

## **Brief Overview of the Formation of Charlestown Fire Brigade (1936).**

### **Early days (1923)**

*"In 1923, the Charlestown Progress Association purchased from the Board a Manual Fire Engine, Fire Hose and gear. All the equipment has disappeared. The hose was allowed to perish, and when the engine deteriorated, parts were sold ..." [1].*

### **Investigations by the Board of Fire Commissioners into the formation of a volunteer fire brigade at Charlestown**

In response to a letter from the Lake Macquarie Shire Council, dated 8<sup>th</sup> May 1935, concerning the possibility of forming a fire brigade, representatives of the Board of Fire Commissioners visited the area on Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> June. Upon making a tour of inspection of Charlestown, it was found that Charlestown was a "... *fair sized township ... It was noted that a great number of the houses are of a poorer type, and together with a large quantity of bush and scrub land throughout the locality, some difficulty may be experienced in affording Fire Protection of a practical nature and at the same time, economically*" [2]. The Board informed Council that a report would be prepared regarding water supply, risks, values, etc.

Deputy Chief Officer Richardson subsequently made an inspection of the area on the 28<sup>th</sup> August, and reported that Charlestown was a township of 350 houses with a population of 1,357. The buildings were mostly of weatherboard construction. It was considered that there were no 'major risks', the area being mostly residential with little bush and well served by a reticulated water supply. He stated, "... *Suitable premises for housing the equipment were not seen. It is likely that part of the Park could be obtained, and a small station erected ... For the protection of Charlestown and Kahibah a Brigade of ten Volunteer Firemen would be necessary ... the equipment necessary would be a reconditioned Motor Fire Engine, Hose Cart, 2,000ft of hose and minor fire appliances of the standard equipment ...*" [1].

On the 21st April 1936, the Board arrived in Charlestown for a further assessment of the situation. However, "... *although the Council had been advised of the Board's visit, and invited to meet the Commissioners ... there were no representatives of the Council in attendance*" [1]. The Commissioners toured the proposed fire district and assessed the various risks based upon a draft estimate submitted to the Board on the 24<sup>th</sup> March. The estimate was based upon a brigade consisting of a Captain, and Enginekeeper and four Volunteer Firemen. The inspection resulted in the following recommendations: -

- 1) That action be taken to apply the provisions of the Fire Brigades Act (1909) to the Town of Charlestown, and to report on the matter of a site as soon as possible
- 2) That when a brigade is being formed, it should be stressed that the retaining fee will be 5/-, as distinct from what was being paid to other brigades in the District.

With the Council being informed of the Board's proposal, Deputy Chief Officer Beare and Administrative Officer Watt subsequently visited Charlestown on 17<sup>th</sup> June to investigate the possibility of obtaining suitable premises to house the engine and equipment at reasonable rental.

*"Considerable difficulty was experienced in obtaining any suitable premises at all, most structures viewed were not sufficiently weatherproof for the housing of the equipment. The Charlestown Court House was recently closed, and consists of weatherboard premises approximately 15' x 30', which is divided into two, the main room being about 28' long. The situation is Smith Street and is central ..."[3].*

The Court House adjoined the Police Station and was owned by the Attorney Generals Department. Messrs Beare and Watt suggested to the President of the Shire Council that Council might obtain a five-year lease of the premises and then let it to the Board at a rental not exceeding 10/- per week.

Following this, Council in a letter dated 23/6/1936, requested that the Board apply the provisions of the Fire Brigades Act (1909) to the area, at the same time requesting that the Board consider increasing the proposed strength of the Brigade to ten men. The Board replied stating that financial considerations made this impossible.

Meanwhile, a letter was received on 9<sup>th</sup> July from a Mr C. Bell of Stuart Street, Charlestown, stating that he was contemplating building on the front of his property and would consider building a room to house the fire engine as well as a room for the firemen at a nominal rental. The Brigade Architect subsequently inspected the old Court House building and determined that the cost of alterations and renovations would be approximately £50. He recommended that Mr Bell's offer be deferred until a decision was made regarding the Court House.

Following a visit by the Board on 11<sup>th</sup> September, the President recommended that

*"... In view of the fact that the Court House building would be suitable for the Board's purpose after the necessary alterations and renovations were carried out as outlined by the Architect, 23/7/36, and the necessary authority having been furnished by the Council for the application of the Act to the area defined, Charlestown-Kahibah, it is recommended that immediate action be taken to ascertain from Resumed Properties Department, the best possible terms and consideration for a lease of the building, with a view to an early application of the Fire Brigades Act to the town"[3].*

### **Charlestown comes under the provisions of the Fire Brigades Act; the brigade is established & they move into the fire station**

Charlestown came under the provisions of the Fire Brigades Act on the 6<sup>th</sup> November 1936, by Government Gazette No 182.

The previous day, Sub Station Officer T. Carr arrived at Cooks Hill Fire Station and took delivery of No. 27 Garford Hale, Fire Engine. He drove the appliance to Charlestown and temporarily installed it in a garage at the rear of Mr Bell's residence in Stuart Street. In the evening, he interviewed fourteen applicants for the brigade and the following day, six were accepted. Mr Carr then proceeded to train the new firemen on a daily basis until the 19<sup>th</sup> November.

In the meantime, the Brigade Architect was converting the old Court House into a Fire Station, and Fourth Officer Barber made the following report: -

*"I have to report that the establishment of a volunteer fire brigade at Charlestown has now been finalised with very satisfactory results, and it is considered that the most suitable type of citizen had been selected to comprise the personnel.*

*Members of the Brigade were assembled at the temporary fire station premises at 7pm on 18<sup>th</sup> inst., when I visited the District, and were addressed on various matters appertaining to the Service. Inspector Coughlan was also in attendance and addressed the members.*

*An inspection of the Brigade, equipment, uniform etc., showed that everything was satisfactory.*

*The fire station in Smith Street will be available for occupation on 19<sup>th</sup> inst.*

*Sub-station Officer T.W. Carr will be returning to Sydney on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> inst. ... "[4].*

The fire engine and all of the equipment were installed at the new station at 2pm on the 20<sup>th</sup> November and Mr Carr returned to Sydney.

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### The Original Crew [5, 6]

▪ FISHER,	Alfred	(Captain)	Turncock
▪ GILLAM <sup>1</sup> ,	Joseph	(Engine Keeper)	Fruiterer
▪ BRADBURY,	Robson		Labourer
▪ WOOD,	Malcomb		Labourer
▪ POTTER,	Frederick		Labourer
▪ PASCOE,	John		Shop Assistant

### Fire engines that have been installed at Charlestown

NUMBER	TYPE	DATE	MAKE	MODEL
27	PUMPER	1936	GARFORD	HALE
253	PUMPER	1952	DENNIS	ACE
137	PUMPER	1964	BEDFORD	J1
339	PUMPER	1969	FORD	D400
479	PUMPER	1974	INTERNATIONAL	1610A
693	PUMPER	1983	INTER	1710C
717	WATER TANKER	1986	MERCEDES/BENZ	911
303	PUMPER	1992	INTERNATIONAL	1810C
355	PUMPER	2001	VARLEY	COMMANDER T4
755	PUMPER	2005	ISUZU	FTS 750

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<sup>1</sup> There are various spellings of this man's name (viz. Gillam; Gillan; Gillon). The name appearing in the earliest documents is Gillam.

## References:

1. Smith. T, *Report of Board's Visit of Inspection - 21/4/1936*. 1936, Board of Fire Commissioners of NSW,. 5/5/1936 p. 1-6.
2. Smith. T, *Charlestown, Dudley, Kahibah and Whitebridge - Report re Board visit 25/6/1935*. 1935, Board of Fire Commissioners of NSW. 9/7/1935 p. 1-2.
3. Smith. T, *Report of Visit of Inspection on 11th September 1936*. 1936, Board of Fire Commissioners of NSW. 14/9/1936 p. 1-10.
4. Barber. B 1936 *Charlestown - Establishment of Volunteer Fire Brigade* The Chief Officer 20/11/1936
5. Carr.W 1936 *Installation of Fire Brigade* The Chief Officer 21/11/1936
6. Barber. B 1936 *Charlestown - formation of Volunteer Brigade* The Chief Officer 9/11/1936
7. Webb. D, *Charlestown - re official opening of new fire station*. 1966, Board of Fire Commissioners of NSW. 17/8/1966 p. 1-2.