

Johnnie Barr– Still in Residence

by Reg Wilkinson

When I paid a visit to the Vale & Downland Museum recently I was pleased to see that one of Wantage's better-known antiquities was still in residence. I refer, of course, to the fire-fighting appliance which used to stand near the entrance of the museum when it was located in the Civic Hall.

Although its exact age is not known, it was certainly in use at the start of Queen Victoria's reign. In fact it could be the appliance which a gentleman named Lovegrove transported to Wantage from London at his own expense in 1783. It joined two others in the care of the town's churchwardens at that time.

This "fire-engine" is really a wooden trough, attached to which is a crude pump which can be operated by rapidly raising and lowering an iron bar with handles at each end. There is provision for the attachment a hose to the pump outlet and the whole lot is mounted on wooden wheels to enable it to be hauled along by hand.

By tradition this appliance is known as "Johnnie Barr". This might be because of the bar which operates the pump, but Kathleen Philip, in her book *Victorian Wantage*, suggests that it was so called for another reason, and that it might have been named after John Barr, a well-known Wantage character of the 19th century. According to Miss Philip, John Barr was made a lamplighter in the town in 1828 when he was paid nine shillings a week plus the fines inflicted on convicted lamp breakers. He later had the job of town crier until 1868.

The parish records for 1844 show that John and Joyral Green were in charge of fire engine No.1, and that Daniel and William Trinder were in charge of engine No.2. The third appliance was the responsibility of all four. Twelve auxiliary helpers were allotted to each engine, and John Barr was one of the helpers on No. 2.

The churchwardens were responsible for the engines and the machines were kept in the parish church until 1847, when they were moved to the Town Hall. If the engines were called

to a fire the owner of the property involved had to pay for the use of the engine and also for the firemen's beer. After, he could claim expenses and compensation from the fire insurance company.

In those days insurance company plaques were displayed on buildings by those who were insured. If no plaque could be seen the firemen did not attempt to put out the blaze because they knew there was not much chance of being paid.

After many years of faithful service "Johnnie Barr" was officially taken out of use sometime in the early 1860s and replaced by a bigger appliance, which was also hand-operated, but had the advantage of being horse-drawn. The old engine was purchased by Sam Harris, an enterprising gentleman who set up in opposition to the official fire-fighting service.

There was great competition between the two for a time, and on a number of occasions Sam and his engine beat the horse-drawn vehicle to the scene of the fire. Thus he was able to claim payment for putting out the blaze from the fire insurance company. Sam was able to get to fires first because the parish firemen had to round up their horses and get them between the shafts before they could start. He had a number of men at his disposal who sped off to the blaze with "Johnnie Barr" in tow as soon as they heard of a fire.

In those days a small payment was made to the person who informed the fire fighters of a fire. Presumably if Sam Harris was willing to pay more than the parish he stood a good chance of getting the news of a fire first.

Eventually the parish fire fighters became more efficient at rounding up their horses, or perhaps Sam lost interest, but "Johnnie Barr" was pensioned off at last and soon became an object of curiosity. Now the little fire-engine is well preserved - a brightly painted reminder of battles with fires that were won or lost a hundred years ago.



Wantage –‘Johnny Barr’ fire engine - small hand-pumped trolley
(ind007.jpg)



Wantage Market Place - 'Johnny Barr' fire engine and the new 1910 Merryweather steam fire engine outside the Fire Brigade Station in the Victoria Cross Gallery. (ind014.jpg)



Wantage - 1936 Carnival - fancy dress parade at Recreation Ground - man in bath chair being pushed by policeman, 3 men pulling/pushing 'Johnny Barr' fire engine.(poc090.jpg)



Johnny Barr (mus294.jpg)

This article was reproduced from "The Blowing Stone" Winter 1984.

The Vale and Downland Museum is a registered charity (No. 270466) which aims to preserve and provide information and objects relating to the Vale and Downland area, Wantage, Oxfordshire.

The Museum encourages access to historical records for non-profit making purposes. This article may be used for such purposes, however the information must not be edited or reproduced for commercial purposes without prior written permission.