

Midgie Cartwright

Born 1899.

Life story by Neil Bennett.

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This life story is archived, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Greenwich Industrial History website. The website describes in breadth and depth the remarkable industrial history of Greenwich.

1. Women Firefighters

The story which follows weaves together the history of the Merryweather and Sons fire engineering company of Greenwich with the life of Edwardian stunt woman Midgie Cartwright.

Fire, the devouring element, has never been known to discriminate between the genders of its victims. Accordingly, where women were alone in home premises when their menfolk were out at work, they needed to know how to fight it. Newspapers carried adverts showing women diligently waging battles with fires using Merryweather corridor pumps.

But in 1886 an important institution was opened by Queen Victoria where there were nothing but women – the Royal Holloway College. Situated at Engelfield Green, just west of Egham in Surrey, it had been built by philanthropist Thomas Holloway and admitted its first students in October 1887. Twelve months later, with the co-operation of Principal and Brigade Captain Miss Bishop, and his right-hand man Mr J H Cleaver, J Compton Merryweather had by this time welded together a team who on a cold Tuesday ached their first fire drill. He was impressed with the alacrity with which the women performed their duties, being mostly quick and agile in making the connections with the internal high pressure mains and hydrants, running out the hoses and working the hand fire pumps and corridor engines. The brigade was divided into three detachments, each with a lieutenant leading about ten students.

Holloway was not the only ladies' College to tool up – Girton and Newnham, both famous colleges in Cambridge, already had private brigades trained ('drilled') by Merryweather and his men. Girton, named after a village near Cambridge and the first women's college, had been established in 1869, and brought on the start of the fire brigade movement among ladies. It was not formally to become a college of Cambridge University until 1948.

A genuine insight into student life is a rare journalistic gem, but especially so when referring to a women's college at bedtime in 1890. Parents' Review writes of the Girton students, who might have numbered as few as eighty in total,

“Between dinner and tea, even the hardest working student unbends. College calls are made and the debating and other smaller societies hold their meetings. Novels take for a brief space the place of text-books, and evening papers and magazines pass from hand to hand. By ten the students' day is done. After a gossip with their friends, the wise retire to recruit themselves for the next day's work by a long night's rest, the foolish burn the “midnight oil.” Occasionally, however, midnight toiler and sleeper alike are startled by the rattle of the captain of the fire brigade. Then books and beds are hurriedly forsaken, and pumping, passing buckets, and the lowering of students from the college windows, is the order of the night.”

Relocating our observation to St Michael's Mount off the south west tip of Cornwall, in August 1889, we see a new Merryweather 'London Brigade' fire engine arriving and being christened. It was for service in the anciently established on-shore town of Marazion. Instead of boys or men, the twenty-six places on the

handles were taken by young ladies, who, at someone's word of command "Work levers!", brought the engine into play and threw a good stream of water. General approval was expressed at the result. This was no nineteenth-century gender tokenism, and nothing jaded their enthusiasm, as fourteen years later the women were still present in the same number, ready to pump, scale ladders or if necessary jump into a sheet. And the photo proves it...



Trained by Merryweather's and manhandling the London Brigade Manual in 1903, the women of Marazion and St Michael's Mount fulfilled an important fire protection duty.

Mr Merryweather's concern to teach the necessity and techniques of defending the ravages of fire extended far and wide, but he did not overlook the needs of those closer to home. John Blundell Maple MP (later knighted) was the husband of James's sister, Emily Harriet. Their mansion, estate and horse-breeding farm, Childwick Bury, had a newly-built laundry, perhaps judiciously situated half a mile from the residence. Despite its modern design, it was universally acknowledged that laundries generally were a fire risk owing to dangers such as overheated flues, stove pipes, drying-closets, or linen left carelessly by ironing stoves.

Mrs Blundell Maple fostered a female fire brigade from the laundry staff and they were equipped with "an elegant little copper and brass fire engine, weighing only 14 lb or 16 lb (6 - 7 kg), which is suspended in the corridor on the wall" – the hand fire pump, along with its hoses and buckets. At the call of 'Fire!' the engine was carried to the waterside, hoses connected and on the head laundry-maid's word of command it pumped fifteen gallons per minute into the ironing room and drying closet, reportedly only ninety seconds after the alarm. At each drill exercise two women operated it, but they might have been the ones saddled with extra washing and drying-out afterwards. The head laundry maid was required to lead fire drills every month, while Merryweathers' inspector superintended the training once a quarter.

Merryweather offered fire drill classes exclusive to ladies, free of charge, to those setting up private brigades at country houses and institutions of many sorts. Their advertisements carried picture impressions of women doing a fine job of combatting the flames. There was a Merryweather Fire Brigade of ladies in Greenwich, supported by the company's established 'school', inculcating life saving by canvas escape chute, portable ladder escape, sling seat escape and kit bag escape. Fire extinction followed rescue training, the women becoming proficient in indoor and outdoor hydrants, portable hand fire pumps, chemical extincteurs, buckets, hose, and then manual, chemical and steam fire engines.

By the time the history of fire fighting had reached the last Christmas in the 1880s, Merryweather had made by far the premier contribution to consciousness-raising, practical training and provision of apparatus to women who had the determination to save their souls and property from the all-too common blazes. Among Britain's female leading spirits in the pursuit were Mrs Edward Smith near Billingborough, Lincolnshire and Miss Fazakerley of Banwell, near Weston-super-Mare. The nieces of the Marquis of Abergavenny christened and started the Llandudno steamfire engine, and likewise Lady Peek at Wimbledon, Lady Shafto Adair at Lambeth and Miss Czarnakow at Mitcham. We might conclude from this that ladies mastered the technical intricacies of 'steamers' and other relevant skills and were there to do more than push the handles up and down to the traditional London cries of "Beer-oh!"



A Cambridge University college women's fire brigade in the 1870s, possibly Newnham. Corridor-type pumps and small branch-pipes are in evidence. Tutoring in response to a fire was probably by Merryweather's Captain James H Cleaver or Chief Fire Inspector Joseph Mason. Chief Officer W J Rushforth, whose name alone was befittingly didactic in this setting, may also have contributed.



A Merryweather manual is made ready by four women, their garments fireproof and conducive to ladder climbing, we hope. The demonstration, leafy location unknown, appears to be for the purpose of professional male endorsement.



The artwork above was possibly inspired by the scene in the preceding picture, with the addition of the draught horses and the lady driver with the whip hand. Merryweather brass helmets are atop the heads of all the women, and the company's standard carriage fire engine under their control. The gentleman in the peaked cap, perhaps Merryweather's Joseph Mason, has successfully completed the ladies' coaching and they are ready to go. The illustration appeared in the first week's issue of the Daily Mirror in 1904. A fragment of progress in women's liberties, but perhaps obscuring the fact that by this time the 'real' firemen were driving self-propelled steam 'Fire Kings' and were about to be introduced to internal-combustion engines.

2. Boy Scout Firefighters

Lord Robert Baden-Powell (1857-1941) ignited the enthusiasm of boys (and largely their parents) in Britain and the world in 1907. He launched his famous book a year later, and the Scouts were on their mission of outdoor awareness, adventure and personal development. A Boy Scout, as everyone knows to this day, can kindle a flame by rubbing two sticks together. But almost from the outset this incontrovertible fact was counterpoised by his ability to put it out.

There is no evidence that Mr Merryweather met Baden-Powell, but B-P's chief scoutmaster, secretary and manager of the movement, Mr J Archibald Kyle had the idea of organising a fire drill among his own senior troop at Richmond, resident near the Thames. This was after boy scouts across the country had been reported to have given useful aid in dousing fires on several occasions. On the second Saturday in April 1910, following talks with James Compton, the first Scouts' fire drill was held at the company's Greenwich works, to be followed in a series. The conduct of the training was assigned to the Merryweather fire brigade's chief officer, Mr Rushforth. The Scouts already possessed a small ladder fire escape, but James promised to loan a manual fire engine.

Both Baden-Powell and Kyle had written books, as had Merryweather, and in 1912 monographs became available entitled 'The Boy Scouts: Baden-Powells at Fire Drill' and 'Fire Drill for Boy Scouts'. While Messrs Merryweather gave a nod to the unsurpassed Valiant steam pump, so well proved in the country regions in the Boer war, they had by now furnished the promised manual fire engine to the Richmond Senior Troop, and proffered the "Boy Scouts' First Aid Kemik Fire Engine and Ladder Cart".

A year later the Scouts held one of their first 'Grand Exhibition and Rallies' in Birmingham, involving competitions for twenty-eight Patrols for the Fireman's Badge. A fire truck designed and built by Merryweather was essential to the repeated exhibition drills that took place. Captain Wells, judge of the contest and a former London chief fire officer, had assisted in its design. The compact hand cart was assured to carry two hook ladders, one fire hook, fire drag, socketed ladders, more than one hand pump, ropes, canvas buckets (the company's staple since its beginnings), canvas tank or cistern, mops for dousing fires, adze (a type of axe), and the indispensable jumping sheet. Compressed-air extinguishers were also carried, presumably the Kemiks mentioned above. Along with the seeming dangers of using some of these self-same pieces of equipment, and the threat of fires, the boys were urged not to try to do the work of seasoned firemen. Was the implied prospect of adults sending young boys up the outside of buildings on hook ladders better than the only recently curtailed inclination to send them up the inside chimneys?

It was expected that this fire truck would become the standard Scout fire engine, approved by the Association Headquarters, for issue across the country.

Thus, formidably forearmed and trained, boy scouts could fulfil their unaided mission to quench small outbreaks in rural areas where the Brigade might take some time to arrive, or to give real assistance to the fully-fledged fire-fighters, in any emergency.



Scouts pose meaningfully with the Merryweather Fire Brigade manual. In markings at least, it appears a different machine from that of the Ladies' Brigade.

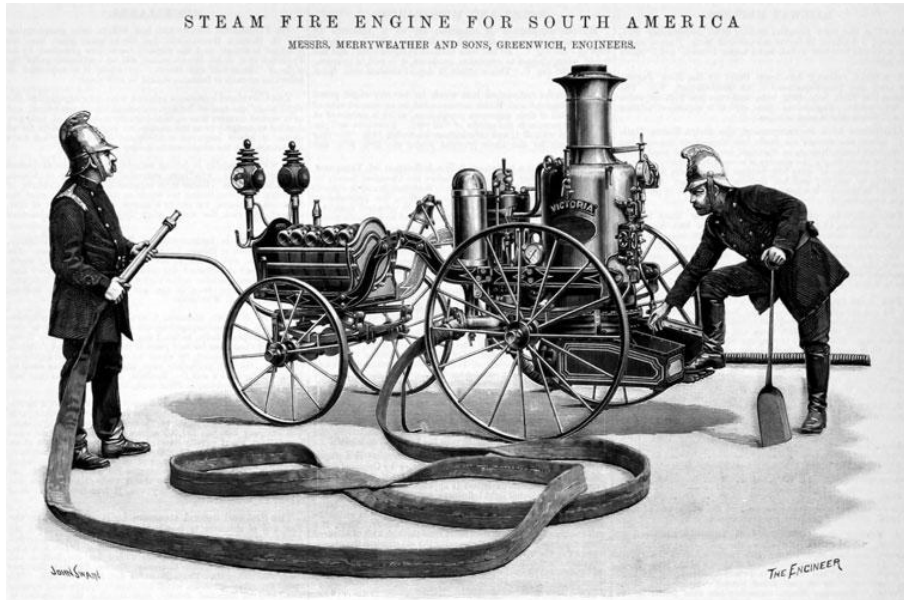


An important shot of boy scouts, with large flat-brimmed hats in the distinctive early style, posing with a partly built (or possibly part dismantled) motor fire engine with Hatfield pump, at the back of the Merryweather works, showing a view of the Ravensbourne Creek at low tide.

The vehicle above was perhaps being prepared for a test of the pump. The photographic source quoted a year of about 1908, but it is likely to be a little later than this. The identity of the trainer, on the right, is unknown. The scouts may have

been given initial familiarisation with the motor fire engine, but would not have been placed in charge of it.

The equipment which Merryweather provided to the Scouts in those formative years, and even more so their training, gave the youths of the day the tools and confidence needed at a time when fires were prone to erupt at any accidental time or place, and indeed for the great conflict that was to follow imminently.



A Merryweather steam fire engine destined for South America.

3. Isabella Merryweather

Mrs Isabella Jane Merryweather appears to have led a social and Conservatively political life in her own right, as distinct from her husband James Compton, and her earlier husband Henry. She was the owner of her house and its land (277 Clapham Road) and she was an active member of the Churchill (Kennington) habitation of the Primrose League. The Primrose League, originating in 1883, aimed to pursue former prime minister Benjamin Disraeli's objectives, the society's symbol of the primrose being his favourite flower. Like Disraeli, the League promoted popular enfranchisement and engagement in support of Conservative ideals including Sovereign and Empire. More than half its members were women. Isabella, or Mrs James Compton Merryweather as she would more often be called at the time, frequently held garden parties for the League in the mid to late 1880s. Broadly speaking, the League ran out of political puff following the Conservatives' defeat in the 1906 election.

At some point before or after the turn of the century, the sculpted contours of Isabella's life led her to take an interest of some sort in the 'Waverley Hydropathic' at Melrose in the Scottish borders. She presented it with a statue of Sir Walter Scott, the poet, balladeer and author of historical novel Waverley. The 'hydropathic' was a hotel integrated with a facility for the therapeutic benefits of hydrotherapy – the early name being 'hydropathy'. Set in beautiful grounds, the opening of the Waverley 'hydro' took place in 1871. It was architecturally interesting as the first building in Scotland to make major use of concrete, following the patent of a Mr Tall of London (and predating Robert McAlpine's first concrete building). 'Hydropathy' or the 'water cure' seemed to mark an early example of the divergence of so-called 'alternative medicine' from science-based therapy. It would have involved the use of pumps, though it is not known whether her husband's company contributed these.

While opportunities for young boys seemed to be abounding, as in the previous section, adult women of the same era were becoming very assertive in their seeking political influence, that is to say enfranchisement, suffrage or the right to vote. Since the 1860s a movement had sprung up arguing nationally for better women's education. Merryweather & Sons the company, is rightly regarded as a business of conservative precepts, but in the early years of the twentieth century Mr Merryweather's second wife, Isabella, cited above, took the opportunity to contribute to a major cause of political advancement.

It would be too simple a judgement of the Primrose League, the women's suffrage movement, and Isabella Merryweather to write that Isabella had a political change of course or a new inspiration in her passion and pastime, but she established herself as a suffragist, if not a suffragette.

A key figure in the Suffragette movement, and second only to Emmeline Pankhurst, was 'General' Flora M Drummond (1878-1949). On one of the many occasions when Flora clashed with the law in pursuit of direct action she came to be thankful to the Merryweathers.

In 1912 fiery feminist Mrs Drummond declared that the militant suffragettes, in pursuit of women's right to vote, "...would come out and destroy property even more indiscriminately than they did before, and they would make life not worth living for Cabinet Ministers". Flora organised most of the suffragettes' protests and outrages, burning and damaging property and buttonholing members of parliament, but they were careful not to cause injury. She was a member of the Women's Social and Political Union – "Deeds not words" – for whom she was both a doer and a public speaker. She earned and endured many terms of imprisonment, usually being quietly let go after feeling the effects of a hunger strike.

The women's activists came from a broad class base. It is not quite clear whether Isabella Merryweather had the vote, as she may have gained it from being a married property-owner. These votes were somewhat restricted to local government (municipal) elections. Her tangible support for the women's movement began on 11 October 1912, at 8.30 pm to be precise, when she and her co-operative husband made available their property at 4, Whitehall Court for the first "At Home" of a local Votes for Women group. The meeting was organised by Helen Gordon Liddle and the speakers were Georgina Brackenbury and Janette Steer. This was nine days after Flora Drummond's fearsome deposition reported above, and six months after a notorious maritime disaster in which a ship had had the bad luck to be conceived, engineered, built, timetabled, skippered and steered by men...and sunk.

Campaigning and agitating for women's right to vote, in Britain, had begun long before the dawn of the twentieth century, but as time went on numerous suffrage bills in Parliament were defeated, one after another. This was partly because of Queen Victoria's implacable opposition to the women's movement as a whole, and neither Gladstone nor Disraeli wanted to affront her. Liberal Prime Minister Asquith was later faced with the suffrage question being conflated in votes with other issues, and a further defeat, particularly in early 1913. Winston Churchill did little to help. Mrs Merryweather read the Daily Herald, a paper supporting the Labour Party and very partisan in favour of the women's suffrage issue. Isabella wrote to them in praise of their writer's uncompromising criticism (in an issue on 8 January 1913) of the 'intrigue' that led to this outcome.

Friday 18 April 1913 saw Flora Drummond and members of her cohort appear on a summons at Bow Street Police Court where they were branded "...disturbers of the peace and inciters of others to commit divers crimes and misdemeanours and were likely to persevere in such conduct by which further crimes and misdemeanours were likely to be committed by divers women". Outside were women noisily parading placards in support of both women's voting rights and free speech. On this occasion Flora was only to avoid a spell in the Holloway cells if she agreed to be bound over not to take part in any militant movement connected with woman suffrage by public speaking or otherwise. She eventually and reluctantly gave this undertaking, for the time being. The court accepted her providing bail in her own recognisance of £200; further sureties of £100 each for Mrs Drummond were provided by Baron von Hirst and Mrs Isabella Merryweather. One hundred pounds in 1913 would buy the equivalent of more than £11,600 in the year 2020.

It is unlikely that Flora or someone on her behalf was randomly moved to the idea of taking the short walk from the court to the company showroom (at the corner of Long Acre with Bow Street), finding that Isabella just happened to be present that day, with a sympathetic ear and a purse that could be unlocked. Isabella's brother, Henry Clarke Hulland had been a long-term manager of the Long Acre offices, apprenticed with Merryweather fifty-seven years earlier. The financial and political wherewithal for Mrs Drummond's bail was undoubtedly planned, the groundwork laid and backed up by the other members of her family, and Isabella may have been present in court.

Later in July, Isabella chose *The Suffragette* as the newspaper in which to quote her own contact name and London address advertising what seems to have been a holiday let for a five-bedroom house in Saxilby near Lincoln, the town of her first marriage.

If they had had time to converse amid the pandemonium surrounding in Bow Street, Isabella would have found in common with Flora, among other things, a closeness to manufacturing industry and the redoubtable skill of 'typing'. Flora had been a manager of the British Oliver typewriter company, after her husband became unemployed. This (unrelated to Olivetti) was exactly the brand of typewriter used in Merryweather's offices since around 1902 – "The Machine preferred by Engineers".



Flora Drummond (of short physical stature, carrying what appears to be a bag), with Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst in a demonstration in Bow Street, London near the Law Courts and the Merryweather showrooms.

The first sovereign nation, i.e. not a colony, to award and maintain women's suffrage was as far away as Norway, but it did so in 1913. Women's evident 'usefulness' during the Great War stood them in better stead, but it was not until 1928 that women achieved electoral equality with men in Britain.

4. Midgie Dolphin

Here we come to Midgie Dolphin, the central character in this life story.



While the scouting boys accomplished their fieldcraft, fire-fighting and knot-tying, the Scout movement embraced gender inclusiveness in 1910 with the introduction of the Girl Guides. There were, however, girls as well as boys whose interests inclined more to theatrical exploits than the mainstream pursuits of scouting. Fame beckoned. One of the girls, from a family of stage performers, found with James Compton Merryweather a means to mutually promote their names.

The father of Margaret ‘Midge’ Dolphin was Walter Dolphin. He seems to have been bred in the judicious naming tradition of something like Water Ford, the town (and ford) in Ireland. Walter Dolphin was the stage manager at Daly’s, which was a Leicester Square theatre where ‘Vue West End’ now stands. It was the last theatre in the Square to be demolished, in 1937, in favour of the oncoming ‘picture houses’.

Ms Dolphin’s forenames of birth, Margaret Flora Stuart, were frequently substituted for a nom de theatre such as the aforementioned Midge, Midgie, Madge or Peggy. Just to sow doubt in a future researcher’s mind that she was real, one newspaper gave her name as ‘MidgieDolphni’. Did the plethora of names dilute her future brand as a celebrity? Born in November 1899, Midgie appeared, aged twelve, dancing in a group of plays at the Aldwych called ‘The Golden Land of Fairy Tales’. In the same year her ethereal credentials became Shakespearian as she acted the fairy Mustardseed at the Gaiety theatre in Manchester.

Midgie was far from untalented. She could sing, dance, recite, navigate a punt, row, cycle and swim as well as act. She also won acclaim at an early age for her caricature artistry, and sketched and sold cartoons of her fellow theatre players and male and female visitors to the capital’s high-class residences and hotels.

Even in Midgie’s childhood years the onset of the ‘movies’ was perchance seen as both a career threat and an opportunity to an aspiring actress. Films were the way ahead. A fire engine factory could be just the ticket...

In the meantime, Midgie did indeed appear in two of the earliest black-and-white silent films. Billed as 'Madge Dolphin' and starring with Warwick Buckland, her first was Props' Angel, released in March 1913. Of shorter length than we are used to today (the reel 1350 ft x 35 mm), the film was made by Cecil M Hepworth and written and directed by Edward Hay-Plumb. 'Props' was the nickname of the fictitious properties master of the Theatre Royal. The film's plot, in which Midgie acted as the girl Elsie, was given in Kinematograph Weekly, 20 March 1913.

Midgie was aware, as one newspaper wrote, of...

"...hairsbreadth escapes...those thrilling films so often seen on the screen where the heroine rescues a whole family from the burning house and then jumps from a seventh storey window".

We do not know whether these were films she had seen, but the much-inspired Midgie wanted to be the first trained stunt-woman, at the foundation of a profession now much represented in movies the like of 'James Bond' and 'Jason Bourne'. This, had she known it, was surely a better destiny than that lying await for very many young women of the time: to become 'munitionettes' in factories such as the Woolwich Arsenal. Could Merryweather's help fortify her career?

Midgie's next film was Detective Daring and the Thames Coiners, by the Daring Films company, where she starred with escapologist Harry Lorraine. She took the part of the girl 'Eileen'. This was a longer opusthan Props', being 2450 feet in length x 35 mm. Of course the running time depended on how fast the projectionist cranked the handle, but was quoted as 24 minutes. The film was ready by March 1914; on 2nd April Kinematograph Weekly detailed its action-filled plot, and it could be seen from 11 May. 'Daring Films' was Harry Lorraine's production company. Directed by Sidney Northcote, the film was a detective crime caper which saw a gang of 'coiners' routed. (These twentieth-century gang coiners no longer clipped the edges of minted coins to melt down, but pressed their own counterfeit coins using cheap base metal). In the synopsis of the story, however, it seems that Eileen as the girl appeared in short dialogue scenes near the beginning, leaving the drama involving a crane to the adults. Did this sow the seeds of a little discontent and a 'burning' ambition?

Whether Midgie herself sought an invitation to Merryweather & Sons' works, or whether she was guided by her father or one of the makers of her films, or an advantageous theatre colleague, is not known. But the fire engineering company boasted at its top not only an engineer, businessman and fire-fighter, but also a supreme trainer, and perhaps most relevant, a publicist. When James Compton Merryweather and Margaret Dolphin became known to each other, the plan to meet hatched quickly. Like Midgie, Merryweather, too, saw the declining trend expected for live theatre and with it perhaps the lessening of lucrative contracts for the installation of fire-proof curtains ('irons') and hydrants (although the kinematograph also proved its own fire risks on several occasions). A widely-known association of the company and its products with a young film star would benefit both Midgie and Merryweather & Sons. A photo-op was settled upon – the publicity would be worth a lot more than the pictures of anonymous boy scouts in training.

James Compton would have given the young ‘wannabe’ a fatherly greeting and taken a decently reserved pleasure in the teenager’s company. As befits a modern-day film unit, the factory took on an ad hoc costume and wardrobe department, along with a veritable props department for the former ‘Props’ Angel’. They fitted her up with a Merryweather metal helmet, a fire hose and branchpipe, to go with the necessary jumping sheet, hook ladder and words of encouragement.

Papers reported that “the ambitious young lady...took lessons in life saving...practised climbing up hook ladders, jumping into a sheet, carrying an unconscious child over her shoulder, driving a fire engine and other daring things. Such is the amazing education of the cinema actress”. The reports gave Midgie’s age as thirteen, despite the articles not appearing until nearly the end of March when she was in fact fourteen. This was all before her new film’s release date of 14 May 1914, though we don’t know exactly when ‘shooting’ of the Coiners was completed. It looks as though her dynamic training experience may have been concurrent with the filming. The Merryweather visit was documented in the Mirror’s intrepid photographs but it is not known whether any ‘movie’ footage was shot at this time and place.



Following a photo appearing in company journal *The Fireman*, the occasion, or occasions, of *la Dolphin's* training made a splash in the aforesaid national newspaper, as above.

'Midgie' is holding a hose branch (incorrectly), left, and preparing to jump into a sheet held by Merryweather employees – right of picture. The crane picture shows Harry Lorraine suspended and escaping from what is probably a very early Coles, either road or rail mounted. There is no evidence that Merryweather & Sons owned this crane.



In this modelled photo at the Merryweather premises, the girl appears to be wearing the same pair of boots as in one of the *Daily Mirror* pictures.

Midgie's 'training' and 'rehearsals' in the time available at Merryweather's would have had to be superficial and supervised. Some girls' schools of the time had 'jumping sheets' and practised with them in case of fire. But today, jumping sheets are no longer used by British or European fire brigades as they are dangerous both to 'jumpers' and 'catchers'. 'Carrying an unconscious child over her shoulder', we hope meant that she improvised with a reduced size of the training dummies known to exist at this early time.

And a Merryweather motor fire engine of 1914, which the papers claim she drove, would have been difficult and potentially dangerous to start, and likewise to drive and steer, even if only round the works yard. She would have had to eschew plunging the valuable vehicle off the edge and into the murky waters of the Deptford Creek. We remember that only six years earlier one of the company's

motor fire engines was in a fatal accident while being tested on the road. The lady's pose on the 'hook ladder' is discussed later in this chapter.

With the help of Midgie's character the coiner gang was satisfyingly dealt with and the bursars of the Royal Mint could sleep easy at night. But after the excitement of the film and her action tuition, the locus of Midgie's career did not soar stratospherically. In spite of her training, initial success and support by the society and general press, she did not appear in any more films, although musical comedy Theodore and Co gave her some further acting success in a Gaiety theatre at age sixteen. Her two films were among the few uplifting distractions which saw the public through the dark years of the war.

Marriage is a thing of more than one school of opinion, but within an ace of her eighteenth birthday Midgie took in wedlock Major Sydney B Edwards of the Royal Garrison Artillery, 'one of the South African heroes'. The forthcoming matrimony was reported, with pictures of Midgie, in the Tatler and other papers. After the wedding the Major's posting may have taken him back to South Africa. It is not known whether Margaret gave birth in that country. Artillerymen's hearing is often said to be at risk...but for whatever reason the couple sadly divorced and Midgie took ship and sailed home from Natal to live in England, in 1925. 1938 saw her re-marry in Islington to Charles H Cartwright.

The one-time immortal Mustardseed, Margaret could not quite live up to this ideal and as it eluded her she passed away as a widow, aged sixty-two. Her resumé included working with film and theatre personalities still celebrated today with warmth and Wikipedia pages. Margaret's address near the end of her life is now occupied by a café restaurant, near the seafront in Frinton-on-Sea. Her effects had a value equivalent in 2020 prices to just £2800.

Cecil M Hepworth's film company, lacking luck and innovation, became bankrupt, and in 1924 all his film negatives were melted down for their silver content towards payment of the receiver. Midgie's second film did not survive either. So it is difficult to know whether any early novelties in cinematograph techniques or acting were explored in these films. Frequently throughout its existence, Merryweather and Sons' presence was discernible and germane both to historical events and the naissance of technologies, but this time in the film industry, it played the smallest of cameos.

Merryweathers' customers, as always those in fear of fire and destruction, everyone from governments to innkeepers, were the ones who capitalised the company as the Great War came and went. James Compton Merryweather, who died in his palatial home before the end of the fighting, never appeared in a film, but many of the company's manufactures remain preserved in this way both in fictional and newsreel productions.

5. The Hook Ladder

Margaret Flora Cartwright had breathed her last, but one small aspect of her life underwent a reincarnation. Her picture became immersed in the mid-1970s debate in the British fire service on the future of a vital piece of equipment, the 'hook ladder', also known as the pompier or scaling ladder.

The hook ladder, possibly originating in Germany in the 1820s, or by its French name, is said to have been introduced to the Metropolitan Fire Brigade by Captain Wells. It had a singular and specialised purpose. Anyone who has used a ladder to paint part of their house will know the importance of the ladder being 'footed' and remaining firmly on the ground. Climbing a hook ladder, in contrast, entailed mounting the ladder as it dangled precariously from a window-sill above, while the ladder's lower end flailed in empty space, usually at a dauntingly extreme height.

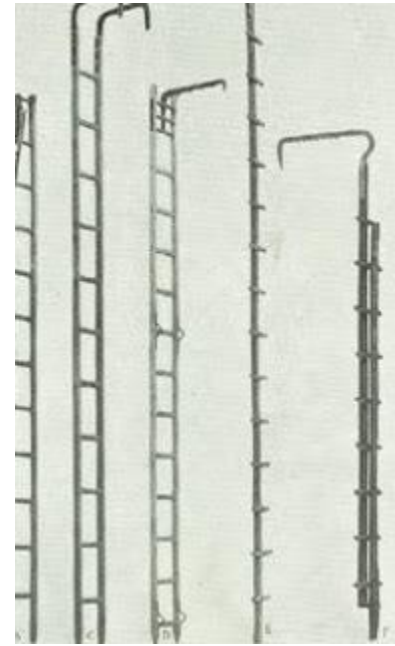
The ladder's length of 13 ft (4 m) was a bit more than the height of a single storey of a building, it weighed 28 lb (13 kg) and at the top was the 'bill', a large, strong, protruding metal hook, usually with serrations on the underside. A hook ladder would be called for on occasions when victims were trapped and calling for help from an upper floor window of a burning building, where it was accepted that owing to the fire there was no other means of escape, and where extension ladders, a wheel escape or a turntable ladder could not be brought to bear owing to lack of access or lack of length.

After muttering something to his heavenly protector St Florian, and taking a deep breath, the fireman, starting on the ground outside the building, or indeed at the top of another ladder, would engage the hook end of the ladder onto the window-sill or window-frame of the floor above, probably using it to smash the glass. He would then climb the ladder to the window and secure himself on the ledge or straddle the remains of the window, haul up the hook ladder and from there aim the ladder upwards again to the next floor above, hurl it against the target window or window-ledge and when satisfied with its purchase, climb up to repeat the process. A rotten bit of wood or failing mortar could mean death.

After the hero's necessary number of repetitions and clambering over the broken glass into the target room, this was not the time to find that your casualty was in no danger other than from a harmless veil of smoke. Did they just fancy being rescued by a fireman and having a story to tell? The fireman had to decide how to bring them down, either by what was left of the stairs or with a variation on the way he had come. The fireman would sometimes work in tandem with other firemen and/or further hook ladders if more of either were on hand. The simple ladder could thus effect access and heroic rescues at a height of many storeys, and its successful use was attested to with lives saved many times, over a span of between one and two centuries.

The fire fighter needed strength, bravery, confidence in himself, and though it was not always acknowledged, luck. Training, which itself sometimes proved fatal, was paramount. A hook ladder rescue was probably the biggest challenge a fire-fighter would meet in his career, and when the implement was used in anger it would nearly always lead to a high honour and medal being awarded.

Merryweather were the primary source and made a range of hook ladders in its own works, usually of its favourite wood, ash. The catalogue of 1938 depicts exactly the same products as 1906, though the price of the single-centre-pole type (4th from the left, shown right), such as Midgie was ascending, has climbed from £3/5/0 to £7/0/0.



The redoubtable Midgie returned to the scene in the 1970s when one of her photos, taken in the 1913 training, was used in the discussion on whether to continue the use of the hook ladder in British fire fighting. To pose for the company's house journal, *The Fireman*, she had stood with a Merryweather single-spine hook ladder, and at the time the company were surely wanting to show the ease and safety of the equipment: Even a woman could do it! Even a child could do it! Commercial publicity and promotion are everywhere, but today this seems a bit disingenuous, at least as far as the implied risks are concerned.

Rightly evident in Midgie's modelling photograph is her Merryweather safety belt, made of leather and woven flax, specific for hook-ladder use and priced the same as the hook ladder. But clearly she is attached to and standing on a convenient fixed vertical ladder, although at a significant height. It is unclear whether, or how the hook ladder is suspended. The 1913 cinema player looked every bit the Avenging Honor Blackman of the 1970s, but was safer than any fire fighter in an operational situation.

Accomplished Assistant Divisional Officer Allan Miller M I Fire E, who was a fire brigade trainer (and Associate Fellow of the Institute of Civil Defence), had the photo reprinted in *Fire journal* in early 1976 to support the proposal that the hook ladder be maintained in use, saying that in London alone they had been purposefully involved in twenty rescues in the preceding five years.

The ghastly Leinster Towers Hotel fire (below) was an example. However, there were factors such as modern double glazing with toughened glass, and building standards regulations bringing the gradual replacement of unsafe buildings and an end to their wooden staircases and inadequate access. These meant that the prerequisite Risk Assessment on a fireground would never realistically lead an officer to issue the order "Scale the building!".

The civil law, reflecting possible damages awards to the families of either fire-fighters or fire or accident victims, undoubtedly had a hand. On the hook ladder issue, after impassioned pleas on both sides, 'Health and Safety' arguably won. Preceding Merryweather's exit from London, the company neither received nor sought any more orders for hook or pompier ladders. Awe-inspiring skill and bravery had been ingrained in the very wood of their substance, coated with vermilion paint or varnished and polished to perfection. The life-saving appliance,

made so long ago with assiduous care, was consigned to the hands of museums, antiquarians and dealers in adornments for the world's fashionable restaurants and pubs.

