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LORD KEMSLEY'S ROLLS

The Famous Rolls Royce Fire Tender of Borough Green

By Nicholas Wright

Every schoolboy will be familiar with the gleaming red miniature of the Rolls Royce fire engine in the window of his local model shop – model number Y-6 in the 'Matchbox' 'Models of Yesteryear' series manufactured by Lesney Products of London. This tiny 48:1 scale replica bears the inscription 'Borough Green & District' along its sides.

"Borough Green & District? . . . Surely that's the village in North West Kent? How on earth did Borough Green come to have a Rolls Royce fire engine, and how did Lesney Products come to make a model of it?" How indeed!

In the early thirties Borough Green had no fire service and relied for cover on the brigades at Maidstone and at Sevenoaks, each some distance away – especially in terms of the time taken to reach a fire. A number of local properties had been lost in fires and it was clear that despite the best of intentions and efforts the existing brigades were just too far away to give Borough Green any real protection. And so, in 1934, the local Chamber of Trade made the decision to establish and organise the village's own volunteer brigade.

A Fire Committee was formed, and among its leading figures were the two Cloke brothers, Robert and Richard, who ran the long-established, and still flourishing, family grocery business in the centre of the village. Other founder members included Messrs A. Wilkins (Chairman), L.S. Daniels (Secretary), H. Williams (Treasurer), C.G. 'Bill' Kennett, his brother Arthur, George Andrews, Ken Ashton, Geoff Bacon, Bill Corner, G. Marchant, Fred Pierce and Harold Woods, all as firemen. John Stone was also a founder member; and, despite being well over 60, he turned out enthusiastically to every drill and practice. Chief Officer Bob Bates of the Seal Brigade was co-opted as Training Officer.

And so the village had a Brigade Committee, but at this early stage it had little else: no equipment, no premises, no funds, nothing in fact except a keen spirit, an infectious enthusiasm, and an obvious willingness to work and learn. They operated as a busy team and soon collected enough basic equipment and funds to form the nucleus of an effective brigade. They had a stand-pipe bar and key, a few lengths of hose, two extinguishers, and the use of Bob Cloke's Morris Eight grocery van. This meagre equipment was kept handy beside the van in the grocery shed, and water came from wherever was the nearest mains supply.

A few (precious) maroons were bought and a launching mortar was made from some old pipes. The Clokes' business and yard became the fire station, and when a fire call was received on the shop telephone, it was Bob's job to nip



BH 8112 is taken into service – 5th November 1938

Those pictured are (left to right): *Front row* – Miss Ewart, Mr K.D. McDermott, A.W. Wilkins, Chief Officer Bates. *Second row* – Bob Cloke, Bill Corner, Ken Ashton, Jack Denton, Harold Woods. *Third row* – Fireman Harris (Seal), Master G.B. Cloke, Geoff Bacon, Fred Pierce, G. Marchant, George Andrews. *At rear* – Bill Kennett (in uniform on left), John Stone (part hidden by Master Cloke), Arthur Kennett (part hidden by Mr Bacon). Extreme left behind windscreen, and right of centre behind Mr Ashton are unidentified. (Robert Cloke)

The big day came on 5th November (and what better day could there be?) when the Rolls Royce appliance was officially taken into service, together with a Dennis trailer pump and a full kit of tools and accessories. Miss K. Ewart performed the commissioning ceremony, and it was thanks only to the unceasing efforts of the dozen or so Brigade members and to the generous responses from the people of Borough Green, Ightham, Seal and Wrotham – the four parishes covered by the station – that this long-held dream became a reality.

At this stage the volunteers had attended twenty-three calls and the Brigade's coffers had been swelled by the insurance bounties on fires attended – for this was their main source of outside income, and in every case each man had paid his full share of any bounty back into the Brigade's general fund – such was the spirit of Borough Green! After Munich, the air of threatening national doom swelled the Brigade's membership as many volunteers signed up, all eager to do their bit, Frank Oliver and Leslie Dryland joined at this time, both of whom were to give long and distinguished service to their community.

The converted Rolls retained its basic chassis and front end. It kept the famous 7½ litre six-cylinder engine, which gave 70 mph and was renowned for being 'quiet as a silent sewing machine', and upon whose radiator a penny could be balanced, and it kept the gracious and distinctive lines of 'the best car in the world'. From behind the driver's seat the body was rebuilt to take a small reserve water tank, hose and tool storage, ladder rack and pulleys, and (rather precarious!)

seating for the crew. In this sense a fire call was reminiscent of the early silent films, for the crew sat in line along padded bench seats facing outwards along each side of the vehicle, their feet were pressed hard-down on firm running boards fixed above the rear wings. Behind them, along the smalls of their backs, was a long brass rail to which stout rope tassels were attached as hand-holds. It was very 'Keystone Cops' but only rarely was a man lost overboard!

When fully laden the vehicle weighed two tons seventeen hundredweight, and it had brakes on only the rear wheels! The Dennis trailer pump weighed another seventeen hundredweight, but this spent at least half its time off the road, being dragged behind the engine with both wheels airborne as it bounced along the Kentish lanes at 60 mph!

The registration number was BH 8112 (a pity not 'BG'), and the Rolls was the pride and joy of the whole village. It was also the envy of every other fire service in Kent! It was lovingly attended and polished — gleaming bright red, with its brass and copper fittings and pipes almost worn away with devoted elbow grease. It shone and sparkled come rain or sunshine, and soon it was to become a very busy engine.

In 1938, the Brigade was officially adopted as the local ARP fire unit, and when war came the station was taken over by Malling RDC. The RDC paid for the equipment and premises requisitioned, including a sum of £200 for the Rolls. This money was invested in a trust fund for the firemen to draw upon should they be injured in the course of duty, and the fund exists to this day. Thus the old Rolls passed out of the trustee ownership of the small band of volunteers and became 'official' property. Even so, the Borough Green men (and the village) still regarded her as very much their own.

The German air raids in the summer and autumn of 1940 saw the Rolls in front line action attending to many bomb incidents and air crashes, and running the gauntlet of Stukas and Dorniers in the Luftwaffe attacks on RAF West Malling.

In 1941, the National Fire Service (NFS) was formed and Borough Green came within Area No. 30 with headquarters at Maidstone. Additional tenders were allocated or 'acquired', the Rolls was used less frequently, becoming something of an 'old lady in reserve'. Late in 1942, she was taken out of service and was ignominiously laid-up in the yard, cruelly exposed to all the elements. There she languished for eighteen months or so, unused, uncared for, but not forgotten. Then, in 1944, Leslie Dryland took a wife. The Brigade was unanimous in deciding that the only vehicle fit to transport a fireman and his bride was the old Rolls, and so the men, with the help of the Boy Scouts, restored the old girl to her former glory for what was to be a fitting swan song. But there were problems, for the glycerine used in wartime cooling systems had eroded the engine water jacket gaskets, and on the short run between Wrotham Church and the wedding breakfast at the 'Pilgrims' Restaurant', the old lady had to be fed as much water as she had pumped out on to fires during her distinguished working life! But at least she was running — although, alas, for the very last time.



A senior officer from Maidstone got wind of the Roll's reappearance and issued strong verbal instructions for the machine to be got rid of – he wanted it off the premises, out of sight and forgotten about. The Borough Green men took him at his word and they moved the old lady up the road to Wrotham where she was hidden away amongst the hay in a barn on Wrotham Park Farm, behind the 'Spring Tavern'. There she remained until some time in 1948 when the Kent Fire Brigade was formed and Borough Green became a retained auxiliary station. Officialdom noticed that a Rolls Royce tender was still on its books, and instructions were issued for the machine to be physically produced so that it could be properly disposed of. Borough Green prevaricated, protested and appealed, and only under dire threat of legal action did they finally give up the fine old warrior. She was towed away to Maidstone – never to be seen again.

Bob Cloke was the first Sub Officer in charge of Borough Green under the Kent Brigade. He retired in 1960 and was succeeded by Bill Kennett, who in turn was succeeded by Frank Oliver in 1965. Frank retired in 1968 and set about searching for the old Rolls – he had hopes of finding her so that she could be restored and brought back to her original home. He tracked the old girl to Guildford, whence she was taken from Maidstone in 1948, but despite wide publicity and national appeals, there the trail went dead. Hopes were raised briefly in the early seventies when Alan Whicker, of television fame, reported having seen an old Rolls fire engine during his travels about America. Thorough

