



The Old Fire Engine by Rachel Brown

A fire engine of very early design was presented to the town of Marlow in 1731 by John Clavering, who was one of Marlow's M.P.s. This engine is thought to be of John Lofting's design (he was the man who ran the famous thimble mill in Marlow and who had come to England in 1686 from Amsterdam in Holland).

Edwin Holmes has published considerable detail about John Lofting's career and records that he had been apprenticed to a Master of Fire Engines in Holland and in 1689 applied for an English patent for an improved fire engine design. He formed a joint stock company to exploit his patent and set up facilities to promote sales. He also organised a fire service

Lofting's engine was simply a manually operated pumping device, that needed filling from a supply of water and produced an intermittent jet of water. Subsequently Newson modified the design to produce a continuous stream of water. It is not clear whether Marlow's engine is a Lofting or a Newson.

The old fire engine was housed in Marlow's All Saints church (prior to its reconstruction in 1835) in a room near the door. At some time it was moved to the Market House, later part of the Crown Hotel (presumably when the church was rebuilt). The Market House had a long association with the Fire Service and firemen were traditionally summoned by pulling a rope hung down the front of the building to ring a special bell above the clock.

After 1926, the engine was in the care of the old Marlow Urban District Council and housed in the basement of Court Garden house. It often featured in the town's carnival processions, towed by various means. It became somewhat dilapidated and was restored at various times by Arthur Wolford, among others.

After the new Leisure Centre was built in 1975, the fire engine was inexplicably dumped in a landfill site in Bourne End and might have been lost had it not been salvaged and restored by Marlow firemen,

who housed it in the Fire Station, then in Cambridge Road. When the new Station in Parkway was being built, the Marlow Society was repeatedly assured that the old fire engine would be properly rehoused and displayed. Yet again it was abandoned! Once again, Marlow firemen (led by Peter Cole) rescued and restored it. It is currently housed in a private garage.

Ideally, the Marlow Society would like to support the rescuers' wish to display the engine in a Marlow Museum, but until large enough premises are available, the future of the town's old fire engine is in some doubt.

References:

Edwin F Holmes, *A forgotten Buckinghamshire industry Thimble making in Marlow*, in Records of Bucks 35, 1993

Sitala Peek, *Bucks Free Press*, 20 April 2007.

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Note from March 2025 – Adam Baxter

Geoffrey Robinson, who, is the Treasurer and Secretary of the Worlingworth Local History Group, and as such, was responsible for the fire engine being restored by The Repair Shop, Series 13 Episode 4 (this episode has, at various times, been available on BBC iPlayer). He has suggested that the fire engine described above was manufactured by Richard Newsham. This is possible since Newsham was indeed manufacturing fire engines in 1731: -

[Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900/Newsham, Richard - Wikisource, the free online library](#)

On the other hand research by the Society of Antiquaries of London suggest that Lofting, who had a business in Marlow at the time, might well have been the manufacturer of the fire engine: -

[Fighting Fire with John Lofting's Patented 'Sucking Worm Engine' - Society of Antiquaries of London](#)