

# Wokingham Remembers

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## OUR PAST

## Those magnificent men in their fire machines

**Jim Bell is renowned for the 30 short books he has written on Wokingham. In this article he tells the story of when fire fighters first appeared in Wokingham in 1830 and the reason hints of our rather dark past. He also introduces us to the Chief of Wokingham's fire brigade – the 6th Marquess of Downshire, a delightful character who doubled as one of the wealthiest landowners in Britain**



**WHEN I first started to research the local history of Wokingham I had been puzzled as to why a fire engine had been stored in the Town Hall many years before the Volunteer Fire Brigade was formed in 1876.**

The new Town Hall which opened in 1860, accommodated the local police force, a courtroom, cells, a savings bank, but no fire brigade. So what was a fire engine doing there? It was only when I began to study the fire fighters of Wokingham that I discovered it was the police themselves who were the fire fighters.

If the police were meant to catch criminals, why were they responsible for fighting fires at the same time? The answer points to Wokingham's rather dark past. According to the notes of historian, Arthur T. Heelas, Wokingham's first fire-fighting service was formed at a public meeting held in the old Wokingham Town Hall on November 19th 1830. The magistrates meeting resolved:

"...on the motion of the Marquess of Downshire, and seconded by Robert Palmer, Esq M.P. for Berkshire, that the alarm created by the acts of base and lawless incendiaries in the neighbourhood districts render it highly desirable that an association be immediately formed with a view to the prevention of the acts by vigilance and firmness, having at the same time the fullest confidence in the good order which has at all times characterized the labouring classes of this neighbourhood."

### Regular acts of arson

The police needed a fire engine to put out the fires from the regular acts of arson which were taking place around the neighbourhood and the perpetrators of these fires would dealt with by acts of vigilance and firmness. To deal with these arsonists, the police needed help and therefore on the motion of Sir John Walsh.

"It was further resolved that the Magistrates, Gentlemen and landholders should open lists in their



The 6th Marquess of Downshire Arthur Hill holds the reins of Wokingham's fire engine. Below, right, The fire engine makes its way through Wokingham and past the town hall.

respective Parishes of all Householders willing to be sworn and serve as Special Constables in aid of the Civil Power within the Forest Division."

The number of sworn-in special constables in each parish varied from five in Barkham to over a hundred in Wokingham town. Hurst and Ruscombe had 90, which included 35 mounted constables and Wargrave had 84, which included thirty four mounted. Wokingham wide, this amounted to over 500 specials.

The Specials had to watch and guard farming premises day and night with the utmost vigilance and Wokingham was the centre of communications



The 6th Marquess of Downshire Arthur Hill, who died aged 46, was known as a man of the people who could mix with simple folk as easily as he could rub shoulders with royalty.

for all purposes of the Association, with meetings held in the Rose Inn.

Each parish arranged its own constabulary force, acted in conjunction with each other and two or more persons chosen by the men themselves were appointed superintendents in each parish.

Buckets were provided and to be ready at all times, together with any other means of extinguishing fires.

The policing activities of these special constables appear to have been so effective that, according to records, there was very little trouble from then onwards.

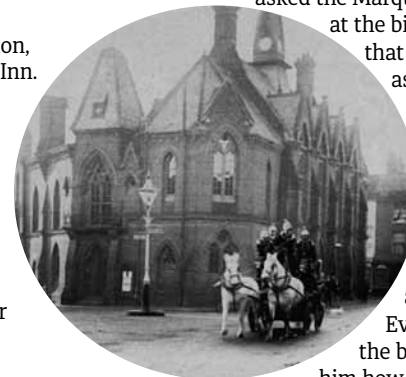
### The double life of Arthur Hill

A young man sits holding the reins of a horse drawn fire engine. He is the chief of Wokingham's voluntary fire service and also just happens to be a member of one of Britain's wealthiest families.

Arthur Wills John Wellington Trumbull Hill, at the age of just three years old, became the 6th Marquess of Downshire, whose family owned 5,000 acres in Berkshire (Easthampstead) and 115,000 acres in Ireland (Hillsborough, County Down).

### FOR THOSE WANTING TO READ MORE...

■ Jim's books can be purchased at the Information Centre in Wokingham's Town Hall. They make great presents at a price of around £3.



By 1883, the Hills family had the eighth highest landed income in the United Kingdom.

For all this wealth however, he lived his life as the 6th Marquis of Downshire and as Arthur Hill, a lover of the more simple qualities of rural life.

A local inhabitant of the area once observed: "In those days everything was driven to the market. There was no transport. They used to drive cattle, sheep and cows and all from the Downshire estate to the market to be sold.

"The Marquess used to follow on as if he was one of the workmen, dressed in a smock. You'd think he was a normal shepherd."

His love of the countryside was obvious, but the Marquess also possessed a love of powered vehicles. Although he had his own chauffeur, he would often swap seats, the driver sitting in the back while the Marquess took over the driving.

The chauffeur would also join in on the masquerade by taking on the persona of gentry and waving at the locals as the vehicle passed them by.

One of the Marquess's favourite pastimes was to drive his steam roller round the roads of his estate. He was doing this one day when a tramp came up the drive.

Not knowing to whom he was speaking, the tramp asked the Marquess the chances of begging a meal at the big house. The Marquess responded

that his chances were good. As soon as the tramp was out of sight, he got down from his steam roller, hurried into the house, summoned the butler and gave him a whole sovereign to give to the man and instructed him to see the cook give him a good meal.

He then returned to his roller and continued on his drive around. Eventually the tramp emerged from the big house and the Marquess asked him how he had fared. The tramp was

ecstatic. He said that he had received an enormous meal, two pints of beer and to top it all, the butler had given him a half-sovereign. On learning this, the Marquess went straight back to the house and sacked the butler for dishonesty.

### At ease with everyone

To know the man, is to know why Wokingham's fire brigade was led by one of the nation's wealthiest men.

He was as much at ease with ordinary folk as was with royalty; who loved both modern technology and a simple rural life. He was both the grand 6th Marquess of Downshire and the ordinary Arthur Hill; some might say eccentric, but one of our true characters and taken away at the relatively early age of just 46 years old.

He died at Easthampstead on the 29th of May 1918 after a short illness following a chill. In his will he gave one year's wages to those who had been in his employment for three years before his death.

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