columns of the Chester Chronicle and the Whitchurch Herald. To hunt through all the papers for the period 1831-1895 would be a huge task, since the newspapers are not indexed. However, some references which I have come across suggest that the engines were used mainly to attend house and farm fires, as one would expect.

By 1890 the residents of Malpas were becoming very concerned about the apparent inefficiency of the parish fire service. Pressure was put on the Churchwardens, who still had responsibility for the two engines. The wardens finally called a public meeting in the recently built (1897) Jubilee Hall, in April 1890. The advertised purpose of the meeting was *"to consider the present condition and state of efficiency of the fire engine, with a view to its re-organisation,*

and the forming of a fire brigade for Malpas and district". At the meeting it was revealed that the operation of the existing engine was in debt to the tune of £34.19s.3d (£34.96). One of the main problems in recent years had been the difficulty of finding men to go out with the engine, since there was no organised permanent brigade. In the words of Mr W P Huxley, who had day-to-day care of the Malpas engine, *"in cases of emergency, what was everyone's business appeared to be no body's business"*.

The meeting agreed that a local rate could be levied by the Churchwardens to support the service, since Malpas had adopted the 1830 Lighting and Watching Act. The Chairman of the meeting, Mr St John Charlton (agent to the Cholmondeley Estate), referred to the prevailing good public spirit in Malpas at the time and which *"was so marked at the Jubilee (1887) by the erection of such a beautiful hall, they would not at the present allow it to go unprotected from destruction by fire"*.

A committee was appointed to inspect both the Malpas and the Broxton engines. In this they were assisted by a Mr Edwards *"who had been instrumental in the recent organisation of the Fire Brigade at Farndon"*. The report on the two existing engines was that, although they were nearly 60 years old, they were both still in reasonable condition. However, the Malpas engine was not powerful enough for the town, since it could not throw water to the tops of the higher houses. It was agreed that the Broxton engine should continue in use but that a new engine should be purchased for Malpas and a brigade be organised. The existing Malpas engine could then be re-located to Bickley or Cholmondeley.

1895-1932

Whether the Malpas fire engine and the brigade survived right until the formation of Malpas Parish Council in December 1894 is not clear. What is known is that the Broxton engine was taken over by the newly formed Broxton Parish Council early in 1895. They moved it from the Egerton Arms to a new fire engine house which they built on the Old Coach Road. This still stands, opposite the entrance to Frogg Manor Hotel, and bears the inscription 'BFB [Broxton Fire Brigade] 1895' over the door. The engine house still belongs to the Parish Council and is rented to a private resident for domestic purposes. The Broxton engine had not been so heavily used as the Malpas engine and was probably in a better state. It went out occasionally, mainly to farm fires. There do not appear to have been any regular firemen and it may be that the victims of fires had to come to fetch the engine and operate it themselves, making a payment for its use. In 1925 the Parish Council formed a Broxton Fire Brigade Committee, comprising five members, and accepted the offer of the Broxton Sports Committee to donate the proceeds of their sports (£95.3s.0d = £95.15) to the upkeep of the engine. In 1932 it was decided to dispose of the engine and to transfer the balance of £39.18s.9d (£39.94) in the fire engine account to the Parish Council's general account. The engine was sold to the Bolesworth Estate for a minimum of £7.10s.0d (£7.50) and the engine shed was let for an annual rent of £2.12s.0d (£2.60). Recent enquiries to the Bolesworth Estate office suggest that the engine no longer exists.



A TILLEY HAND PUMPED ENGINE OF THE TYPE PURCHASED IN 1831



INSCRIPTION OVER DOOR OF BROXTON FIRE ENGINE HOUSE



BROXTON FIRE ENGINE HOUSE TAKEN IN 2009

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