

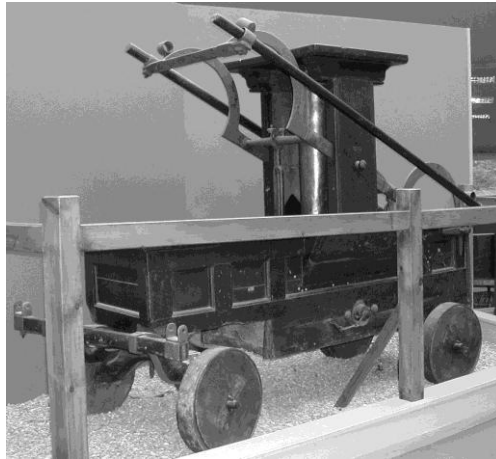
The Old Engine and Watch House

A Short History



It is known that a new fire engine – the one which is now on display in Bourne Hall Museum - was bought in 1770. In the same year there is also a record of a fire engine being accommodated at a private house and one can fairly safely assume that both records refer to the same engine. The earliest record of an actual Fire Engine House is a note of payment being made by the local authority for mending one in 1777. There is no accompanying record of where this was and it is therefore possible that a new Engine House had been built in 1770, although it cannot have been very well made if it needed mending only seven years later.

A visitor travelling through Ewell in 1790 noted that the building which stands today had “just been erected”, which dates it later than 1770. It would tend to suggest that the 1770s building which had been repaired in 1777 had subsequently been replaced. The last fire to be put out by the engine was in the High Street in 1869, when it was replaced by a new machine which was housed in the building that is now a café at 36 High Street.



The Old Fire Engine (now in Bourne Hall Museum)

There is no early information about the Watch House (Lockup), which occupies the other compartment. Before it was built, Ewell miscreants would have been confined in the market house, which stood at the nearby crossroads until it was demolished around 1800.

It seems likely that the building was dual purpose from the beginning, as was the case in Epsom. (In Epsom there was a combined Fire Engine House and Lockup until 1848, when it was pulled down. The clock tower replaced it and, although it continued as the Fire Engine House, there was no longer any provision for confining prisoners.)

A story, probably apocryphal, tells of a prisoner who needed some good cheer. As the “cell” bars were too close together to pass a container through, his friends fed him cider through a clay pipe. Versions of this story have appeared in other parts of the country and seem to go well with the “olde worlde” ambience of Watch Houses.

The front wall is built of an unusually wide selection of rubble, which came from other demolished local buildings. The sides are timber-framed and weatherboarded and the roof is tiled. There is a view from 1825 which shows a turret and weather vane behind the Watch House. They may have been part of the building commissioned from Henry Kitchen in 1787, which seems to have been a much grander affair than the Watch House as we know it today.

In the nineteenth century, the building was given a stucco front squaring up the former triangular gable end, with the words 'Watch House' and 'Engine House' impressed in the stucco. This in turn was demolished in 1963 when the front was reconstructed in its present form (to make it look more historic), using stone from the Council Yard.

A map of 1802 appears to show the building extending further back than it appears now and the original contract refers to an upper storey. The map also shows a side passage to the left (when viewed from the front), which could have given access to rooms at the back. This would have made a more substantial replacement for the demolished market house than the building we now see - in fact it would have been a mini Ewell town hall.



The plaque over the building contradicts the text in that it dates the building to c. 1770