



The
CHIEF





THE CHIEF

A TRIBUTE
TO THE LATE

JIM HARKER

CHIEF FIRE OFFICER
OF THE
GEDDINGTON VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADE
1979-84

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“THE CHIEF”

Jim Harker devoted a great deal of his life to Geddington and the Geddington Volunteer Fire Brigade became, in many ways, the embodiment of the spirit of service and affection which guided all the many things that Jim did for his beloved village.

It began quite by chance really, in 1977, a year which will always be remembered for its “winter of discontent”, the regular firemen took what was for them the rare step of going on strike. Although the Government announced emergency plans, villages like Geddington seemed distinctly vulnerable if disaster were to occur. Jim Harker immediately organised a team of volunteers, drawn from all sections of the village community, who were ready to turn out at any hour and to help in any emergency which might arise. Lists of telephone numbers were drawn up and an organization was created. These volunteers had no training or special expertise but they mustered between them a great variety of talent and they shared a willingness and a determination to do whatever they could, should they be needed.

Fortunately, apart from a tree felled by a winter gale, their resolve was not put to the test, but the enthusiasm which had been engendered had a special quality. The firemen's strike ended and the volunteers staged a “standing down” dinner, which was greatly enjoyed, so much so that an anniversary dinner was arranged the following year. At this second dinner, it was decided that there was a permanent place in the village community for a body of men who were willing to join together to tackle any emergency, firemen or no firemen, and so the idea of the Geddington Volunteer Fire Brigade was born.

On 7th December 1979, the Brigade was formally established with Jim Harker elected by acclaim as its Chief. From then on, events acquired their own momentum. A Charity Fund was set up, a trailer pump was acquired and renovated, a uniform evolved, a goat was adopted as a mascot and a marching song was composed. It was all great fun and much of it harmless nonsense but, beneath the superficial joke was a serious purpose: a body of men was organized and ready to help in any village crisis. Crises of various kinds soon came along. Teams turned out to mop up a flood in an old lady's cottage, to move a pensioner's furniture into a new flat and to raise more funds at Dutch auctions. Presiding over these activities was “The Chief”, always taking the lead, always looking for opportunities where the Brigade might help and always enjoying the humorous banter which characterized the Brigade's meetings. Not content with the trailer pump, he was soon in negotiation to purchase a full-sized fire tender, which was solemnly christened “Queen Eleanor” by Princess Margaret at Boughton House in 1981 and which became a popular feature at local fetes, swelling the Brigade's charity fund. This steadily growing fund enhanced the annual distribution of the ancient Samuel Lee Charity and provided a Christmas bonus to senior citizens in the village.

“The Chief” played a very special role in the Brigade, which he saw as an extension of his own sense of community service. It was an expression of his

pride, his humanity and even his patriotism, all of which were deeply embedded in his character. All those who served in the Brigade held him in the greatest respect and affection, recognising the honesty and sincerity of purpose which guided all he did, both publicly and privately. His early and sudden death was a grievous blow and it was fitting that Brigade members should have carried him to his final resting place in the village churchyard. He left a gap which could never be filled: the Brigade will never have another Chief.

As a tribute to "The Chief" and to a fine English gentleman, we here print some extracts from the Parade Records of the Geddington Volunteer Fire Brigade in the hope that they will convey something of the spirit and the enjoyment which were his unique inspiration.

All proceeds from the sale of this publication will go to the Geddington Volunteer Fire Brigade, which is a registered charity.

THE BOXING DAY PARADE

Every Boxing Day since 1979, the Brigade has paraded through the village and demonstrated its squirting power, usually successfully, at the brook. A collection is taken for charity and a good time is had by all.

Boxing Day 1979

"The Chief Fire Officer, impressively disguised as the late Prince Bismarck, inspected the Parade and issued his orders of the day."

September 1980

"It was agreed to arrange for a Parade on similar lines to the previous Boxing Day and the Chief undertook to seek the Vicar's intercession in respect of the weather."

January 1981

"Fireman Miles presented his photographs of the Boxing Day Parade. Members felt that they did convey something of the atmosphere of the occasion. Most remarkable was the areola which was clearly visible surrounding the head of the Chief. While sceptics might attribute this variously to the high polish on his helmet or the Victualling Officer's beverage, more faithful souls might recognise the truly supernatural nature of this phenomenon. It would be unwise, however, to give publicity to this manifestation in case the arrival of too many nuns disrupted the normal progress of agriculture at Little Oakley."

EMERGENCY SERVICE

The Chief was always on the look-out for ways in which the Brigade could serve the village or individuals who needed particular help. He frequently assisted people in trouble himself and, if the record of these events was usually lighthearted, the good deeds themselves were genuine.

