



This Matchbox Model of Yesteryear belongs to the chairman of Borough Green Parish Council.

THE ROLLS-ROYCE OF FIRE ENGINES

Mark Amies uncovers the story of a rare yet familiar Kent-based fire engine

If you are of a certain age and a collector of the Matchbox Models of Yesteryear series, you will be well aware of the Y-6 Rolls-Royce Fire Engine, which was first issued in 1977. Several years ago, I was in the John Lewis department store in Brent Cross with my father, when I spotted the model. The paper sticker on the side stating it was the property of "Borough Green & District", where my father had gone to school in the 1940s, was enough to persuade me to buy one.

I sold my original on when I was in my late 20s, however after recently picking up a replacement (for the princely sum of £8), I decided to do some research to see if it was based on a real vehicle

Borough Green is large village in Kent between Sevenoaks and Maidstone. Up until the 1930s, the village had no form of fire appliance, and was entirely dependent on either Maidstone or

Sevenoaks. The delay in getting an engine to the village resulted in a number of properties being lost. In 1934 the local Chamber of Trade decided enough was enough, and established a volunteer fire brigade.

At first things were decidedly amateur. Funds were low and items of fire-fighting equipment were built up over time. The two Cloke brothers, Richard and Robert ran the village's successful grocery business. Their Morris Eight delivery van became the tender and their yard became the home to the brigade, with calls fielded through the shop's telephone.

This approach was all very well, but the village needed a proper fire appliance, which local residents gladly subscribed to. A solution was to come when Robert Cloke saw a small ad in the Daily Mail, offering for sale a 1921 Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost for £30. The seller was the newspaper baron Lord Kemsley.



Matchbox based its model on the original plans and this photograph.

proprietor of The Sunday Times, The Daily Sketch and the Sunday Graphic. On visiting Kemsley, Cloke managed to bargain the price down to £26. It hardly seems believable.

The vehicle was handed over to Mr W Bonallack, of coachbuilders Bonallack & Sons for conversion.

The work was completed in October 1938, and a Rolls-Royce limousine

The fire engine was handed over to Borough Green Fire Brigade on behalf of the village by Miss M Ewart. In return, she was presented with a bouquet of flowers by Gerald Cloke, son of fire chief Robert.



became a fully equipped fire-fighting vehicle. It retained its chassis and front end, and its 7.5 litre, six-cylinder engine, (capable of 70mph).

All the additions began behind the driver's seat – a small reserve water tank, hose and tool storage, ladder rack, pulleys and bench seats for the crew that ran along the sides.

The new fire engine came into service in November 1938, and served the village and outlying areas until 1942, when it was put into storage. This part of Kent was now served by more modern National Fire Service vehicles, and so the Borough Green Rolls sat unused for another two years. In 1944 it was pressed into action as a rather unusual wedding car for one of the firemen, Leslie Dryland, the last time it was to see use.

As a result of the Fire Services Act 1947, Borough Green and District Fire Brigade became part of Kent Fire

Brigade, and the Rolls-Royce was apparently disposed of despite some resistance by the original firemen.

Frank Oliver, a sub-officer at Borough Green Fire Station retired in 1968 and set about tracking down BH 8112, starting in Guildford, where it had last been seen. In 1976 someone at Lesney Products and Co Ltd, producers of the famous Matchbox toy brand, heard about Frank Oliver's search for the elusive fire engine.

The company believed the vehicle would make a great addition to its Models of Yesteryear range. Contact was made with Kent Fire Service and Bob Cloke was able to produce the original drawings for the conversion. Meanwhile Frank Oliver found one of the few surviving photographs.

From all this useful material Lesney was able to produce a model utilising an existing chassis casting from their 1968 release of the 1912 Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost Landau (Y7). The model stayed in production until the late 1980s.

We now know that at some point the vehicle was changed back to a tourer by an unknown coachbuilder, and the vehicle was in Lancashire where it was sold to a local address in 1973.

It does appear that the vehicle still exists. Maybe you know some interesting facts about BH 8112, if so do let the editor know. 📧

For more about fire-fighting in Kent, visit Kent Fire Fighting Museum, Woodlands Garden Centre, Ash Lane, Ash, Kent TN15 7EG (01474 854094, www.kentfirefightingmuseum.org.uk)

THERE'S NO NEED TO BE ALARMED

Borough Green's Rolls-Royce isn't the only unusual looking fire engine...



A one of a kind, built by Morris at its Cowley factory for use by the in-house fire brigade, this Morris Minor fire engine was operational between 1953 and 1983, when it was put into the reserve fleet. It was fully retired in 1990 and is now on display at the British Motor Museum in Gaydon, Warwickshire.

During the Second World War, the Auxiliary Fire Service in London commandeered around 2,000 Austin Taxis. Fitted with ladder racks and a



tow bar, they could carry a crew of up to six and equipment, as well as towing a trailer pump. There are a few examples in museums across the country and a 1:76 scale diecast model of a converted taxi is available from Oxford Commercials.



The Commer FC and its successors were popular vehicles for various public organisations including the London Fire Brigade; however this

Dodge SpaceVan is one of a kind, having been converted into a fire engine for use on an airfield. As well as the 'blues and twos' and ladder, it has a pump that is powered by isolating the prop shaft from the rear axle.



In 1998, Grampian Fire and Rescue Service announced that it would be repainting its vehicles white as the colour was easier to spot at high speeds than red and grey vehicles. Fifteen years later, Scotland's eight regional fire services were absorbed into a single organisation – the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service – which oversaw the phasing out of white vehicles and the reintroduction of "the colour most synonymous with fire appliances the world over."



A NEW Fire Tender and Motor Trailer Pump were formally handed over to Borough Green Fire Brigade at the Western Hall on Wednesday. The ceremony was performed by Miss Ewart, of Wrotham, on behalf of the subscribers.