

FIRE SERVICE IN BRAINTREE AND THE DISTRICT

In 1632, Braintree was one of the first places in the UK to have a *“fire engine for the common good of the parish to quench fires”*.

Many local authorities in Essex worked together with the insurance companies offering fire protection service for their community. Equipment would have ranged from buckets to beaters to a manual pump. Later, larger towns would have had steam fire engines. Smaller communities had volunteers who were rewarded with a few pints of beer once the fire was out.

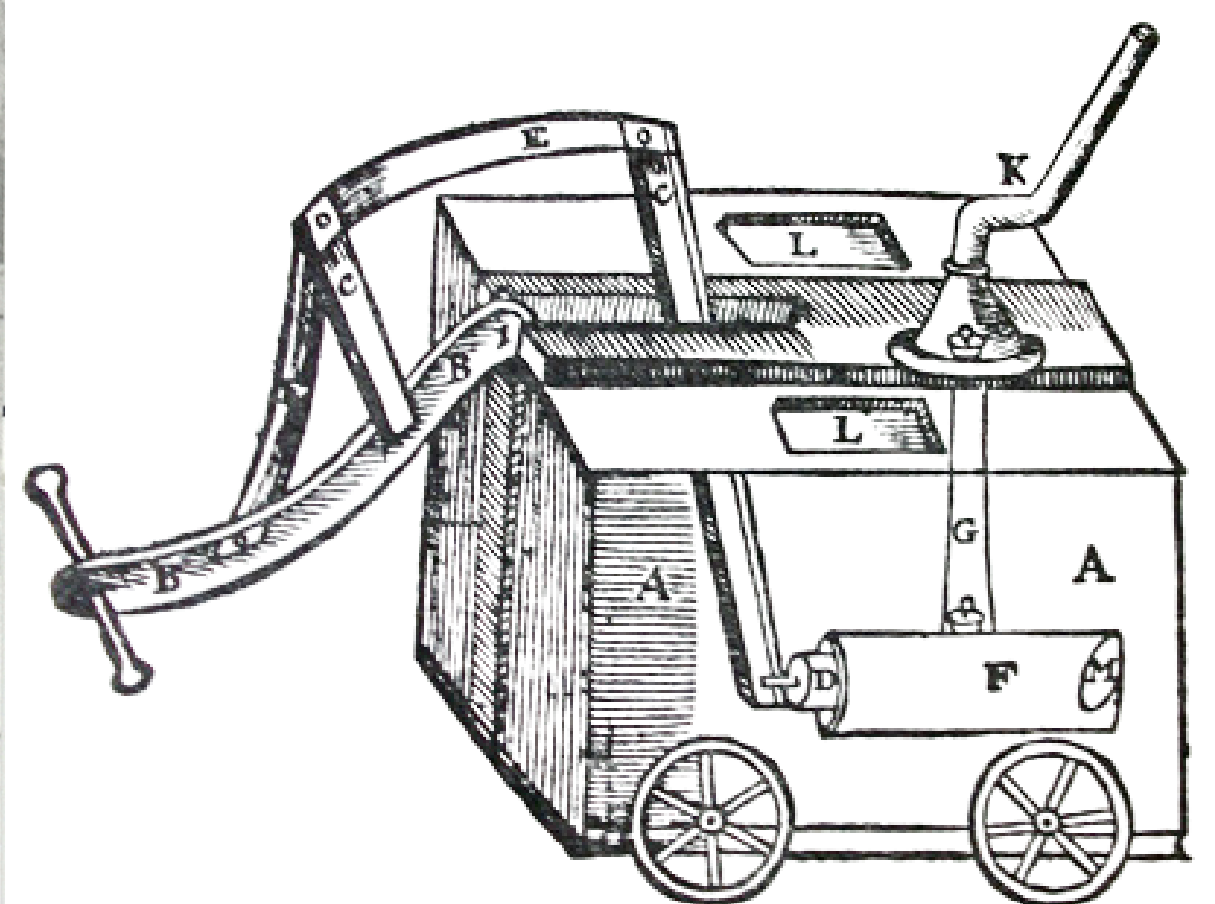
Locally, ‘engines’ were operated by Essex and Suffolk Equitable Insurance Society, Essex Economic Fire Office and the Finchingfield Society.

The first recording of Braintree having a fire brigade is in 1869 with a manual engine but the town’s official brigade formed in 1880 eventually merging with Bocking Fire Brigade around 1934.

From 1938 there were approximately 60 separate fire brigades in Essex alone. The way we fought fire during the Second World War had a lasting effect on how the service developed and it wasn’t until 1948 that local authorities resumed control again. Changes continued to happen throughout the intervening years and currently Essex is protected by the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service with headquarters at Kelvedon Park near Witham.



Bocking Fire Brigade’s horse drawn engine circa 1910.



Etching of the engine likely to have been purchased for Braintree in 1632.

WILLIAM DUNLOP

1850 - 1909

Born in Colchester in 1850, at the age of 21 William is living in Braintree and has become a stone mason. Six years later, in 1877, he joins the Braintree fire brigade.

This would have been a part-time position as a fireman responding to fires and attending training drills. By 1899 he is promoted to Captain of the Brigade but is also working full-time as a 'monumental sculptor' and 'builder mason' as well as the leader of the town band.

As Captain of the Brigade, William Dunlop would have been responsible for a team of about ten men. He would have planned and coordinated firefighting operations, conducted fire drills and safety inspections, overseen the maintenance of the fire station and equipment as well as keeping records and reports in a log book.

From this same log book it is noted that in 1907 Captain Dunlop falls seriously ill and is unable to attend the drills. It is then suggested that Superintendent F. Rudkin take over his duties while he recovers. However, sadly Captain Dunlop passes away in 1909 and F. Rudkin takes over as Captain permanently. At his funeral the members of the Braintree Fire Brigade and Town Band attend in full uniform and marched in front of the coffin.



Braintree Fire Brigade circa 1902.
Captain Dunlop standing top right.

PERCY COOTE

1893 - 1936

Born and raised in Braintree, he was the eldest son of Mr. Harry Coote, who served 27 years in the Braintree Fire Brigade and retired with the rank of Chief Fireman. Percy was employed as a fitter at the Crittall works and because he lived around the corner to the factory on Albert Road became captain of the Crittall works fire brigade Braintree.



Percy joined Braintree Fire Brigade in 1914 at the outbreak of WW1. He was probably exempt from enlisting to fight, not because he was a fireman, but because he was an industrial worker at Crittalls. Percy was awarded the silver medal for 20 years' service in 1934. He was a very keen and capable officer in both brigades and according to his fellow firemen was most conscientious and reliable, thoroughly dependable, and very efficient in his duties. He was generally the first man to answer a fire call, and whatever he had to do he did well.

Sadly, Percy Coote had a fatal accident while participating in the weekly drill practice at Water Tower Yard. This included training to go down a fire escape chute from a platform on the tower, 30ft. from the ground. Several of the firemen had come down the chute and Supt. Percy Coote, in full uniform and wearing the regulation firemen's heavy boots, started the descent. When he was half-way down the canvas chute ripped open and Supt. Coote fell heavily, his head hitting the concrete floor of the yard. Badly injured, Dr. Anderson was summoned; and Percy was rushed to the William Courtauld Hospital. He died three hours later. It was later found that a nail was sticking out from one of his boots and got caught in the canvas chute ripping it open.



"Members of the Chelmsford, Colchester and Witham Fire Brigades, with their black-draped fire engines, and his colleagues of the Braintree Fire Brigade, all of whom attended a fire together less than a fortnight ago, were present at the funeral at Braintree on Thursday October 2nd 1936 of Supt. Percy Coote".

RON HUTLEY

1920 - 2013

Soon after the declaration of War in 1939 many people joined the Air Raid Precaution Organisation known as the A.R.P. This organisation supported the emergency services as a rescue team after enemy attacks. Ron Hutley joined the A.R.P. at the age of 19 and was a worker at one of the building companies based in Braintree.

At the request of the Urban District Council, two building companies in Braintree, A.D. Letch and E.C.P. Brand (who also built the Braintree Fire Station on Drury Lane in 1931) formed their workers into rescue teams for the A.R.P.

When air raid sirens sounded their instructions were to report to the A.R.P. Centre on London Rd. where the first teams of first aid, rescue and breakdown assembled ready for call out during a raid. Ron would be there night after night on a bunk, in his uniform ready for action.

Ron was called up for the army and served in the Royal Artillery. He worked anti-aircraft guns across the country; supported the clearing and rebuilding of cities; was an artillery driver during the allied advance in France and Germany; witnessed the liberation of the concentration camp of Belsen and transported S.S. officers to prison.

He was demobbed in 1946 and from 1956 Ron served as a retained fireman at Braintree Fire Brigade.



Braintree Fire Brigade
circa 1960s
Ron Hutley, seated 2nd
from the right.

BRAINTREE & BOCKING RIVALRY

The spirit of competitiveness between Braintree and Bocking extended to their fire brigades, especially when Bocking purchased a new motor engine costing around £500 in January 1925, proudly parading it around the parish.

Later that year the Bocking Brigade appeared at the Braintree Carnival procession and were promptly dubbed “the Bocking Brass Hats”. Locals attending the carnival came dressed up as a comic take of the Braintree Brigade pushing a cart with buckets and scruffily dressed. (pictured)

Braintree Council were annoyed by these developments and soon agreed that they must have a better and bigger engine than Bocking and proposed an engine that cost £1,000. At a Council meeting they were asked *“if Braintree were considering spending a thousand pounds on a fire engine because Bocking had spent just over half that amount and it was felt that Braintree couldn’t allow Bocking to do it on us”* and the council responded *“That is the general idea!”*.

Bocking had to take out a loan to buy the new engine and to support the repayments they offered their fire protection to the wider community. So, when Braintree tried to do the same a year later it failed as, regardless of the size of the engine, surrounding villages had already signed up to Bocking’s support. It was therefore agreed that the Braintree Brigade would be reimbursed for their services as and when called out.



THE GREAT WAR

DEFENDING BRAINTREE

The First World War saw a shortage of manpower in brigades as most men signed up to fight or joined the reserves. The reservists were soon asked to return to firefighting duties after fires caused by the German bombing raids almost overwhelmed the brigades.

This also triggered the co-operation between neighbouring brigades being strongly encouraged. However, full co-operation didn't quite work because non-standardisation of hydrants, stand pipes and hose couplings limited how brigade equipment worked together.

Strategies were adopted by Braintree Fire Brigade during the First World War to prepare for air raids:

1. Every fireman on duty, if not visited by the Captain or Officer in Charge, to report himself at intervals at the Captain's House.
2. Twelve Special Firemen were appointed 21st June 1915, a number of which are listed above.
3. An inventory of ladders available in the district to be used at fires was taken. Twenty eight locations were registered, at private addresses, factories, banks, shops.
4. The use of Messrs Courtauld's manual fire engine was approved by Mr S. A. Courtauld, provided it was looked after and any damage to be put right.
5. In relation to black outs, permission was granted by the Chief Constable to use lights on drill nights five days before the full moon, and five days after.

THE GREAT WAR

DEFENDING CHELMSFORD

As war progressed it became far more difficult for fire brigades to maintain their supply of horses to pull their fire appliances because they were needed for the Army overseas. The added threat of enemy bombing, meant that fire brigade callouts would increase despite having depleted resources.

The Chelmsford Borough Fire Brigade's Chief Officer, in May 1915, called a meeting to discuss the threat bombing posed on the town, the risk of many fires breaking out at the same time, along with the concern for the Brigade's inability to tackle more than two fires at once.

It was proposed that fifteen unpaid volunteer firemen be appointed and 500 feet of extra hose and couplings, two standpipes, one hand truck, twelve belts and axes and fifteen armlets, were needed. This rapid reaction to bolster manpower and equipment at this early stage of the war would stand the Chelmsford Borough Fire Brigade in good stead. Chelmsford had no concern about conscription of firemen, as they had by that time a pool of well trained and enthusiastic older volunteers to call upon. The volunteers would be used only in the event of fires resulting from air raids and would be summoned, at the discretion of the Superintendent, by sounding the Borough's fire alarm. Regular firemen would be summoned by electric bells that had been fitted in their homes. The Borough took the welfare of the volunteers seriously. They were issued with overalls, axes, badges and armlets. Chelmsford eventually purchased a powerful motor car – a Panhard – modified by a local garage - Roslin's of Springfield Road - to pull a steam fire engine as by 1918 the supply of horses had completely dried up.

THE GREAT WAR

DEFENDING COLCHESTER

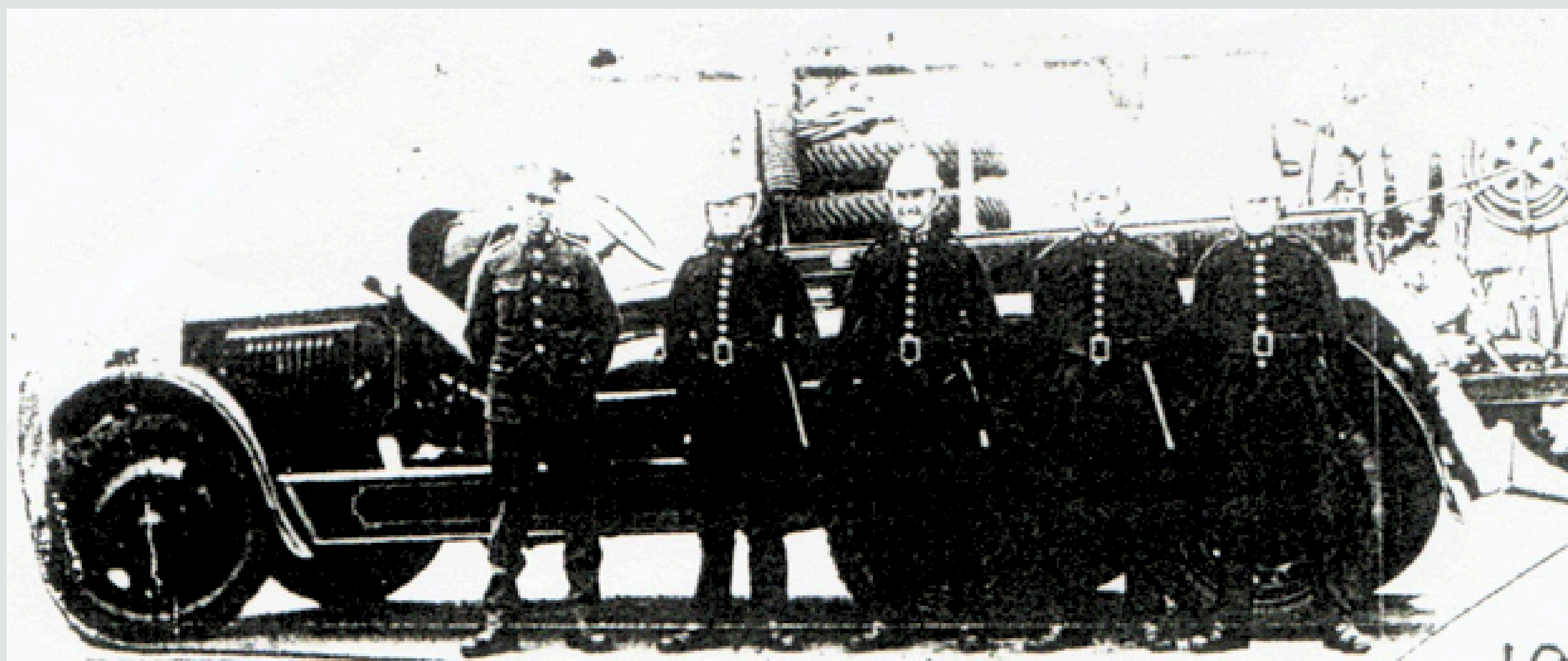
The Colchester Borough Fire Brigade approach to the threat of bombing differed from its neighbours.

They coordinated local private fire brigades including: factory, hospital and mill brigades to deal with possible simultaneous outbreaks of fires resulting from enemy air raids.

The chief officer of the Brigade was asked to meet with the captains of these private brigades and owners of apparatus within the Borough, including the military authorities, to form a plan.

Several sizeable local companies, and the Army, joined a scheme whereby their brigades were given specific areas in Colchester to cover and roles to undertake in the event of air raids, but it was not recorded if this scheme was ever utilised apart from firemen's training was increased, and they were all instructed in first aid.

Nevertheless, Colchester made every effort to maximise the potential of all firefighting organisations within the Borough for the duration of the war.



Colchester Garrison Fire Brigade
Engine: Thornycroft "Merryweather" 12 tons
Essex Fire Museum Archive

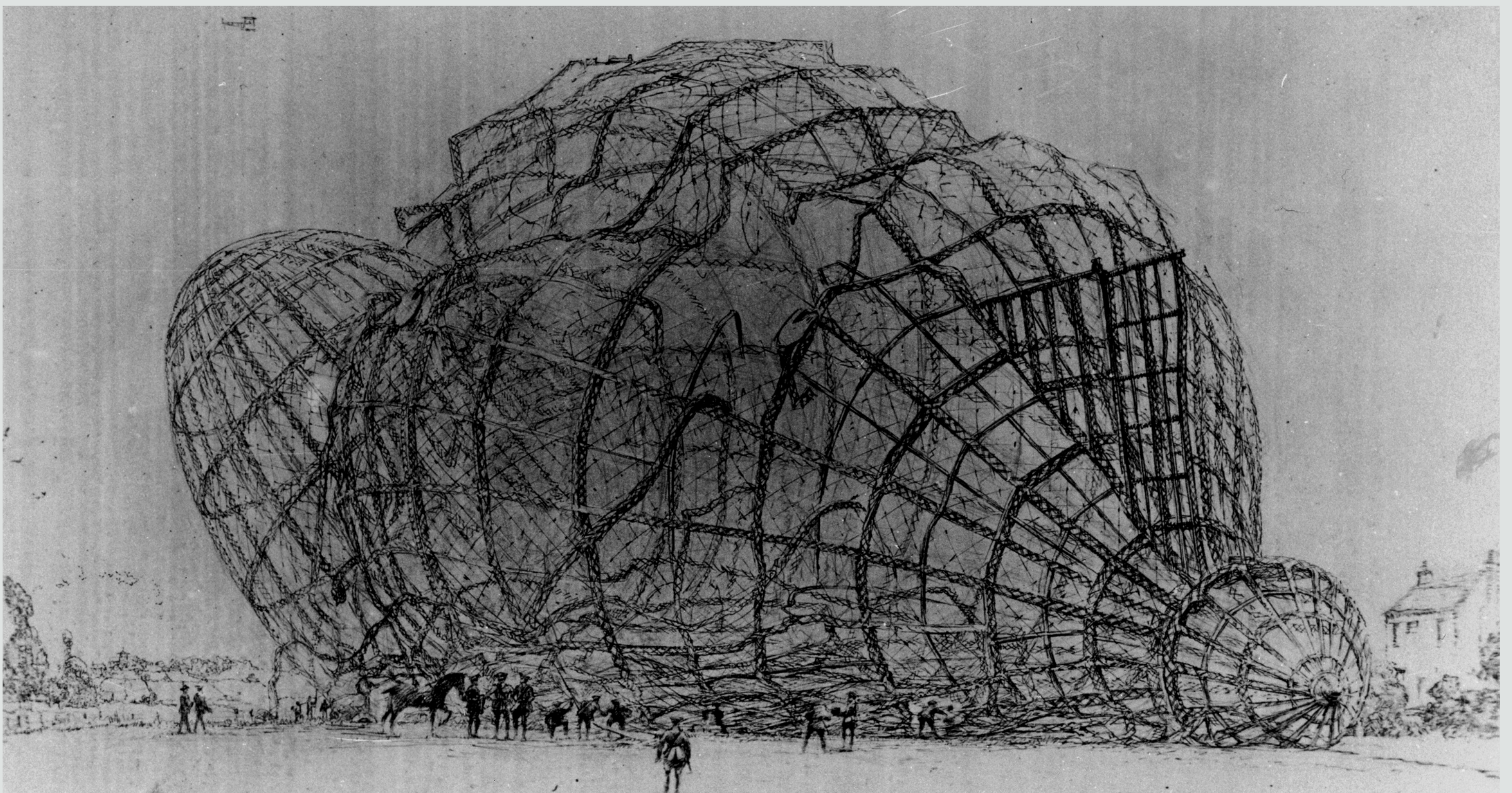
ZEPPELIN RAIDS

During the First World War, Britain came under attack from the air, putting civilians in the firing line for the very first time. With the defence focussing on the coastline and the Royal Flying Corps operating overseas it left the British skies open for enemy attack.

The main German airship was the Zeppelin, which was made of a light metal framework filled covered by fabric and with different gasses. There were over 100 Zeppelin scouting missions and raids over Britain between 1914 and 1918 targeting the war industry. Many missed their targets and ended up doing terrible damage to buildings, injuring and killing many people.

The authorities were going to have to act quickly to try and combat this new threat, not only the military, but also the various civilian services, including the fire brigades.

Eventually, defences improved and British fighter pilots and anti-aircraft gunners became very good at bringing down Zeppelins. In Essex, two Zeppelins came down in 1916. Reports from the time describe how local people and cars full of Londoners rushed to see the wreckage.



A Memory Sketch, by Adam Bruce Thomson of Zeppelin L33, brought down in Essex, Sept. 23, 24,—1916. Passed by Censor. F.H.

ZEPPELIN RAIDS

TWO RAIDS ON BRAINTREE

Because Crittalls and Lake & Elliot were helping the war effort producing armoury, Braintree was a target and suffered two air raids.

21st February 1915 - First attack on Braintree

This raid was carried out by German aircraft using incendiary bombs. Around 8.30pm bombs were dropped on London Road and at Great Bradfords Farm off Coggeshall Road, shattering nearby windows. Mr Reeve, signalman at Braintree Railway Station, heard the buzz of the aeroplane flying over and saw a streak of light as the bombs fell. The same aircraft later dropped bombs at Coggeshall and Colchester. Thankfully no lives were lost.

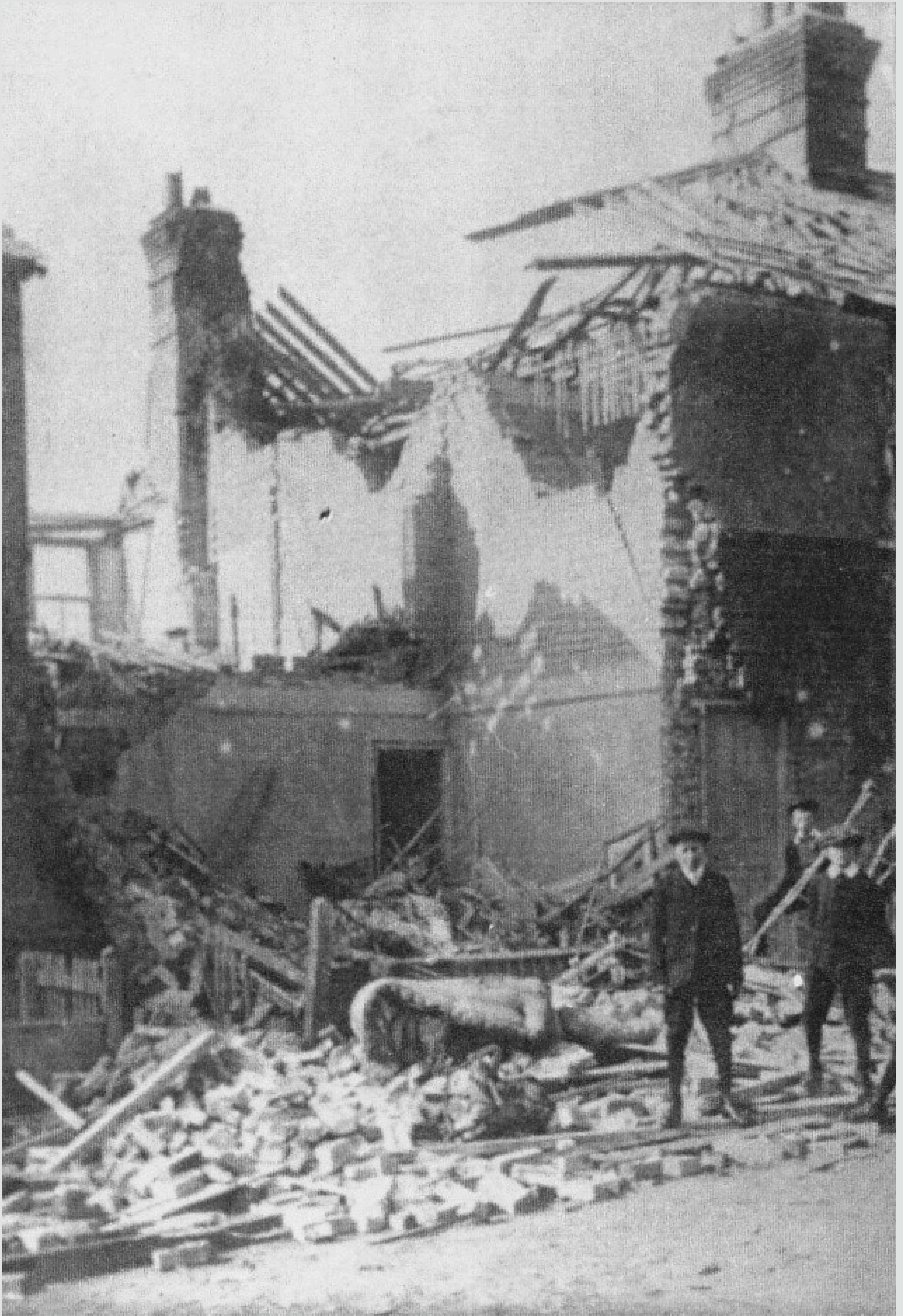
31st March 1916 - Second attack on Braintree

Zeppelin L14 arrived over Braintree and at 11pm 3 bombs were dropped. At 19 Coronation Avenue Mrs Ann Herbert was killed but her daughter and her two children, in their beds, were blown down to the ground floor and were rescued with just a few cuts, bruises and shock. No. 19's chimney fell onto 21 Coronation Avenue killing Alfred and Annie Dennington and their 3 year old niece Ella. The 2nd and 3rd bombs fell harmlessly to the west of Coronation Avenue, one landed on an apple tree, the other on open ground creating a crater about the size of a van also blasting out windows on London Road.

After the raid in Braintree, more rules came into place for home defence. The Fire Brigade would patrol the streets on watch for any bombs whilst the police controlled traffic making sure that the blackout was being observed.

Windows of what is now homes on London Road, Braintree, shattered by the explosion from the bomb on 21st February 1915. [BRNTM NEG: 146]





Bomb damage at 19 and 21 Coronation Avenue, the morning after the Zeppelin raid on 31st March 1916.

BRAINTREE AFS

As the country prepared for another war so did the fire brigades. It started with The Fire Brigades Act of 1938 making local authorities responsible for providing fire brigades, engines, and equipment. There was also an urgent need to adapt the brigades for a wartime role. Although all firemen were exempt from war service it was quickly established that brigades needed many more personnel and better equipment.

In 1938 a large recruitment campaign was launched encouraging men and women to join the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS). A new service to support and strengthen the fire service in time of crisis.

The AFS would deal with fires caused by the intense dropping of incendiary devices by the enemy. AFS crews had to seek out and organise the relay of water over long distances using trailer pumps and fix communications that could be cut between fire stations and telephone exchanges.

The Chief Officer of Leyton Fire Brigade, Essex was reported to have refused to accept women into the AFS. He was quoted saying '*...no woman is going to come into my fire station while I am here... women would be more trouble than they are worth...*' How wrong he was!

Braintree AFS recommended it was manned by men over 25 years old and a total of 149 were required. The Government was requested to pay for 2 large, 3 medium and 5 small trailer pumps to be maintained by Braintree Urban District Council.

By 1939, the national recruitment campaign had enlisted nearly 175,000 people but still far short of the required 300,000. Nonetheless, AFS members were ready for action.

Firefighting units in Essex were mainly fighting land and building fires caused by aircraft crashes or discarded bombs and incendiary devices. In Braintree, 3 people were killed and 23 injured after the town centre was targeted in February 1941.

Not only were local fire crews protecting their own community, they were regularly alerted to attend incidents further afield sometimes as far as London!

BRAINTREE NFS

As a result of the relentless bombing, the non-standardisation of equipment and the struggle to still organise many different brigades the National Fire Service (NFS) was formed in May of 1941 to unify the whole of the country and eliminate any operational problems. Braintree Fire Brigade became part of the NFS in August 1941.

The individual local authority fire brigades became part of a much larger organisation building on the extensive development that the AFS had done to organise and equip the many units throughout Essex. Resulting in an effective joined up organisation, brigades were able to respond to an alert at a moment's notice to virtually anywhere in the county.

By the end of 1941 20,000 firewomen were working full time for the NFS. Working as control and station watch room operators, despatch riders, driving canteen vans, stores lorries and supporting the replenishing of pumping appliances at incidents.

Works fire brigades, like those at Crittalls and Courtaulds in Braintree, became affiliated to the NFS. They assisted their local NFS colleagues but were rarely sent away from the industries they were protecting.

At the end of the war on 8th May 1945, the NFS was gradually disbanded with control being handed back to the local authorities. During this time as much equipment as possible was standardised.