

The Cover Story

Antique Fire Engines on Stamps by Newton Kulp

As a follow-up to my presentation to the club on June 4 I have taken just one of the many possible topics that encompass the area of Fire Service on Philately. Of the several thousand stamps that I have identified to date that fit into one of the various categories of the topic, about one hundred depict various antique fire engines. Many are individual stamps that may or may not be part of a larger set while others are part of a multi-stamp sheet or souvenir sheet.

Merryweather and Sons is believed to be one of the oldest, if not the oldest, commercial manufacturer of fire apparatus. Merryweather and Sons was originally established around 1690 by a Nathaniel Hadley whose factory on Cross Street in London manufactured - among other things - pumps and fire-fighting apparatus. The first fire engine factory was built in 1738 at the corner of Bow Street and Long Acre and was used for the manufacture of hand (manual) engines and leather hose, and later for steam engines. In 1862 a new factory was built in York Street, Lambeth, England for the manufacture of steam engines. In 1873 the Long Acre factory was destroyed by fire and a new building constructed to be used for offices and as a show room. In 1876 another factory was built in Greenwich Road and three years later the Lambeth factory was closed.

Merryweather steam fire engines were generally equipped with their patented "Hatfield" three-cylinder reciprocating water pumps driven off the steam engine through a clutch and drive-shaft. These engines were liked by fire departments since they could build enough steam pressure to power the water pump within about five minutes. This was critical to getting water to the hose lines quickly – often during the time the engine was responding to the fire and getting the water supply connected. They offered several models engineered from a small single horse cart (or manual pulled) size unit that pumped about 25 gpm (gallons per minute) to large city units pulled by four horse teams capable of pumping 300 or more gpm (assuming the water supply was present to support this volume).

Many other companies also made manual pumpers and in the late 1800s, steam powered pumpers. Most of these units were custom made and only a few were made by a company per year. Merryweather on the other hand could make over one hundred units per year. Non-custom units were often given brand names for easy identification and ordering. They became in the late 1800s and early 1900s the supplier of the world, especially the British Empire (except Canada).

Included below (and on the front page of this newsletter) are examples of antique fire equipment built before 1900 and depicted on stamps issued by countries world-wide. Scott numbers are included after the issuing country and if known the name assigned by the manufacturer.



Cambodia 1604, 1605 and 1606 – issued 3/11/1997 – 1731 Newsham manual pumper, 1863 Merryweather manual pump 'Putnam' and 1894 Merryweather steam fire pumper



Equatorial Guinea 242d – issued in 2001; 1888 Merryweather steam fire cart (differs from 4-wheeled versions shown above which were built for city fire departments, the smaller cart versions were built for rural departments)



New Zealand 635 to 638 – issued 12/7/1977; 1860 Merryweather manual two person pump, 1880 two-wheeled hand-pulled hose reel with attached ladder, 1873 Shand Mason steam engine and 1888 Shand Mason chemical engine ‘Beltana’



Sierra Leona 2519a – issued 5/24/2005; 1885 horse drawn steam pumper

Slovakia 541 and 542 – issued 4/30/2008; 1872 four man manual pumper and 1880 Seltehhofer four man manual pumper



Australia 860 – issued 1/12/1983; 1851 Merryweather 200 gpm manual pump ‘Lady Don’