



Surrey Docks Farm History

The Blitz at South Wharf: heroic rescues and amazing escapes



On Saturday September 7, 1940, hundreds of German planes droned overhead, dropping thousands of bombs on East London. A prime target was Surrey Docks, which became a devastating inferno as fires spread through the vast timber yards. The Farm's site, which was then South Wharf Smallpox Receiving Station, was caught in the middle of this.

The full dramatic details of what happened here on that first night of the Blitz have recently been rediscovered. It's a remarkable story, for not a single life was lost, and barely an injury sustained, despite the raging fires on all sides, the constant bombardment and the partial destruction of the buildings and pier. All the staff, and dozens of local people, were rescued from here, thanks to the heroic actions of firemen and staff. Eight of these men were later recommended for gallantry awards.

Escape across the river

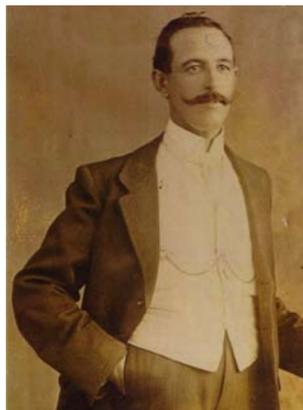
There were 11 staff at the smallpox receiving station that day; no patients were being kept here at the time. The first air raid began at around 5pm, and before long South Wharf was surrounded by fire on all sides. When the nurses' building caught fire, staff fought hard to save it until the water supply failed. Incendiary bombs started to land on the wharf's buildings and on the pier. The Fire Brigade had already started evacuating residents from the surrounding area via the wharf onto a boat at the end of the pier. But with the tide going out and the pier alight, with petrol stored at its end, immediate evacuation was called for. The nurses and domestic staff ran down the burning pier and joined the boat, in which the police took them across the river to safety at Millwall.

Saving the rescue boat

After landing everyone safely at Millwall Dock, the police boat now found itself stuck – a rope had become tangled around its propeller. One of the auxiliary firemen aboard, Nathaniel Barnes, volunteered to try and free it. Removing his outer clothes, he plunged overboard and dived right under the stern to reach the propeller. After an underwater struggle, he managed to clear the obstructing rope, allowing the police boat to continue its rescue work.

The brave attempt

All the while, another auxiliary fireman had been trying to get to South Wharf to help. Frederick Meeks was at Commercial Pier Wharf, a short distance to the south. When he heard that there were nurses stranded here, he set off alone in a small rowing boat to try and reach them. However, the river was by now a dangerous obstacle course. Dozens of barges were drifting uncontrolled after their mooring ropes had burnt through, and half of them were on fire from incendiary bombs. He steered his way carefully between them, but the tide was against him and in the end it carried him away. He was picked up by a fireboat, and joined its crew; he continued firefighting throughout that night and all the following day.



William Petley (left) was the General Mechanic employed at the smallpox receiving station, and lived in a staff cottage on site. Right from the start of the air raid, he threw himself into the firefighting, and helped to rescue the staff and evacuate local residents. He stayed behind on the burning site, working incessantly throughout the evening fighting fires. He was awarded the British Empire Medal.

William was 59 in 1940; this photograph shows him around 30 years earlier. He'd spent many years in the Navy, had served on minesweepers in WWI, and had also been a police constable. After the Blitz, he found a similar job as a mechanic at a local hospital, and moved to Bermondsey, where he lived for the rest of his life.

Harold Richard Barrett (right) was in charge of the crew that evacuated the staff and local residents and transported them across the river. For this he was awarded a Commendation.

Harold was a 43-year-old Senior Fireman; this photo shows him in the 1920s. Born and brought up in Rotherhithe, his first job was at the Peek Freans biscuit factory. Like many of the men in the River Fire Service, he had served in the Navy in WWI. He continued to work as a fireman for the rest of the war, including as a fire boat instructor on the Manchester Ship Canal. After the war he worked as a Fire Safety Officer in West End theatres and at the Coal Board.



Nathaniel William Barnes, who plunged under the police boat to free the propeller, was an auxiliary fireman. Aged 50, he was a machinist by trade and lived in Waterloo. He was originally recommended for a Commendation, but it wasn't granted. However, colleagues spoke with gratitude of his selfless actions: *'After much effort on his part he was successful in doing a very difficult task and much credit is due to this man as his efforts put the boat into commission again ...'*

Frederick Edward Christopher Meeks, who attempted to row to South Wharf to rescue the staff, was a Leading Auxiliary Fireman. Aged 26, he lived locally in Rotherhithe, and was a machinist by trade. Although unsuccessful in his attempt, he was awarded a Commendation because of his bravery, unflagging efforts, and the positive example he set: *'... he displayed great courage in making the attempt under the extremely dangerous conditions ... His cheerfulness and indifference to danger were very inspiring.'*

Auxiliary Firemen

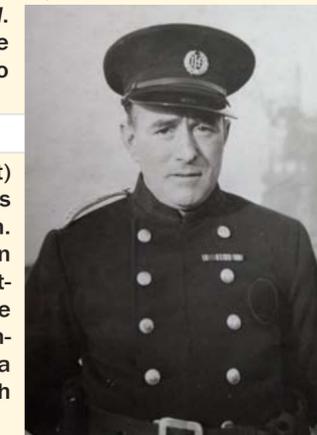
Of the eight men mentioned here who were recommended for gallantry awards, four were members of the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) – civilians who were trained to help with firefighting in wartime. Initially, because there was little for them to do, AFS members were nicknamed 'army dodgers', but in the Blitz the grateful public honoured them with a new nickname: 'the heroes with grimy faces'.

The risky rescue by towrope

With fire engulfing the area and cutting off the roads, more local residents had come down to South Wharf seeking to escape by river. They and some auxiliaries took shelter from the flames in an empty barge moored off the pier. Two firemen, Richard Ashton and James Bowtell, came alongside in their fireboat. Attaching a line, they towed the barge away with about 50 people aboard, while bombing continued overhead. This required enormous skill, as the towing line wasn't designed for such a heavy load, and the river was obstructed by dozens of drifting burning barges, between which they had to navigate. They succeeded in landing everyone safely at Nelson Dry Dock (where the Hilton Hotel is now). A senior officer later commended them for their 'coolness and skill under extremely dangerous conditions'.



Richard Henry Ashton (left) was in charge of the fireboat, and was awarded the British Empire Medal, photos of which are above. At 47, he was a professional fireman; this photo shows him a few years later as Station Officer at Dockhead Fire Station. Before becoming a fireman, he had served in the Navy until 1923. After the war, he worked as a fireman at *The News of the World*. Richard had 11 children; some of his sons and grandsons also joined the Fire Brigade.

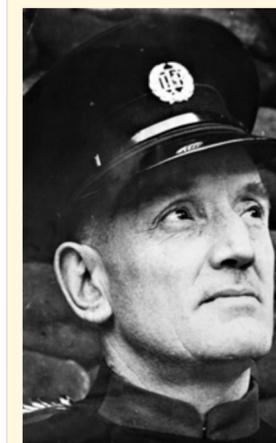


James 'Jack' Bowtell (right) navigated the fireboat, and was awarded a Commendation.

James, 43, lived in Bermondsey and was an Auxiliary Section Officer, but a Thames lighterman by trade, working on cargo barges. He too had served in the Navy in WWI. He continued to work for the River Fire Service in a senior role for the rest of the war, after which he returned to working as a lighterman.

Saving the Matron, and an epic escape through the flames

Sister Hope, the Matron, was in charge at South Wharf Receiving Station, and had seen all her staff escape via the river. But before she could follow them, another bomb landed on the pier and it collapsed. Forced to take refuge in a shed, she might well have perished there, were it not for the courage of two firemen. Timothy Muir and Samuel Melvin had heard that the Matron was still trapped at South Wharf, and took the risk of going back for her. They led her out between burning buildings and trees to the road outside, where she waited in a fire vehicle while they went back to fight the fires. But as darkness fell, a second wave of Luftwaffe bombers launched a fresh attack. With the situation worsening, they needed to make their escape. They started to drive the fire vehicle out through the darkness and smoke, but suddenly it plunged into a water-filled bomb crater. Sister Hope had to be lifted out. Finding another car nearby, they all got in – only to find they couldn't start it. With flames leaping at them through the swirling smoke, they thought their luck had run out. But after a desperate search, they found an empty taxi. Flames scorched the bodywork as they drove it out of the inferno and to safety at their base at Cherry Garden Fire Station.



Both of these men who risked their lives saving the Matron were awarded the George Medal, the second-highest award for civilian gallantry.

Timothy McGugnan Muir (left), 43, was a professional fireman based in Rotherhithe. In WWI he had served in the Navy as a telegraphist. After this dramatic rescue, he continued to work as a fireman for the rest of the war, being promoted to Company Officer and Section Leader.

Samuel Thomas Melvin, 44, was an auxiliary fireman; he too had served in the Navy in WWI. He was a driver by profession, and in this epic rescue he

drove the vehicles in which they made their escape. Samuel wasn't even supposed to be working at the time. He was off-duty and at his home in Peckham, but when he heard news of the air raids on Surrey Docks, he raced back to Rotherhithe on his bicycle to offer help. He humbly said afterwards: *'For all this, Sub-Officer Muir and I have received George Medals. We don't think we did anything that our mates would not have done.'*

Sister Annie Elizabeth Hope, the Matron, was aged around 50 and had been based at South Wharf for a couple of years. The day after her rescue, she made her way back to Joyce Green, the isolation hospital in Dartford which was the main base for all the nursing staff. There she stayed and continued to work until at least 1947. When reporting the events of that terrible night, she had particular praise for William Petley, and for the Fire Brigade *'to whom she undoubtedly owed her life'*.

These stories were researched by staff and volunteers of Surrey Docks Farm's *Piecing Together Our Past* project in 2017, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

We would like to thank authors Neil Bright and Arthur Lockyear for initially bringing these stories to our attention, and the relatives of the men illustrated, for providing the photographs and assisting with our research.



LOTTERY FUNDED