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Controlling Fire: The Politics of Water and Steam Technology, c. 1833–80

In an early issue of his short-lived journal, *Household Words*, Charles Dickens recounted the spectacle of a night-time domestic fire in ‘a squalid court’ in London. Narrating the immediate response of the London Fire Engine Establishment (LFEE) to the frenzied cries of ‘Fire!’, Dickens emphasized the importance of speed and composure in mastering city fires. Mounting the manual fire-engines, the firemen, including their Superintendent, James Braidwood, were dragged by horses through London’s teeming streets, ‘all alive with excited people’, first at a ‘brisk trot’, before becoming a ‘canter’ and, once they caught a glimpse of the ‘bright red gleam’ of flames in the distance, a ‘gallop’.¹

Having arrived at the fire-ground, the engines’ long pump-levers were seized by a ‘rush of people’, all of whom were ‘mad to work’ them in return for payment and refreshments. The water-plugs were drawn and connected by suction to the engines, filling their cisterns with water. While the hired hands pumped ‘with a fury that seems perfectly frantic’, two firemen entered the burning building each armed with a hose. Finding the heart of the flames, they calmly aimed their weapons ‘so that the water strikes with the utmost force upon the fire’. The flames were soon extinguished. ‘Drenched to the skin with cold water, and reeking at the same time with perspiration’, the ‘gallant firemen’ returned to their quarters victorious.²

Dickens’s account echoes a broader political culture, which recognized that, by the 1850s, firefighting had become a public duty incumbent on joining together firemen, water and technology in an integrated reactive force. Effective firefighting necessitated the establishment of an organized fire brigade, under single officer control, and staffed by a corps of disciplined and trained firemen who relied upon readily available high-pressure water to quickly extinguish fires. Investment in

S. Ewen, *Fighting Fires*
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the technologies of firefighting – from the fire-engines and horses to the fire-plugs attached to the water-mains and the firemen’s hoses – integrated firemen’s labour with the supplies of water they needed to master fire because control depended upon speed, mobility and organization. Effective firefighting had to be economical as well as efficient, which demanded uniform organization under municipal government. Unlike the private sector, municipal government had access to the rateable resources needed to create a coherent body for protecting life and property against fire. The decision to transfer responsibility for London’s protection from the privately funded LFEE to the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1866 was indicative of the growing clamour for monopoly control.

Focusing on London, as well as the northern industrial towns, this chapter will show how municipal governments joined together firemen, water and technology between 1833, when the LFEE was constituted, and 1880. Growing support for organized firefighting as a cognitive and practical strategy gathered momentum between the 1830s and 1880, and was discernible in the written reports of parliamentary enquiries as well as the technology of the fire-plug and steam fire-engine. The study of local experiences of firefighting became a hallmark of royal commission and select committee proceedings in their pursuit of solutions to common problems. Recommendations were based on robust evidence provided by municipal officials, water engineers, insurance agents and senior firemen. This growing body of experts recognized the interdependence of particular problems, and proposed uniform solutions that would, they anticipated, be relatively inexpensive to implement for municipalities sensitive to ratepayers’ anxieties about the rising costs of government.

The water problem

‘The supply of water is the most vital part of any exertions towards extinguishing fire.’ James Braidwood’s comments, in a paper read to the Royal Society of Arts in 1856, may have been obvious, but they were clearly meant to be translated politically. Braidwood’s statement was a criticism of the existing supply provisions of water in London. As ‘a bastion of private enterprise’ in water, London’s profitable market was shared among eight joint-stock companies, which frequently colluded to block attempts to compel them to improve access to supplies. Most fire-plugs in the capital were attached to the domestic service pipes, which the water companies opened every day, but only briefly. To