



"Matchbox Models of Yesteryear"

The "Merryweather Greenwich" Steam Fire Engine

by Ian Anderson

1893, a very important year in the history of Ipoh, has been featured in an earlier article (IVOD Issue 29). As the year after the "Great Fire of Ipoh" on 1 June 1892 there was much to be done to rebuild the town and turn what had been a haphazard collection of insanitary wood and attap shacks into a modern town of wide streets and brick built houses. And all this, according to W J P Hume, the Collector of Land Revenue, Kinta, without any budget! Nonetheless the objective was achieved and the very same streets remain today - although the names have been changed, thus obliterating their history.

But, as the story goes, there were many other outstanding events in the wake of the fire - both the Ipoh Club and the Hakka Miners' Clubs were founded as was the Kinta Sanitary Board. Civilisation was coming to the once mess of squalid hovels, surrounded by piles of tin. However, perhaps the most momentous event that took place in early 1893 was the delivery of Ipoh's (and incidentally Malaya's) first fire engine.

This was ordered by the Ipoh Town Council immediately after the fire in 1892. It was to be delivered within six months. No doubt there was much consideration, argument and sucking of teeth, before the final decision was made. While we will never know, it is almost certain that two companies, Messrs Merryweather and Sons, and Shand Mason and Co., between whom there was always fierce competition, would have been discussed. But in the end the preferred technology, "The Greenwich", from the most prestigious fire engine manufacturer of the time was selected. It was of course Merryweather and Sons with their premises close to the River Thames in Greenwich, London.

Merryweather and Sons was a famous, prize winning company with steam fire engines delivered across the world; the company roots going back as far as 1690 and the original engineering company established by Nathaniel Hadley in Cross Street. However it was not until 1836 that the name Merryweather appeared when the company was taken over by Moses Merryweather, previously an apprentice in the same company who married one of the partners' daughters. Such is the way to success in business that is not uncommon today!

Returning to the story of Ipoh's purchase and for the technically minded the website "British Made Steam Fire Engines" describes the Greenwich thus:

"Merryweather introduced the Greenwich pattern steam fire engine in 1885. It had a horizontal double cylinder pump, which was produced in numerous sizes from 300 to 1,800 gallons per minute (gpm). This type of steamer can be identified by the mid-ships mounted pump and air vessel. This is similar to earlier models but now Merryweather have shortened the distance between the boiler and the pump. In later years they also produced a double-vertical model."

The model selected for Ipoh was capable of pumping 400 to 600 gpm.



One wonders how the wise men of the Ipoh Town Council knew about such things as steam fire engines but of course Ipoh did get newspapers and magazines from London, albeit they were some 6 to 8 weeks out of date and there is no doubt prestigious publications like the Illustrated London News would have carried drawings and descriptions of the latest machines. Certainly, all the medals and prizes won by Merryweather would have helped with the decision making. Another mystery is how the machine and horses actually get to Ipoh? Undoubtedly the engine was shipped from London to Singapore and possibly onwards to Teluk Anson in a smaller steamer. But after that was it by boat, elephant of bullock cart that it reached its final destination. One feels it must have been broken down into sections and reassembled in Ipoh, but did Merryweather engineers accompany it to undertake the work?

Then there is the question of the horses. Were they shipped from London or from British India? I doubt we shall ever know. Finally where in Old Town were the horses and fire engine stabled? The first evidence of a proper Fire Station is a photograph from 1915, taken in Brewster Road, just to the East of the bridge in New Town and we know there was nothing that side of the bridge before 1909.



Whatever the answers the glorious machine did arrive and caused the Kinta District Magistrate to authorise the formation of the Ipoh Fire Brigade under the jurisdiction of the police. Manned by Sikhs it was a great step forward in firefighting which during the early years, was a voluntary job, with each shop sending one or two workers to help, whenever the fire alarm sounded. Equipment was limited to buckets of water and brooms, although after the Great Fire of 1892, the Chinese community organised their own fire brigades under the guidance of William Cowan, the Assistant Protector of Chinese.

The above photograph, courtesy of the Powerhouse Museum Collection, shows the Merryweather Greenwich delivered to Australia in 1895. It was in service at the Broken

Hill Fire Station from 1897 to 1921 when it was replaced by a motorised vehicle. Unfortunately we do not have a similar photo from Ipoh. But back to Ipoh and 1893!

Imagine. A bright red steam fire engine drawn by a pair of magnificent horses, galloping down the streets to the latest conflagration. This was a spectacular and unusual sight even in Victorian Britain. In Ipoh where all but the few Europeans had no shoes and most local people were simply dressed, it must have been a terrifying sight at first. History tells us that it was said to be "the fastest thing on wheels in the whole of the nation".

A local legend is that unless a property had an insurance company plate prominently displayed on the building, the brigade would not put out the fire! Why not? Because it is said that they only got paid if the building was insured. Whether this is true or not we have no knowledge but a few of these plates like the Commercial Union one shown here do still exist on the beams above the 5-foot way. Either way it was a great marketing ploy for the insurance companies. One thing is certain and that is that in 1895, the Kinta Sanitary Board started to charge for fire brigade contributions - an additional two per cent on annual rates. I doubt it went to the firemen!



Meanwhile, as already mentioned, many other things were taking place in the wake of the fire and one of them was a most amazing coincidence. It relates to the famous biscuit makers Huntley and Palmers and the fact that Malaya was one of their biggest overseas customers, next only to British India. The company, founded in 1822 and known as "The Most Famous Biscuit Company in the World". They not only made biscuits and cakes for which they won many Gold Awards both before and after 1900, but also crafted the most wonderfully shaped tins depicting highly detailed and descriptive illustrations. These provided a wealth of information for purchasers at home and abroad, not only on exotic foreign lands but also on many different aspects of British life and history. And, believe it or not, in 1893, just as Ipoh was receiving their Greenwich, Huntley produced their latest tin, "The Fire Brigade".

This was an ornate four leaved clover shaped tin 16cm high and 17.5cm across the corners. The tin shows continuous fire brigade scenes round the sides with a horse-drawn fire engine on the lid. The engine is so similar to the Greenwich that it was probably the inspiration for the design. The tin, a collector's piece, is from the ipohWorld collection.

