FIREFIGHTERS AND THE BLITZ

How the war changed the fire service

The Blitz began 70 years ago on 7 September. It transformed the fire service, as well as the firefighters' union. To mark the anniversary, the FBU commissioned Francis Beckett to tell the story, in a new book, *Firefighters and the Blitz*. In this extract he describes Britain's fire services in the runup to the war.

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In 1937 Britain's fire services were in no state to deal with a major national emergency. That was the year the Home Office instructed local authorities to draw up air raid precautions and fire protection schemes and the Air Raid Precautions Act provided a grant to finance improvements in firefighting services.

These services had grown up in a piecemeal way. Many firefighters were recruited from the navy, where they were taught the rigid and unquestioning obedience that fire officers believed the job demanded. Life in a fire station was run like life on board a naval ship, revolving around drill and discipline, spit and polish. New recruits were even expected to clean their officers' homes. "Fire stations," noted Victor Bailey in his history of the Fire Brigades Union, "were simply ships on dry land."

Every firefighter was on duty 24 hours a day for 14 days and nights. Men who had fought a serious fire in the night had to spend the next day cleaning and testing the engines and equipment. Discipline was arbitrary and the station manager's word was law. Outside the big brigades, there were no pensions and pay was reduced during sickness.

Few firefighters could rise through the ranks to become officers, for these were often recruited from the ranks of naval officers. The man who was to become easily the most famous of these was the appropriately named commander Aylmer Firebrace, veteran of the 1916 battle of Jutland and a former commander of Chatham gunnery school. The instincts of a naval officer accustomed to instant obedience never quite left him.

John Horner

Firebrace became an officer in the London fire brigade (LFB) in 1919. In 1933 he recruited to the ranks a young man of 21 who, arguably, was to have as big an influence on the future of the fire service as Firebrace himself. His name was John Horner, and he did so well at training school that Firebrace attached him to headquarters and placed him in the zone of accelerated promotion. If Firebrace had had any idea what sort of man young John Horner would turn out to be, it is unlikely he would have done that.

Horner found the LFB deeply conservative and rooted in the past, and was horrified to discover that its equipment was incompatible with equipment used elsewhere in the country. Could those in charge not see how dangerous this would be in time of war, when other brigades might need to come to London's aid? Could no one see that military-style uniforms and drilling to make men docile were not the preparation required for war work? Apparently not.

"It was the brass helmet which for me epitomised the hidebound traditions of the LFB," Horner wrote later. "Polished every day and after every fire, the crown might become dangerously thin by generations of elbow grease, since a helmet could have previously served more than one fireman throughout his entire service. Heavy and cumbersome, awkward in confined spaces, it provided little protection. Since the dawning of the age of electricity the high crest with its splendid embossed dragon had been a constant danger to the wearer."

Born in November 1911, Horner knew what poverty did to people and to families, for he remembered his father, who arrived in London, a 13-year-old orphan, looking for work: "He was to remain an illiterate navvy

until, his strength failing, he simply died." Horner's parents brought up their four children in a tiny two-up, two-down house in Walthamstow. The defeat of the 1926 general strike when he was 14 seems to have been the point at which he became a socialist.

A scholarship to a grammar school led to him becoming a trainee buyer for Harrods. It could have been the gateway to a comfortable life far removed from the privations of his parents, but everything in this restless man revolted against it, and after a year he left and went to sea. He travelled the world with the merchant navy and became a qualified second officer – but one who could not find a ship because of the economic crisis of the 1930s. So he applied for a job in the fire service.

As a seaman, he recalled, "I had seen the collapse of world capitalism. I had seen the unwanted wheat of the prairies of America mixed with tar to fuel dockside locomotives, while starving jobless immigrants wandered the quays and begged for scraps from the hogswill in our galley's shit-bucket." Now he was seeing the dreadful poverty and starvation of the 1930s in Britain; and he had seen the 1929-31 British Labour government do nothing at all to change it. It was a bitter disillusion for reformers of Horner's generation. So he was quite ready to be what his colleagues called "a bolshie".

Horner became an activist in the FBU, whose power and influence were very limited. Two thousand of its members were employed by the London county council (LCC), and the other 1,000 were spread thinly over provincial brigades. The LCC refused to have anything to do with it, and set up a tame "representative body" (RB) instead.

The LCC under Herbert Morrison made a parade of refusing to deal with the FBU. Morrison also poured scorn on the claim that firefighters worked 72 hours, "announcing publicly that we actually slept at nights – on beds – with blankets supplied by the LCC". Contemporary London politicians have recently, as I write in 2010, made the same appalling discovery, and speak about it with the same manufactured outrage.

The military-style drill was designed to make the men docile and unlikely to get involved with the union. But firefighters relied on each other, and as Horner wrote later: "I came to realise that the strong bond of mutual reliance which characterised the job could be a powerful element in forging a special kind of trade union for a special kind of service."

These two men, the grandee who had been a naval officer and the young working-class former merchant seamen, were to be the key figures in the fight against the Blitz.

PA PHOTOS

Herbert Morrison from the London County Council attacked firefighters' conditions

In 1938 Firebrace was appointed chief officer of the LFB. That was the year of the Fire Brigades Act, which required local authorities to maintain efficient firefighting services, and Firebrace took up his post just in time to implement it in the capital.

Before this Act, local authorities provided whatever they thought they ought to provide by way of fire services. No local authority except the LCC was under any legal obligation to provide a fire brigade at all. What they did provide was often very sketchy indeed. The heads of local fire brigades were often local worthies who had an interest in firefighting.

No extra money

The Fire Brigades Act of 1938 made fire protection compulsory for every local authority. Britain was divided into 12 regions under the command of chief regional fire officers to coordinate resources, including manpower and appliances. But the Act did not provide extra money, and it did not reduce the fire brigades to a manageable number. When tested in war conditions the new law proved insufficient.

But it was a sign that the government and the press had belatedly woken up to the reality of aerial warfare and were tending if anything to exaggerate its potential for destructiveness. The Fire Brigades Act put the expansion of the fire service under the control of the Home Office, which issued a Memorandum on Emergency Fire Brigade Organisation. This pointed out that the assumption that large numbers of fires would not occur at the same time, upon which fire service organisation was based, was reasonable enough in peacetime but clearly wrong in the sort of war that was likely to be fought. For war, a huge and rapid expansion was needed, both of men and equipment.

Frederick Radford, the first historian of the Fire Brigades Union, noted just after the war that "the union drew the nation's attention to its woefully inadequate fire defences. There was a criminal lack of equipment and uniforms. Fires were fought in civilian clothes in some towns. There were deficiencies in hoses, blankets and beds."

In March 1938, the LCC's air raid precautions committee set up what became known as the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) by deciding to recruit and train 28,000 auxiliaries for the London Fire Brigade, and to set up 360 additional fire stations. There were to be two types of auxiliary: unpaid part-timers, who did their normal jobs and worked as firefighters when they could and when they were needed; and those who, in the event of war, would give up their jobs and become full-time, paid firefighters.

The AFS became a national organisation, and was to be the key factor in fighting the Blitz. John Horner's determination to use its creation as an opportunity for the union, rather than a danger, was the foundation upon which today's FBU is built.

Firefighters and the Blitz by Francis Beckett (ISBN 9780850366730) may be ordered at the special pre-publication price of £10 plus £1 p&p to addresses in the UK until the end of September. Order from Pre-publication offers, Central Books Ltd, Mail Order Department, 99 Wallis Road, London E9 5LN, (Telephone 0845 458 9910, fax 0845 458 9912 mo@centralbooks.com) and quote Pre–publication Offer/Firefighters. (The book will be sent out on publication in the second week of September.)

"The strong bond of mutual resilience which characterised the job could forge a special kind of trade union"

Top right: John Horner, FBU general secretary during this pivotal era