

Riverstone Fire Brigade

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Compiled by Clarrie Neal from information and photos provided by Len Parry, Peter Aldridge, Penrith Museum of Fire and the Windsor and Richmond Gazette.

The first Fire Brigade was formed in Riverstone in 1925 when the Fire Board asked Charles Davis, a prominent storekeeper in the town, to nominate two men suitable to form the brigade. Charles was also asked to look for suitable premises to house the brigade.

The brigade was formed with John Weaver as Captain and Harry Head as his assistant, both men being partially paid. The other six purely voluntary members were -

Les Bray,	Harry King,	Albert Keegan,
George Wiggins,	M. G. Arnett,	A. Rankine.

John Weaver as captain received a retainer of 32 shillings and sixpence per month, with Harry Head receiving seven shillings and sixpence per month. In 1927 John requested that the other six volunteers receive the seven shillings and sixpence retainer.

A horse drawn turbine appliance, No. 69, was transferred from Richmond to become the brigade's first unit. It is not certain where the unit was first housed, but a Mr J. Andrews received five shillings a week for the lease of the shed. Records at the Penrith Museum of Fire show the Fire Board strongly objected to placards being placed on the walls of the shed by a Mr Harper, advertising the then current shows at his Riverstone Picture Hall.

Len Parry believes the shed was between the railway station and Taylor's produce store. A report in 1925 states 'the building is very old and does not provide good housing for the appliance, or sufficient comfort to encourage members to attend of an evening', also that planks were to be laid on the dirt floor.

Len, now aged 86, recalled as a young lad going with his father Bert Parry to this shed and sitting there by the light of a hurricane lamp. Each volunteer fighter had to spend one night each week from 7.00 pm to 10.00 pm, signing the book and maintaining equipment.

A large bell, similar to a church bell, was used to call the volunteers to the outbreak of fire. Len also recalled other members being wary of John Weaver as he often advanced the spark timing so that whoever started the pump would receive a kick.

It is believed that the same horse used at the sawmill was used to pull the brigade cart. Len also recalls a truck owned by Jess Goodwin often towed the cart, and an attached report shows a vehicle owned by Lyle Rosenthal towed the cart to a fire on the 4th March, 1928. Another report in 1926 shows Les Bray suffered a badly damaged foot when the turbine engine ran over his foot as it was returning from drill.

Fire-fighting equipment in those days was very basic; a cart that carried hoses and a small hand started pump. With no reticulated water supply in the town, the pump was used to draw the water from the nearest creek, dam or well. Sometimes for fighting bush fires the only equipment available was a green tree branch or a wet bag.

On the 4th September 1931, No. 98 motor engine, a solid rubber tyred Garford Hale appliance, was installed at the Riverstone Fire Station. Records show that at this time a new brick fire station 32 ft x 12 ft, with a galvanised iron roof was built for the Fire Board on land leased from Taylor's produce store for 10 shillings per week.

This time the land was on the northern side of the store, between Riverstone Parade and the railway line and the building was to serve Riverstone until 1972. In the 1950s a siren was installed to replace the old fire bell.

The brigade's first Captain J. W. Weaver resigned on the 31st August 1930 and was replaced by Harry Head who held the position until the 18th August 1936, resigning after completing 10 years service. The brigade in 1931 was:-

Harry Head - Captain and Engine keeper,
Harry King, Bert Parry, Herb Freeman, A. L. Aberley, Arthur Wells, W. Doolan, Cecil Gibbs.

Long serving volunteers in this period were:-

Albert Keegan 1925 - 28	Les Bray 1925 - 29
Herb Freeman 1928 - 46	Arthur Wells 1929 - 51
A.L. Aberley 1929 - 35	Bill Doolan 1930 - 31
Cecil Gibbs 1930 - 42	Joe Fitzgerald 1931 - 38
G. Saxby 1935 - 37	

It appears that the No. 98 unit was replaced with another Garford Hale unit No.154 in 1935. In 1937 a telephone fire alarm was installed in Railway Terrace, opposite St Albans Road, Schofields with a direct line to the Riverstone Fire station. A Garford Hale unit No.131 served the area in the 1940s.

Bert Parry who had joined the Riverstone brigade on the 1st March 1927, took over the captaincy from Harry Head on the 18th August 1936. He continued to serve in this position until 1965, a total of 28 years as the captain. As the longest serving volunteer fireman in the history of the town's brigade, Bert was honoured for these 38 years of service with a plaque inscribed on the bell located at the new Fire Station when it was opened in 1972 on the corner of Church Street and Riverstone Parade. Bert's son Len Parry, joined the brigade on the 1st October 1936 and also received a long service medal for his 20 years service.

Henry Cooke became a volunteer fireman in 1937. In 1943 on his way to answer a fire call he was riding his bike down Garfield Road and when cutting the corner into Riverstone Parade he collided with the fire engine on its way to the fire. Henry suffered nasty injuries in the collision, including a fractured skull, dislocated shoulder, fractured left wrist and lacerations to the left leg.

Another unfortunate incident occurred on Christmas Eve 1950. Harry King, one of the town's original volunteer firemen, failed to return home after a fire call to the Meatworks. At 3.00 am his wife went to the Meatworks to inquire of his whereabouts, a subsequent search finding Harry lying in the grass near the fire station. He was conveyed by ambulance to the Parramatta Hospital where he died later in the morning from a cerebral haemorrhage.

Other long serving volunteers who served with Bert over the years included:-

Henry Cooke 1937 - 43	Hilton Platt 1938 - 40
Les Alderton 1942 - 46	Hector Magennis 1944 - 51
Neville Alcorn 1946 - 71	Morrie Haylor 1946 - 65
D. Wills 1948 - 50	Jim Andrews 1951 - 55
Eric Gunton 1951 - 66	Neville McGaughey 1951 - 61
Reg Anderson 1960 - 66	

In 1972 when the new Fire Station was built, Stockmans resumed using the old brigade building to store baled hay. In 1975 this hay combusted and the resultant fire caused the building's walls to collapse and it had to be demolished.

When Bert retired in 1965 his son-in-law Neville Alcorn became the brigade captain. Neville had joined the brigade in 1946 and he retired in 1971, a total of 25 years service for which he received the Queen's Medal. Names of other members at the time included:-

Stan Russell 'Red' Buchanan 'Sonny' Knott.

Peter Aldridge joined the brigade in 1966 and became captain in 1974, a position he was to hold for the next 25 years. Names of other volunteers of this era include:-

Bill Burnett	Norm Herrington	Ken Nobbs
John Fulton	Ray Coleman	Gary Murray
Jim Quillan	Brian Kemp	Michael Britton
Brian Wallace	Len Gosling.	

Peter recalled volunteer's payment in those days was made up of a 20 shillings/month retainer, 20 shillings/month to attend drills, and seven shillings and sixpence per hour when fire fighting.

The Riverstone brigade since its inception has been manned by volunteers. It was volunteers only up to January 1990 when permanent staff were introduced for the first time. Monday to Friday from 8.00 am to 4.30 pm it was manned by a Station Officer with three permanents, plus volunteers. At all other times (week-ends and night time) it was staffed with a Station Officer plus volunteers on call.

It is believed the Garford Hale unit was replaced with a Dennis unit in the 1950s, and then followed the Bedford, a D Series Ford, a 1700 Series International and today it is a 1800 Series International.

The brigade has attended many major fires. In 1932 a fire destroyed the town's largest store, a two storey weather-board building along with an adjacent store. After a day of fighting bush fires on the 14th January 1939 (Black Saturday) that claimed the lives of two persons and destroyed many homes in the district, volunteer Harry King collapsed from heat exhaustion and cramps and had to be hospitalised.

The flames from the fire that destroyed the Berkley Box factory in Edward Street in the 1970s were visible for many miles.

However the worst and the most tragic fires occurred at the old Meatworks. The most spectacular was the skin shed fire that occurred in the evening of 27th July 1970. Residents from Windsor and Richmond reporting seeing the flames, and the glow was visible as far away as Katoomba. The skin shed was totally destroyed, but worse was the 3,700 sheep and 820 pigs that were burnt to death. These animals had been placed in pens underneath the skin shed ready for the next day's slaughter. It was impossible to get near to the stock to save them, and the community of Riverstone did not take too kindly to reports from certain sections of the media that more could have been done.

Several weeks later temporary holding pens were built between the mutton board and the freezers to enable production to continue. On the 8th October when a fire broke out in the freezer section, many workers aware of the previous criticisms, rushed in to get the sheep out. It was on the roof over these men that the collapsing freezer wall fell, resulting in the death of six work mates and several others being seriously injured. It was a tragic event that had a devastating effect on the entire community of the Riverstone district.

Following a series of fires at the Meatworks in the 1950s, the Riverstone Meat Company decided to set up their own brigade. They bought a 1929 Garford tender and built the fire station behind the Meat Inspectors dining rooms. Staff who served on this brigade include:-

Bill Anderson	Dennis Graham	Eric Graham
Bob Taber	Norm Brown	Arthur Godfrey
Keith Turnbull	John Fulton	Kevin Gough

While training was always a serious matter, members still recall the day they parked the vehicle on the bank of Eastern Creek and while practicing their hose drill, leaking hoses caused the vehicle to slide down the bank into the creek.

The last day on which the Riverstone Fire Brigade Station was manned by permanent staff was Thursday, 12 December 2002. The Brigade was then transferred to the new station at Hambleton Road, Schofields/Quakers Hill, which was officially opened on Tuesday, 11 March 2003.

The Station at Riverstone is now manned by "Retained Fire Fighters" on call. (i.e. Volunteer fire fighters.)