

The Centenary of Hawthorn Fire Station, 1910-2010

An introduction by Ted Thomasson, a member of the Hawthorn Historical Society

This article was originally produced as a supplement to the report by the Hawthorn Historical Society's president on the occasion of their members' attendance at the official centenary of the old Hawthorn Fire Station on 16 September 2010. However, on delving into the subject it revealed more and more interesting facets of the history of the fire station, the fire engine and the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) that deserved to be told in full. The research involved meant that the report has been revised and amplified to include that material and to do justice to the very interesting history of this important part of Hawthorn's heritage.



The 1914 Hotchkiss fire engine on display at Hawthorn during the centenary celebration.

Normally housed at the Fire Services Museum at Eastern Hill, the fire engine is frequently displayed at special occasions such as this centenary.

The Hotchkisses were at first used only as hose carts, later a rotary pump and ladder were added. The brass Hotchkiss badge on the top of the radiator shows a pair of crossed cannons, evoking the company's origins as a maker of armaments and later, luxury motor-cars, the last of which were built in 1955.

AFTER the official centenary event the guests were invited to take refreshments where we had the opportunity to chat with members of the 'official party', which included the Co-ordinator of the MFB's Research & Photographic Management Unit, and the unit's Photographic Archivist. These ladies subsequently sent me a detailed chronology of the Hawthorn

Fire Station and several historic images from the MFB's archives that provided all the background information one could have hoped for, and they have been included herein.

It all began with the formation of the Hawthorn Voluntary Brigade in 1879. That was housed somewhere in the Lower Town Hall and, as the historical society's members saw when they toured the Town Hall recently, the firemen used to hang their canvas hoses out to dry on a rail that still protrudes from the small tower at the back of the town hall.

The MFBB, the Metropolitan Fire Brigades Board as it was then known, purchased the land for the new station in William Street, Hawthorn from the council in 1892. However, due to the financial crash of the 1890s, building of the new fire station was delayed until after the turn of the new century.

Construction began in 1909, was completed in 1910 and the brand new building was to be known as station No. 18. The official opening was quite an important event, according to the report (overleaf) that appeared in the **Hawthorn & Camberwell Citizen** newspaper of the 19th of March 1910:

◀ A Hotchkiss fire engine at Hawthorn, circa 1926.



HAWTHORN FIRE STATION OFFICIAL OPENING

The citizens of Hawthorn have every reason to be proud of their up to date fire station recently built in William Street. It was officially opened by the President of the Metropolitan Fire Brigades Board, Mr. Samuel Mauger [pronounced Major] on March 11, 1910 in the presence of many public men and leading citizens.

It is a handsome brick and slate building, with granolithic floors, and comprises quarters for two married men, five rooms in each. Also there is a recreation room, engine room, store, feed and cart rooms, a dormitory, horse stall and other conveniences. Everything is constructed in the most approved and latest style.

The street alarm board and telephone switch-board occupy conspicuous places in the watch-room. The new hose cart and steamer lend much significance to the station.

At the opening ceremony, there were present Mr. S. Mauger, MFBB President; the Hon. George Swinburne MLA; the Hon. Mr. James Balfour MLC; the Mayor of Hawthorn, D.H. Dureau; Sir Henry de Kellett, representative on the MFB Board; the Councillors of

Hawthorn; Mr. Jarrett and Mr. Lock of the Underwriters Association; Mr. Harrie B. Lee, MFBB Chief Officer and many others. Mr. Mauger declared the station open and the company then inspected the engine room, watchroom etc. and one and all expressed pleasure at the way in which the building was fitted out. The married men's quarters were also inspected and received favourable comments.

A display of drill was gone through under District Officer Brims. Then, three horses were run down into their places, harnessed up and dashed away to the nearest fire plug for drill. This was accomplished exceedingly well and was much admired by the assemblage.

Light refreshments were provided in one of the rooms and toasts were honoured to 'The King', 'The Visitors' and 'The Metropolitan Fire Brigades Board'. Appropriate speeches were also delivered by several of the visitors.

The Hawthorn fire station is the central one for District C and is as well appointed as any in the state. Residents who have not yet seen the new building should do so, as it is well worth inspection.

District Officer Brims and his fire fighters are the right men in the right place.



A picture from the MFB's archives of the official opening of Hawthorn Fire Station on 11th March 1910.

Fire-fighting was very much a male domain in those days - not one woman was present at the event.

Women have had equal opportunities as fire-fighters in the MFB since 1988.

As a footnote to that article, the firemen brought the fire bell from the old quarters and the new fire station continued to use horse-drawn vehicles for a few more years.

The Depression brought hard times. In 1935 the gas night-light in the watchroom was discontinued and the meter removed as the cost of two shillings per month was deemed to be "uneconomic", and it was not until 1940 that they finally acquired a second telephone line. Until then there had been only one line covering all nine stations in the district which led to frequent delays and, according to one report, "the line was always engaged", a chilling prospect even back then!

The building has been praised in a citation by Heritage Victoria as "architecturally and historically important to the State of Victoria as a particularly successful adaptation of the Edwardian Freestyle" and "important as a design of the noted

architect Cedric Ballantyne of the firm Oakden & Ballantyne who designed most of the [MFB's] buildings in the early twentieth century."

The building was closed in 1997 when its operations moved to the brand-new station further down William Street.

I mentioned to the MFB staff that I'd noticed in the invitation that guests were asked to bring along any relevant photographs they may have, and that I had taken some shots of a large fire some years ago in Weir Street, Tooronga near Tait's timber yard, just the other side of Gardiner Creek. The blaze happened on a Saturday afternoon and could be clearly seen from Tooronga Village Shopping Centre. I added that I could only remember that it was a furniture factory. "Oh yes," one of the MFB researchers recalled, "that was the Moran's factory, it was September 1994 and the Hawthorn brigade was

involved.” The MFB staff certainly know their subject well.

Another of the invited official guests was Sergeant Megan Dobbs of the Victoria Police. Based at their station at Harp Road, East Kew opposite the Harp Hotel, she is the official police liaison with the MFB Eastern District. A highly responsible assignment, this embraces a range of duties such as co-operation with the MFB to notify families of a fatality, investigation of possible cases of arson and related forensic issues that may need to be referred to the Crime Investigation Unit. Naturally, the often-complex and sensitive nature of these duties calls for expertise in several specialised fields and as she admits, it keeps her busy.

I also got to talk with Glenn Cumming, Secretary of the Fire Services Museum Victoria, who was in charge of the vintage fire engine for the event. I told Glenn that I’d heard that *complete* vintage fire engines are not only quite rare in the first place, they are less likely to have survived intact as such because, although they usually had a low mileage and had been carefully maintained, when they were sold off they were usually converted into trucks or vans and their brass fire-fighting fittings sold as scrap metal. Glenn verified this was all too often the case.

The one on display was a 1914 Hotchkiss. Around the top of the large circular brass badge on its radiator it read *Hotchkiss*, and at the bottom, *Paris*. (Hotchkiss doesn’t sound at all French, but it *was* a French company. It’s a long story.)

Glenn outlined the origins of the MFB’s fleet of Hotchkisses. They were originally built as chassis-only, as most long-wheelbase vehicles were during that era. The buyer then had a coachbuilder add the desired body, as an ambulance, a van, an extended touring car (called a charabanc) or whatever. The MFB acquired their fleet as chassis-only before and during World War One, then designed the body and the fire-fighting equipment to their own specifications and had it all built at their own workshops.

An eventual total of 36 Hotchkiss fire engines were built. The then Chief Officer of the MFB, Mr Harrie Lee, had foreseen the need for a fully motorised brigade. By 1919 this resulted in Melbourne becoming one of the first cities in the world to have a fully motorised fleet.

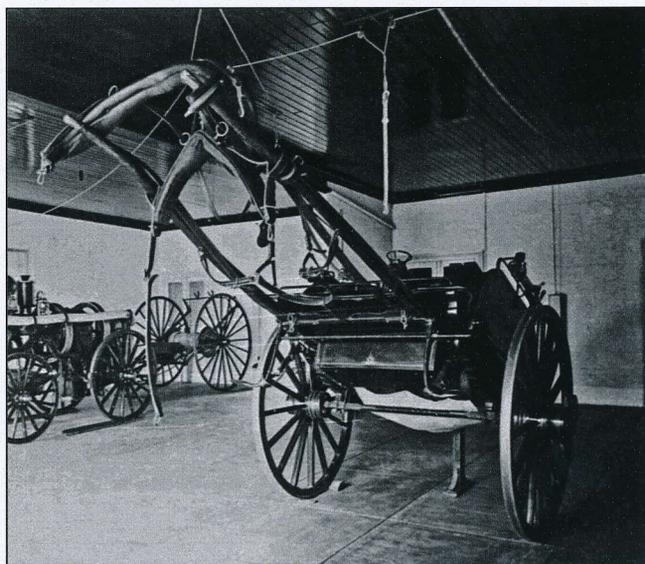
I asked Glenn if this was motivated by the need to get fire units underway quicker than having to get the horses into their harnesses with all the buckles, straps and so on. Not necessarily so, Glenn said: long before then, the MFB had devised a standardised set of harness for the horses. This was suspended from the ceiling directly above each horse’s position. When an alarm was raised this arrangement was

simply lowered onto the horse, fastened with two clips and off they’d go. The training and practice was so thorough that even the horses knew exactly where to stand for the harnessing.

There was no need to get the horses ‘warmed up’. They knew that the harnessing meant they were about to go out for a good gallop and they’d be literally chomping at the bit, rather like when a pet pooch hears the magic word “Walkies!”

Glenn added that the horses had ample exercise when they were rostered off-duty to keep them fit and strong. The men even taught them a few simple tricks which they would perform to the delight of children visiting the station. The horses were very well cared for in every way; in fact they were almost regarded as family pets and they all had names.

It’s not hard to imagine that when the day came for the horses to be ‘pensioned off’ there were a few moist eyes among the men.



▲ The harness devised by the MFB required only a single clip for the collar and another for the belly strap.

◀ The ring and rail on the east side of the small tower at the back of Hawthorn Town Hall that were used for drying out the canvas hoses. The nozzle of the hose was placed in the ring and the hoses were draped over the rail.

▼ The 1914 Hotchkiss was featured on the 40-cent stamp, one of a set of four stamps issued by Australia Post in 1983 depicting some of Australia’s most historic fire engines.



27 cents stamp: Originally built for the Sydney MFB, this unit was later converted for towing behind a truck and used up to the 1930s. **65 cents stamp:** An American-built unit that was imported for the NSW Fire Brigade. **75 cents stamp:** This horse-drawn unit was operated at the central-Victorian gold town named Scandinavian Crescent, later renamed Talbot. Purchased for the township by touring theatrical performers Sir William and Lady Don, the town named it in honour of Lady Don.

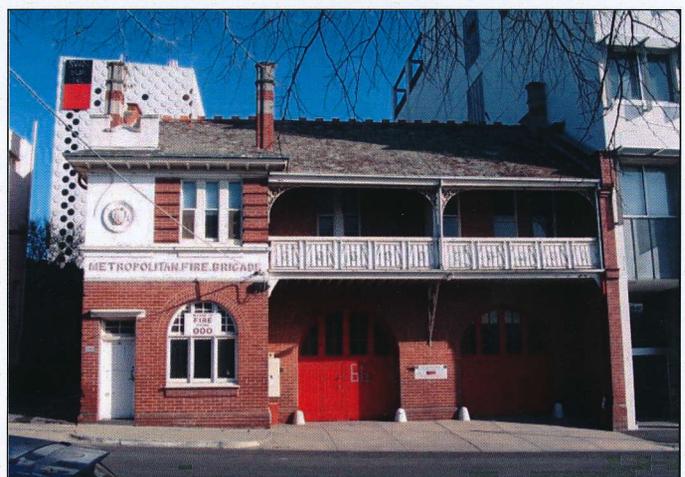
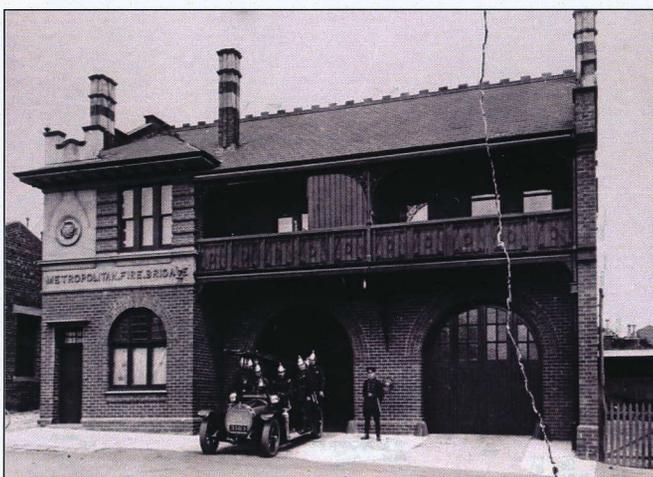


Some images of Hawthorn Fire Station over the years

The rather grandly-named 'Waterous New Century horsed pump' was originally commissioned in 1905 then later housed at Hawthorn when it was opened in 1910. The pump was operated by a gasoline-powered motor. The horses were specially selected for their strength, stamina and having a docile nature. One of them was named 'Stretties', but no-one is sure if this is him.



The entire complement of the Hawthorn station's crew and equipment, circa 1915. At far left is a hand-drawn currie ladder that could be extended by a winch that allowed it to reach upper floors. Next to it is the crew's carriage. Sadly, the original gas lamp hanging from the veranda has long gone. The cottage next door has been replaced by a six-storey building that is part of the Swinburne University.



Hawthorn Fire Station in 1926 and today. Happily, this handsome building has remained virtually unchanged in its 100 years. It is now dwarfed by multi-storey buildings that are part of the vast Swinburne University of Technology complex.

The Hawthorn Historical Society is grateful to the Metropolitan Fire Brigade and the Fire Services Museum Victoria for the invitation to the centenary celebration, and to their Research & Photographic Management Unit for their help in providing the archival pictures and the research material that have been so valuable in the preparation of this paper.

