



Getting all steamed up

Wendy Nix reveals the history behind a 1904 horse-drawn steam fire engine at this year's BDS Show

The BDS Annual Show is the epitome of tradition among the trade and vintage vehicle classes, with each exhibit reminding us of a time gone by with every bit of brass and white metal polished till it gleams along with bright and colourful paintwork, but this year saw one that really stood out; a vehicle that is completely different from all others.

Tony and Christopher Drewitt's 1904 horse-drawn steam fire engine, resplendent in its red, gold and black paintwork, justifiably won the class on its showing debut. "We were a bit worried about showing it," admits Tony. "It's too big for a light trade class and we are so emotionally tied in with the vehicle we didn't want it down the line; to win was wonderful."

Museum exhibit

There is no doubting the pride held by father and son for the fire engine and to understand the emotion, you have to go back to the beginning.

Costing £450, 'Speedwell' the Type 'B' Double Vertical Steam Fire Engine was built by Shand Mason of Blackfriars, London, for the Kent Fire Brigade's station at Hythe.

It attended several fires until 1913, when it was put into storage at Maidstone.

During the Second World War it came back into service as a static relay pump at the Grand Military Canal at the Medway and at one point worked continuously for nine weeks, helping to put out fires caused by German bombing raids. After the war the vehicle stood for 10 years

outside Maidstone Fire Station, as a 'garden ornament'. Sadly, the weather took its toll, rotting the wheels and boiler.

In 1968 it was removed to the Kent Fire Brigade Museum where restoration work was undertaken. Fate then took a hand; Keith Warner, a friend of the Drewitt family and a retired fireman, was appointed horsemaster at Chatham Historic Dockyard. Part of his role was to give children rides on the steam fire engine, pulled by the dockyard's Shires. Among those who had rides on the engine was Christopher, who became quite besotted by it. The vehicle was used as a visitor attraction for 10 to 15 years before the Shires were pensioned off and it was put back in storage. Keith left his job and, tragically, was killed in a road crash soon after.

Heart rules the head

For some time, Christopher nagged his father about the fire engine until, eventually Tony approached the powers that be. He arranged to lease the engine and took it to Kew Bridge Steam Museum in Brentford, Essex; the first stage of a long restoration before moving it nearer home.

Having spent in excess of £30,000 over six years in bringing the vehicle back to its magnificent original state, Tony struck a deal with the Kent Museum which was closing down and bought it for the princely sum of £1. Christopher has left no stone unturned in his quest to maintain authenticity, gaining assistance from Jim Marsh, a traction engine restorer, in the final stages and sourcing axes, belts and uniforms of the period.

The vehicle is now fully equipped and capable of fighting fires, having a vertical boiler with 145 water tubes and a working pressure of 120lbs per square inch. The boiler has a capacity of 24 gallons; under working conditions it can pump 360 gallons of water a minute, raising a jet 125 feet into the air - all done from cold in just nine minutes.

The fire engine is quite a sight, pulled by two sturdy horses, as the whistle blows and steam rises from the boiler. One can feel the hairs rise on the back of the neck as images of horses and engine, going flat-out on the streets of Hythe, flash across the mind.

"It was a sad set of circumstances that brought the engine to us," says Tony. "But we have a sentimental attachment to it and we are very grateful to John Brown for horsing it at Smith's Lawn and allowing Lee Bonnell to show it for us. It takes a week to clean and polish it into show condition and Christopher is obsessed about keeping it dry and clean."

And will this wonderful reminder of an era gone by be on show again? "Oh yes," Tony enthuses. "I and Christopher have livery status with the Worshipful Company of Firefighters (WCF) in the City of London and we will be using the steam engine as a recruitment and fund-raising attraction. The WCF has a charity that supports firemen and their families in times of need, should a fireman be badly injured or killed in action, and 'Speedwell' will be on show in aid of the charity."

A fitting role for such a vehicle and one that Keith Warner would surely be proud of.