

## By Mark Pickering

A hundred years ago years ago next month Sheffield Corporation set up its own fire service. Since then it has been called out do some pretty strange things - and has fought its fair share of major fires.

For although the more unusual duties firemen perform often make the news, it does not alter the fact that a fire brigade's *raison d'être*, is fire fighting.

It is ironical that one .of the fiercest blazes the city has experienced took place just four years before the municipal Service, was set up.

In the early morning of March 25, 1865, the Surrey Theatre, in West Bar, one of the most beautiful and luxurious theatres in the country, was reduced to a blackened shell. The fire lasted an hour and a half, but much of the interior of the gas-lit building was made of wood, and it burned very quickly.

Seventy years after the Surrey Theatre blaze, the old Theatre Royal, Tudor Street, the, oldest and largest theatre in Sheffield was completely gutted. Only a week after the fire; which was in the early morning of December 30, 1935, the theatre was to have been used for a radio broadcast, which would have made local history as one of the first national broadcasts from the city.

As with the Surrey Theatre, the fire took a hold on the building very quickly, and the valiant efforts of 30 firemen led by Superintendent Tom Breaks, could do nothing to save it.

At times it looked as though the nearby Lyceum Theatre and Adelphi Hotel were also going to go up in flames, but the skill and determination of the fire-fighters saved the day. At times flames reached 150 feet in height, according to a report in the following day's issue of the "Yorkshire Telegraph and Star".

The Telegraph and Star" set up a fund for the artists and others who had lost their belongings in the fire and Tuesday's issue of the paper recorded that fire contributions .had been received, ranging from £5 (Sir Charles and Lady Clifford) to 1s (from someone who called themselves "Milk").

Newspaper accounts of the fire made special mention of Superintendent Breaks, chief fire officer of Sheffield for 14 years, and the man who laid the foundations of the modern force we know today.

Superintendent Breaks, who died in March 1966, at the age of 75, was among the most distinguished fire officers of his time. Apart front his service in Sheffield from 1923 to 1937; he was chief inspector in the Home Office fire department. He was decorated twice by the French for his contribution to their fire service during World War One, and during World War Two played a leading role in setting up the Auxiliary Fire Service.



Supt. Tom Breaks

But Supt Breaks had already left Sheffield when the next major fire broke out, and once again Sheffield was to lose one of its .most famous places of entertainment. This time the blaze started shortly' after the last house had left one of the city's first cinemas, the Albert Hall, on the night of July 14, 1937. As with the other theatre fires it spread very quickly.

By midnight, when the fire was at its height, about ten thousand people were watching the firemen striving to put it out. And even people at Fox House near Hathersage, could see the glow.

The "Sheffield Independent" refers in its report next day to "Wonderful Work by Fire-fighters" ..."Dense smoke made the work of the firemen difficult, and falling splinters and debris Made it dangerous; All the time they were playing water on to the roof from the inside of the building there were loud reports and terrifying crashes of debris."

The firemen "performed a wonderful work in confining the flames to the one building."- said the Independent.

But this fire and the effort demanded by it were nothing compared with what faced Sheffield's firemen during the war.

On the night of December 12-13 1940 the Germans .attacked the city for nine-hours with about 300 aircraft, starting; scores of fires and. reducing large parts of the city centre to rubble. The Moor was a mass of flames all the buildings were either destroyed or badly damaged. High Street and Angel Street was an inferno and fires .raged everywhere.

The best the fire service could do was to contain those that had started, and rescue the people caught in them. Many buildings had to be left to burn out, simply because there were too many fires to be dealt with at once. At the end of it all, the main shopping centre was in ruins, 33,000 houses had been damaged but the industries - vital to the war effort - were largely spared.

The end of the war did not mean the fire brigade could relax. On a cold February morning in 1947-: the Corn Exchange, one of Sheffield's most `historic buildings, was practically destroyed by fire. Among the items lost were records of the, Duke of Norfolk's estate.

All the city's fire engines, plus a lorry-mounted generator to floodlight the scene, turned out; but little could be done to save the building. Firemen brought several people living in the building to safety, however, and other buildings were protected.

One of the most notable fires since then was at the Wicker goods depot in Saville Street. This was started by three Sheffield youths in the late afternoon of July 31, 1966, and four firemen were injured by falling debris while fighting it.

Flames were reported to have licked "70 feet in the air, and: a dense column of smoke...rose hundreds of feet." But the 50 firemen with their 11 appliances kept the blaze under control, and it burnt itself out.