



# Fire buckets

**T**he history of fire buckets is intertwined with the history of fire fighting and mankind's historical relationship with leather, metal and plastic.

Putting out a fire didn't used to be as simple as dialling 999, 911 or your local emergency number. Before about the 17th Century, there was very little in the way of an organised fire service anywhere in the world. Needless to say, this lead to a number of devastating fires engulfing many of the world's major cities.

London suffered great fires in 798, 982, 989, 1212 and the infamous fire in 1666. Originally started at a bakery on Pudding Lane, the fire quickly tore through two square miles of the city and destroyed thousands of buildings including the Royal Exchange, the Guildhall and the medieval St Paul's Cathedral.

## Early beginnings: The humble leather fire bucket

Back in those days, fires were fought by parish groups using leather fire buckets, axes and simple water squirts stored in the local church. At that time there were no organised fire brigades. Instead,

people fought fires within their own parishes using equipment stored in the local church. Fire hooks were used to pull down buildings in an attempt to stop the fire spreading to other buildings. Buckets, made from leather with a rope handle, only held a small amount of water and were passed along a line of people towards the fire.

Early English buckets were 'stout', being almost as wide as it is tall. By the 1820s-1830s, traditional methods used in England to construct buckets began to change. No longer were fire buckets entirely held together by hand-stitching but instead copper rivets were substituted for cordage.

This leather bucket (right) was found in a burned out cellar at the end of Pudding Lane along with the remains of wooden supports for barrels. The cellar and its contents were preserved under collapsed buildings and debris used to build up the ground after the Great Fire of London. The bucket may have been used to fight the Great Fire and was probably dropped in the chaos. The leather bears the initials SBB and traces of the first three figures of the date painted on it – 166 – but the final digit is unclear.



18th Century leather fire bucket In the Museum of the City of New York



# HERITAGE



*Photo: Trish Steel*



*Early 20th century conical shaped fire bucket from Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad near Baltimore, Maryland, US*



*19th Century leather fire bucket with coat of arms*

► Made from leather with a rope handle, the buckets only held a small amount of water and some of that water was spilt as the buckets were passed from hand to hand along a line of people towards the fire.

Individual homeowners were required to keep special leather buckets on hand so they could help to transport water from a nearby well or lake to the scene of the fire by volunteers.

## **After the Great Fire of London**

It was after the Great Fire of London that insurance companies started to form organised fire brigades. But, initially at least, these were private fire brigades and were instructed

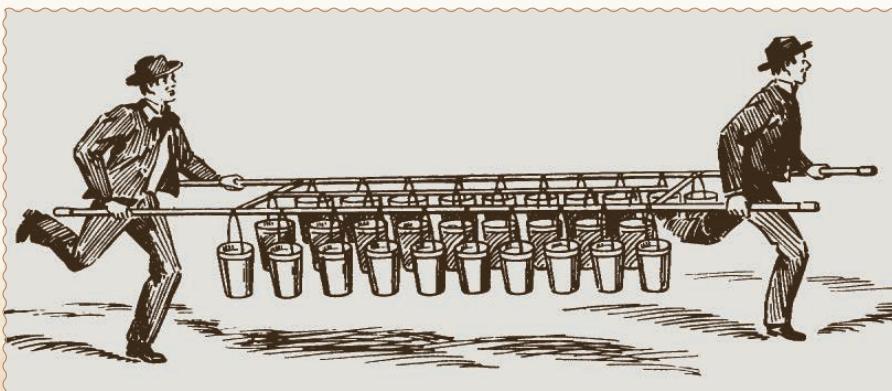
only to extinguish fires on properties that were insured by the insurance company. Eventually these brigades started putting out other insurance company's fires (for a fee to be charged later) and then started extinguishing all fires to stop fires spreading to insured buildings.

Technological advancements like fire engines and sophisticated pumping systems made fire fighting easier and publicly funded fire brigades followed closely behind.

During the 18th Century, many leather fire buckets were exported to North America. This was at a time when there were few makers of fire buckets operating in the

North American Colonies due to the prohibitions against making and exporting finished goods. Very likely, during the early years of the Republic, the first American makers of fire buckets were English trained and so it stands to reason that the many of the earliest fire buckets actually made in the Colonies would strongly resemble the same form of fire bucket that was most familiar to them. As time went on, fire buckets made in the exColonies diverged from the classic English pattern and took on a more American style. This divergence of pattern was a predictable result of the eventual need for new equipment as with the wooden moulds that buckets were formed over. (you can make a pattern fit a mould but it is very difficult to make a mould properly fit a pattern). Not only did the basic body shape transform over time, new improvised methods of construction were devised.

Fire fighting in the Colony of New York Organised fire fighting began as early as the Dutch settlement in New Amsterdam (now New York). In 1648, the Governor of the colony, Peter Stuyvesant, appointed four fire Wardens to help prevent fires by patrolling the colony and



*Bucket brigades being modernised*

# HERITAGE

inspecting homes for wooden chimneys and thatched roofs. Townspeople were expected to wake up and hurry to the location of the fire. Fires, at that time, were fought using leather buckets. Citizens of New Amsterdam were required to fill three buckets of water at sunset and place them at their doorsteps in case an alarm was sounded. At the scene of the fire, a bucket brigade was formed; one line of people passed filled buckets from the water source to the fire and the second line passed empty buckets back to the water source to be refilled.

In 1683, the British took over the colony of New Amsterdam and renamed it New York. Fire buckets in colonial towns had the owner's name painted on them. Laws often required residents to purchase them and keep them in repair. In the 1680s, in New York, the number of buckets a home or business needed was determined by the risk of fire. A baker must have three buckets and a brewer had to have six buckets on hand in case of fire. Penalty fines were used to keep fire equipment, such as hooks, small ladders, and buckets, in good condition. During a fire alarm, citizens were expected to throw their buckets into the street to be picked up by able bodied persons forming part of the bucket brigade. Fires were fought in this manner until hand engines were introduced.

But the humble fire bucket still had an important role to play.

## Metal fire buckets

As metal became easier to mine and manipulate, metal fire buckets became the next obvious jump from leather fire buckets.

Instead of being stored in a church hall and used to combat fires wholesale, these metal buckets were stored close to where fires could start and used as a cheap and easy first line of defence against small blazes. They hung on stands in prominent



Fire buckets at Sheffield Park Station in the UK

positions like in rooms and corridors, close to fire pits and in government buildings like school canteens and army barracks.

They were coloured bright red to be seen and had the word 'fire' stencilled on them.

## Why did fire bucket have round bottoms?

Fire buckets often had a convex, protruding bottom. The rounded bottom resulted in a strong, directed stream of water when the water is thrown at the fire. The rounded-bottom bucket was far more efficient in launching the water at the fire than a flat bottom bucket.

Many metal fire buckets have round or conical bottoms to stop them from being stolen or used for another purpose beside fighting fires. When in use, the buckets were normally

hung up or suspended by frames so that they don't fall over.

Many modern fire buckets that don't have rounded bottoms have now become antiques.

## Plastic fire buckets

Plastic fire buckets are the modern answer to the fire bucket. Just as more and more of our products have been made from plastic; plastic buckets have become the option of choice for combatting small fires.

Plastic fire buckets are cheaper than metal ones, they are lighter and easier to use. Plastic buckets are also less liable to dent and rust, as metal ones tend to do when they are left outside for long periods of time.

We have certainly come a long way since the early bucket brigades! ▲