



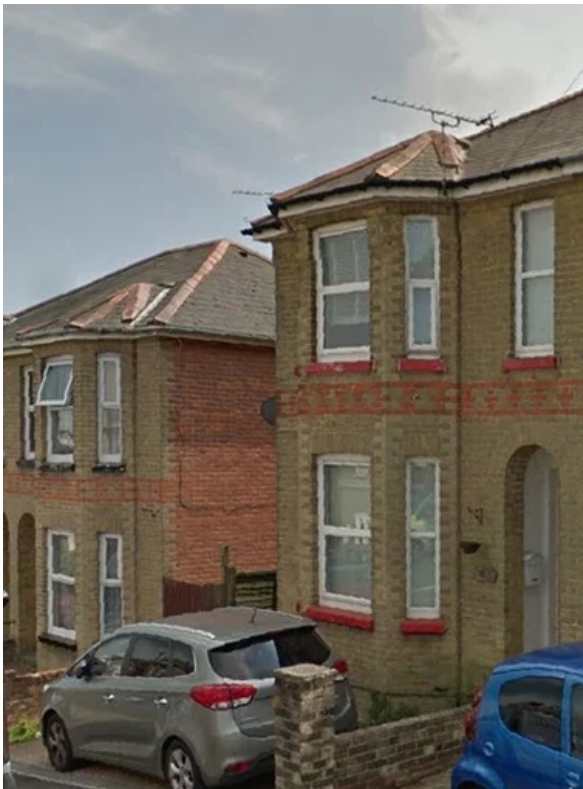
# FIREMAN REGINALD ARCHIBALD OSCAR BARTRUM



Reginald Archibald Oscar Bartrum was born on 3 January 1906 to parents William, a general labourer, and Alice.

The family spent much of Reginald's younger years at an address in High Street, Oakfield. The 1911 Census evidence that Reginald was the second youngest of eight children ranging from 4 to 19 years of age. Little is known of his younger life until he married Dorothy Emily Mursell on 5 April 1931 at St Saviour's in the parish of Upper Sunbury, Middlesex. The couple both originated from the Isle of Wight, Reginald from Ryde, and Dorothy from Newport, but at the time of their marriage were living in Sunbury, working as motor engineer and grocer respectively.

Interestingly the Newport family of Mursell has links with the pre-war Newport Fire Brigade, most notably Nicholas Henry Thomas Mursell, who served with the brigade from 1893 to 1928, for most of that time as Captain and Chief Officer. Additionally, he was landlord of The Castle Inn for an incredible 54-years. Although I can see that ancestors of Dorothy were also licensed victuallers of Newport's Wheatsheaf Inn and Green Dragon Hotel, I can't find a definitive relationship between her and Chief Officer Mursell (research is ongoing).



18 Well Street, Ryde (Google Earth)

Reginald's family hold a very rare record of his service. These are rare because, as I was to discover early in my years of fire service research, the IW brigade disposed of

most of its records many decades ago. When records such as Reginald's are discovered, it creates a lot of interest, and in his particular case it affords us a glimpse into a broad service across a key era in the history of Isle of Wight firefighting.

Evidently at some point in the early 1930's Reginald and Dorothy departed Sunbury and returned to the Isle of Wight, establishing their family home at 18 Well Street, Ryde.

In July 1933 Reginald passed a Ryde Borough Medical and was appointed a member of the brigade on the 31<sup>st</sup>. A photograph of the Brigade outside the fire station in 1935, was accompanied by a handwritten caption indicating that Reginald is stood to the rear right alongside Ryde's long-serving Chief Officer Henry Frederick Jolliffe. In the photograph Jolliffe is holding two trophies. These are the Seely Challenge Cup and Langdon Cup, won by Ryde's drill team of which Reginald was a member, for victories in the Motor-pump drill and Motor-turnout drill, during the IWFBF drill competition hosted at Partlands Sports Ground on 6 September 1935.

Reginald remained a consistent member of the Brigade's drill team, performing in events at the Frank James Hospital, Sandown's Broadway Ground, the Royal IW Agricultural Showground, and twice at Shanklin's Big Meade until the final IWFBF drill competition in July 1939.



*Ryde Fire Brigade 1935. Fireman Bartrum is at the rear right alongside Chief Officer Jolliffe.*

With the sudden death of Chief Officer Jolliffe in 1937, the brigade came under the command of Max Heller, formerly an officer and inspector of the Dover Police-Fire Brigade. Heller was a man committed to both his men and the service they delivered, and he developed some innovative methods of improving their response. This included adapting the Station Street fire station to include a games room. During the period in question Ryde Fire Brigade, like all IW brigade's of the era, comprised part-time volunteers that weren't paid a great amount for their efforts. To encourage them Heller inspired his men to create leagues and competitions based on the facilities he provided in the games room – thus ensuring that on most evenings many of the men were at the fire station and able to make an instant response if a fire call was received.

It proved so popular that when the Brigade's annual dinner was held at the station on 5 February 1938, local dignitaries were invited to present the awards, followed by a jolly singsong during which Reginald was noted for delivering a rendition of his own accompanied by Fireman Melvyn Upright's accordion.



Chief Officer Max Heller

One month later, the Borough of Ryde placed their first public advertisement for the positions of auxiliary and reserve firemen. This was in response to a Government decree that all local authorities should prepare civil defence organisations for the possibility of war. It was also the year that the brigade ceased using the traditional brass fire helmets. Tragedy had struck several mainland firemen through brass helmets coming into contact with exposed live electrical cables while fighting fires in buildings. In response Ryde's men were issued black leather helmets in April 1938 – the brass helmets were retained only for ceremonial and public duty purposes.

The required number of AFS firemen was substantial. Initially numbers flooded in. But as the need substantially increased it became more difficult to recruit new volunteers. Eventually, as the threat of war became imminent, the authorities raised the pay of AFS firemen to encourage greater recruitment. What the authorities hadn't considered was that the pay offered was substantially better than what the regular brigade firemen were earning. Consequently, and who can blame them, several resigned from the regular brigade and joined the AFS. Reginald's personal record shows that on 25 October 1939 he did the same, undertaking the additional protracted training and passing the required AFS examination by July 1940. Researching Reginald's activities with the AFS from thereon have to be undertaken with some diligence as it became apparent that one *Roy Bartrum* of Green Street was also recruited into Ryde's AFS around the same time – reports of Fireman R. Bartrum have therefore to be considered possible but not definitive.



Reginald's transfer into the AFS came near the close of the Phoney War, an unsettling period during which war was declared but hadn't yet been felt on the home front. The lack of action in the towns and boroughs began to undermine the substantial cost of employing both auxiliary firemen and members of the Air Raid Precautions organisation. Some were laid off or had their hours and pay reduced. The situation suddenly reversed when the Island received its first bombs on Sunday 16 June 1940. Although the actual effect was nothing more than the creation of new bunkers on Chale's golf course, the reality was a wake-up call that the war was real, and this was just the beginning.

Local records evidence that Ryde's 25<sup>th</sup> air raid warning was sounded during the afternoon of 18 July. In August, sixteen incendiary bombs were dropped on a farm near Ryde Airport, compelling a response from Ryde's regulars and auxiliaries from stations at Station Street, Edward Street and Simeon Street, and a Vickers Vilderbeest crashed into the Ryde foreshore whilst conducting torpedo dropping practice. Such events reawakened the need for civil defence, and everyone nervously awaited the development of the war.



*Ryde Auxiliary Fire Service, on parade in Lind Street, Ryde, c.1940.*

By then Reginald was based at the Edward Street temporary auxiliary fire station in the requisitioned Stainers Dairy Yard – barely a two-minute walk from his home address in Well Street. The Edward Street facility was in concurrent use as the district AFS training centre, in addition to affording Chief Officer Heller greater space for the administration and storage of the mass of equipment being despatched to Ryde by the Home Office. By summer 1940, when Reginald became an AFS member, Edward Street would have a bustling hive of wartime firefighting activity.

The situation was sharply magnified on 23 August when the district sustained its first civilian wartime fatality – an unfortunate man who sought shelter in his wooden shed at West Priory, Nettlestone.



*1942 – Ryde's 4Y Blue Watch in the drill yard at Edward Street.*

Less than a week later eight high-explosive bombs crashed down close to the Battery Hotel. In September Ryde and district sustained sporadic dropping of a total 30 high-explosive bombs, some of which caused structural damage and fires and a few that remained unexploded – representing an altogether different nature of threat.





*Elektronbrandebombe B-1E 1 kg*

For Reginald and Ryde's auxiliary firemen their first major test was to come in the evening of 23 November. At eighteen minutes past six on that cold, clear, Saturday evening, the warning sounded. As per AFS procedure all crews started their appliances in readiness. At that stage most of Ryde's AFS pumping engines were Home Office issued trailer-mounted Beresford Stork pumps, towed by all manner of borrowed or requisitioned vehicles. Ryde fireman Colin Weeks wrote in his diary that 22-minutes after the warning, the first stick of bombs dropped on the St Johns area – *together with thousands of incendiaries*. Fireman Weeks' claim isn't as overstated as it may at first seem – a single Luftwaffe bomber was capable of carrying six or seven cylinders, each containing 600 of the notorious 1kg incendiary bombs that could be dropped simultaneously. It is popularly assumed that it is the heavyweight high-explosive bombs that caused the worst of the damage, but it is a fact that the firestorm of the London blitz was the work of the 1kg incendiary bomb – small, light, relatively cheap to manufacture, and devastatingly easy to disperse and create hundreds of chaotic small fires which, if not checked, develop and link to become near unstoppable conflagrations.

According to the recollection of Fireman Weeks, who was also based at Edward Street – *Light trailer appliances were immediately despatched to the scene of the occurrences from the Main Station, Simeon Street auxiliary station, and Edward Street*. Messengers returned to the District Control Room at Station Street with reports that fires were burning from Appley Farm to the foot of East Hill Road, with several private residences affected. St John's Lodge was practically gutted by fire.

As Ryde's crews were battling to control the spread of fires, a second load of incendiaries were dropped in the Ashy area, causing large fires in and around Gatehouse Farm just before eight o'clock. With no option Chief Officer Heller had to split his forces, sending a contingent of his already sooty and sweat laden firemen from St Johns to Ashy.

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In his diary, Colin Weeks had previously stated that prior to the action happening on Ryde's doorstep, the AFS had been largely treated with disdain by people in the town, often being referred to as *The Army of dart-players*, or *Three-Pound a week Army Dodgers*. In the days following the massed incendiary attack, he noted – *Overnight the position changed, and we were proud to walk the street in Fire Service uniforms – many of our lads went to their first fire that night... they simply carried things out as if it was just another drill, and despite the existing conditions, they kept their heads and made a name for themselves and the AFS*.

Reginald had been a fireman for almost a decade by November 1940. In that time, he would have experienced several fires in homes, business premises and rural locations as a peacetime fireman – affording him a greater appreciation than his young fresh-faced AFS colleagues of the staggering difference when responding to wartime fires under continued enemy activity.

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It was the recognition of this difference from all corners of the UK firefighting fraternity, that required the Home Office to rethink the plan for the future. The efforts by all firemen, regular and auxiliary, had been exemplary throughout the period of heavy bombing marked by the period of the London blitz, but it also highlighted that the disparate nature of local authority brigades and AFS was not commensurate to fluid operations. The solution was the creation of the National Fire Service.

Reginald's records show that akin to all in fire service uniform across the country, he became a member of the NFS on its launch date – 18 August 1941. Reginald was re-employed as a wholtime NFS fireman, service number

248835.



His record includes references to *special qualifications* such as his skills as a plumber and a St Johns first-aid medallion, but two photographs supplied by Reginald's daughter Janet, suggest that he may have been qualified as an engine driver and motorcycle messenger. When the NFS was formed the Isle of Wight became Fire Force 14 Division D of Region 6 – Southern. The Fire Force driving school was located in Havant Road, Drayton, Hampshire. The two photographs show Reginald at this location, one in a typical end-of-course photo with a group of colleagues, and the other as one of six firemen astride motorcycles marked *FF14* (the building that accommodated FF14 driving school remains in place, with minor structural alterations, operated today by Hampshire Car Sales).



Fireman Bartrum, second from right at the rear. Fire Force 14 Driving School, Drayton, Hampshire.



Fireman Bartrum second from right. Fire Force 14 Driving School, Drayton, Hampshire.

NFS motorcycle messengers were of paramount importance when the Isle of Wight suffered its worst aerial bombardment on the night of 4/5 May 1942. An estimated 160 Luftwaffe bombers descended on the mouth of the River Medina, raining Cowes, East Cowes, and other targets further south along the river with high explosive bombs, incendiary devices, and parachute mines in two waves – the first around 23:00 on the 4 May, and the second around 04:15 the following morning. All cable communications were shattered. Motorcycle messengers, scrambling through atrocious conditions, debris, and continuous enemy bombing and gunfire, were essential in taking situation reports to Fire Force Headquarters at The Grange, Staplers Road, and returning instructions to the fireground on both sides of the Medina.

However, on this occasion a contemporary account found in the journal of Ryde's Leading Fireman Alfred Rees suggests that Reginald was not on two wheels that night. He was part of Rees's four-man crew that were despatched to East Cowes at 01:00 in the morning of 5 May - their task was to convey and operate the Y9 trailer-pump. The towing vehicle was by daytime a coal delivery truck belonging to Jack Fountaine, who was also a fireman. Fountaine drove the crew, comprising himself, Rees, Reginald, and Fireman Hill as far as a rendezvous point adjacent to the gates of Osborne House to await further orders.



*Fireman Jack Fountaine and his coal lorry come fire service towing vehicle.*

With little time to waste they were despatched to the floating bridge slipway to draw water from the Medina as base pump for a water relay to other firefighting units in the town. This was achieved from a single outlet from the Y9, allowing Rees to task his men to deploy a second length of hose from the vacant outlet from which they engaged fires affecting the buildings close to the pump. As this proved successful Rees left one man in charge of the continued pump operation and the others proceeded into the town to assist other crews with firefighting and rescuing persons from collapsed buildings. Rees notes that in all the Y9 pump didn't stop from when they arrived, around 01:30, until 11:30 that morning. After packing up their gear and driving to Newport Fire Station to formally report their actions and be checked in as safe and uninjured, they returned to the Edward Street station in Ryde before clocking off at 13:28.

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After some food and rest, they were recalled to Edward Street and redeployed to East Cowes, where the firefighting was ongoing, at 23:00 that same evening. They continued to battle the flames until 14:00 the following afternoon – clocking up 28 hours of arduous duty in a 37 hour period. Leading Fireman Rees wrote of his men – *My crew worked splendid, and nothing was too much for them to do.*

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Reginald remained a fireman at Edward Street until 15 October 1943 when he was transferred to Station 2W (Bembridge) for almost twelve months. Bembridge is the only station on the Isle of Wight that retains a full set of original handwritten NFS logs covering the period of the war (and beyond). It is evident from these logs that Reginald's permanent position at Bembridge may have not begun until 15 October, but he was continually present for shifts at the station on several dates before. From the 15<sup>th</sup> onward his name constantly appears in the routine aspects of station life – arriving for shift, knocking off at the end, conducting routine checks of equipment, etc.

Incidents Reginald attended in Bembridge tended to be of a domestic peacetime nature – accidental fires in the home and at some business premises, chimney fires etc., - the sort of work that Reginald would have experienced a pre-war fireman in Ryde. This was only briefly broken by a random aerial attack on 15 May that took the life of one of the village Fire Guards.

Reginald was also involved in a protracted period of *Special Services* that began in May. At that stage the Isle of Wight, like a lot of the south coast, was an important staging post for men and materiel that was about to be launched on the coast of Normandy in Operation Overlord: *D Day*. Every morning around 08:00, from the middle of May until 12 June, Bembridge sent an engine and crew to the harbour for an undisclosed *special service*. In fire service vernacular a *special service* can be anything not mandated as a normal service responsibility. Given the timing, and that this ended once all the D Day resources had finally crossed the channel and the advance on Northern Europe was in motion, it seems highly likely that the special service was associated with the fire protection of military assets, perhaps a refuelling operation or similar – we'll never know for certain. Other unspecified *special services* also called on the Bembridge crews at other nearby locations from June to September.

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But in September Reginald's firefighting journey took a completely different turn – he was sent to London.

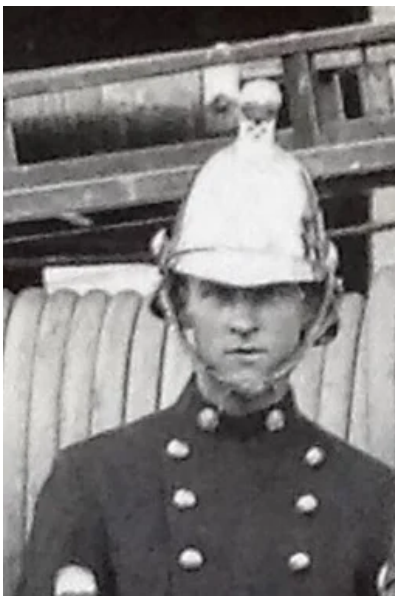
On 15 September 1944, Reginald turned up for duty at Station A5Y of Fire Force 34. Some ambiguity remains concerning the precise whereabouts of A5Y, but it was certainly to the west of the City. A retired London colleague who has much greater knowledge of the history of the capital's fire service's than me, is convinced that it was a requisitioned business premises known as the Eaton Square Garage at No.1 Eaton Mews, Belgravia. The garage, which was one of the first motor mechanical repair shops in the country when it opened in the 1890's, remains in business today as the Belgravia Garage, largely unchanged externally since the war.

The question remains – why was he there? He served in London until 28 November, a period of just over 10 weeks.



There are no records to confirm it, but it seems most likely that Reginald was one of the men that volunteered to spend a brief period in the capital to allow one, or more, London firemen the opportunity for a comparative break by means of a temporary exchange programme. The working breaks were much appreciated and valued by the hard pressed London firemen, and the Isle of Wight was unsurprisingly a very popular venue at which to take them.

Whether that assumption is correct or not, Reginald returned to duty on the Island on 29 November. Abbreviations in his record suggest that he was placed on the NFS Reserve due to an in-service injury (unspecified). At this stage of the war, the threat on the home front from the Luftwaffe was near non-existent and as history shows, there were no further aerial attacks on the Isle of Wight at all. Inevitably the authorities, both local and national, were keen to reduce the substantial cost of maintaining a wartime fire service and across the country many disappointed men and women were laid off by the NFS, or had their wholtime status downgraded to part-time. It's difficult to know precisely what duties and expectations were placed on Reginald on the Reserve, but the matter was clarified on 27 March 1946 when he was contracted as a *Retained* Fireman at Ryde. By then massive reduction of the NFS had seen the closure of all temporary stations leaving the town as it was before the war, with just the one station in Station Street. An administrative reshuffle redesignated the station *D4* (Ryde Fire Station is still defined as station '4' to this day).



Reginald would have experienced the anticlimactic reduction of the NFS, an inevitable consequence of victory in war, and remained in service in its swansong. His record shows that on 1 April 1948, along with all of his remaining colleagues on the IW, Reginald ceased to be a member of the NFS, which was formally disbanded on the previous day, and from then on served with Station 4 of the Isle of Wight County Fire Brigade.

But things didn't go back entirely to how they were before the war. The old Ryde Fire Brigade existed in a pre-legislative era when brigades were provided by local authorities at their discretion and limited in what they were permitted and expected to do. In the post-NFS world, fire brigades were compelled to respond to emergencies as mandated in the 1947 Fire Services Act – resulting in increased callouts.

On the 2 December 1954 Reginald became due the 20-year Long Service and Good Conduct medal. He received his medal on 15 September 1955 at an elaborate and well attended ceremonial occasion in Newport. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II instituted the medal in the previous year. Reginald and the 13 others that paraded alongside him on that September day were the first IW firemen to receive the new LSGC.

An aspect of the 1947 Fire Service Act that was generally less popular, was the indisputable requirement to retire from the service on the day before the 55<sup>th</sup> birthday. For Reginald this should have required his resignation on 2 January 1961 – in fact he remained in service, on reduced two-thirds



cover, until 31 March.

Tragically, within four-months of the end of his extensive and varied service to the community with RFB, AFS, NFS and IWCFB, he passed away at the Royal County Hospital on 25 July.

Rest in peace Fireman Bartrum.

### Footnote

In the summer of 2021 I was contacted by Reginald's daughter Janet Payne. Janet, who is based on the mainland, wished to find a suitable home for her late fathers much treasured pre-war Ryde Fire Brigade brass helmet, and felt that bringing it back to the Island was most appropriate.

Given the lack of a secure place or service museum, it has not been possible to locate the helmet on permanent display. However, having been entrusted with its care and security, it has regularly featured during IWFBF presentations in association with the story of the man whose head it once protected. I think it an apt epitaph that the good done by Reginald's extensive service, continues to do good by raising funds that support modern firefighters and their families when in need of assistance from the Firefighters Charity.



*Fireman Bartrum's daughter, Janet Payne, delivering her fathers Ryde Fire Brigade brass helmet, during her visit to Ryde Fire Station, 10 September 2021.*