

Fireboats

The first recorded firefloat was built in 1765 for the Sun Fire Insurance Company in London. This was a manual pump in a small boat, rowed by its crew to the scene of the fire. A similar craft was built in Bristol by James Hillhouse for the Imperial Fire Insurance Office in the 1780s. All fire fighting in Bristol was carried out either by private insurance companies or the Docks Company until the formation of the Bristol Fire Brigade as a branch of the police in 1876.

In New York City, a small boat with a hand pump was used to fight marine fires as early as 1809. By the middle of the nineteenth century, self-propelled steam firefloats were beginning to be introduced. The Fire Department of New York (FDNY) leased the salvage tug, John Fuller, as the city's first powered fireboat in 1866. Prior to the 'John Fuller', as early as the late 1700s, the FDNY used hand-pumpers mounted to barges and large rowboats. The first purpose-built steam driven boats were introduced by Boston Fire Department ie William F Flanders and FDNY ie William F Havenmeyer in 1873 and 1875 respectively.

The first European fireboat to appear in Bristol was the Fire Queen, built by Shand Mason and Co, London, in 1884 for service in the city docks. The 16.61 metre long craft was equipped with a three-cylinder steam pump supplying two large hose reels; one of these was replaced with a monitor or water cannon, in 1900. Fire Queen served until 1922.

A fireboat is a specialised watercraft with pumps and nozzles designed for fighting shoreline and shipboard fires. The first fireboats, dating to the late 18th century, were



Toronto's William Lyon Mackenzie fireboat, Canada

tugboats, retrofitted with fire fighting equipment. Older designs derived from tugboats and modern fireboats more closely resembling seafaring ships can both be found in service today. Some departments would also give their multi-purpose craft the title of 'fireboat'.

They are frequently used for fighting fires on docks and shore side warehouses as they can directly attack fires in the supporting underpinnings of these structures. They also have an effectively unlimited supply of water available, pumping directly from below the hull. Fireboats can be used to assist shore-based fire fighters when other water is in low supply or is unavailable, for example, due to earthquake breakage of water mains, as happened in San Francisco due to the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

Some modern fireboats are capable of pumping tens of thousands of gallons of water per minute. An example is the Los Angeles Fire Department's Warner Lawrence fireboat, with the capability to pump up to 2,4 cubic metres per second or 32 000 imperial gallons per minute and up to 122 metres in the air.

Fireboats are most usually seen by the public when welcoming a fleet or

historical ships with a display of their water moving capabilities, throwing large arcs of water in every direction.

Occasionally fireboats are used to carry fire fighters, emergency medical technicians and a physician with their equipment to islands and other boats. Some may be used as icebreakers, like the Chicago Fire Department's Victor L Schlaeger, which can break 20 to 30 centimetres of ice. They may also carry divers or surface water rescue workers. Passengers from ships in danger can be also transferred to various kinds of rescue boats. Rescue boats may also be used for oil and chemical destruction on rivers, lakes and seas. For example, the Helsinki Rescue Department in Helsinki, Finland has various kinds of boats for various kinds of fire fighting, rescue and oil destruction tasks.

Hydrocopters, rigid-hulled inflatable boats, fanboats and even hovercrafts and helicopters are also used in fire, rescue and medical emergency situations.

Cities with fireboats are usually located on a large body of water with port facilities. Smaller fire departments lacking resources will use rigid-hulled inflatable boat or borrow boats from local rescue agencies ie EMS, coast guard or military. ⚠



Frankfort Fire Department's fireboat, Germany
Photo: By Eva K