

No, it's not a Beatrix Potter story, but one about an old Devon Fire Brigade 1955 Dennis F8, which, as you will have guessed, was known affectionately to her first owner in preservation, Frank Down, as *Jemima*. Now back in the ownership of Devon Fire and Rescue, and lovingly cared for by Chris Swindle, Sub Officer at Ottery St Mary Fire Station, *Jemima* is a regular visitor to many West Country events in the course of each year.

Earlier this year, Chris contacted me to say that on April 13<sup>th</sup>, he was planning to take the old fire engine back to her 'place of work' at Dartmouth, where he was hoping to get together as many of her former crew as possible. Would I like to go along? Of course, I accepted immediately, but as a preliminary, Chris suggested that I visit Frank Down, who had also been Sub Officer at Ottery St Mary, and who in fact, was responsible for saving *Jemima* when she came out of service – as well as giving her a name! Two weeks before the Dartmouth event, I called on Frank at his home in Ottery to learn about his involvement with the Devon Fire Brigade, and with *Jemima* in particular. How did it all start, I asked Frank. "I joined the Brigade in 1948. I came out of the Navy after the war, and spent twelve months spending the money on beer! I joined the Brigade here – it was Ottery St Mary Fire Brigade in those days. We had an Austin ATV and trailer pump. That was up the hill towards the church at Silver Street. We moved down to the station at Batts Lane in 1953." Later even that station was left, in 1986, for the present day 'base' at the delightfully named Land of Canaan. Frank served with the Brigade from 1948 to 1975, ending his time as Sub Officer at Ottery.

Like many of his colleagues nationwide, Frank became involved with fire appliance preservation, though *Jemima* was not his first vehicle. He started off with the type of appliance with which he began his service – a 1941 Austin K2 ATV, with Dennis Major trailer pump; that had ended its working days with Shrubbery Garage at Rousdon, near Lyme Regis. "There were three of them parked in a field behind the garage at Shrubbery, and I bought that one for £100. There was no battery in it and the tyres were flat. I pumped the tyres up and asked if they had a battery. One was fitted, and after priming the petrol pump, it started. We set off over the hill to Seaton and across the top here; at the top of the hill, the brakes started binding, and the hotter they got, the more they bound, so we eventually ground to a halt, right outside the Hare and Hounds pub. We had to go in and try the beer of course, and after we'd had one we came out and loosened the brakes off. We came down hills in bottom gear then; I was afraid to apply the brakes in case they stuck on! That was the beginning. Later she was sold to the 'WAFERS' collection in South Wales. The first rescue tenders we had were ATV's, with shear legs strapped to the roof. Mind you, those ATV's were very numerous, and though we knocked hell out of them, they always came up smiling! Of the 28hp Bedford and the 28hp Austin engines, I preferred the Austin. Funnily enough the 'tune' from the gearbox was very similar. I can remember taking the ATV on the Devon Coastal Run, and going over the top from Torquay, it was bottom gear with the pump behind"

He also owned a 1943 Austin K4 Merryweather Turntable Ladder – GXN210 – which came from a builder from Callington in Cornwall, who had used it for work on church towers and other high buildings. Frank bought it from Exeter Cattle Market for £400. Originally the ladder was manually operated but was later converted to hydraulic control, with a pump working off a power take off. The ladder did not traverse, but was fixed in place. In its elevated position, it was held by clips. When he stripped the paint off the doors, he found that it had served with West Sussex Fire Brigade, at Worthing. The K4 apparently had a crew cab when new, but it was removed by the Sussex Brigade in 1963 so that they could carry a lightweight pump across the front, in the position where the cab would have been; it was used to supply water to the hose on the ladder. At the same time, the Barton pump usually fitted to the front of these appliances was also removed. She was replaced in the Sussex fleet by an ERF hydraulic platform, in 1970, and advertised for sale in 1971. She has again been fitted with a cab since her days with Frank. That cab was found in a scrapyards in Cambridgeshire, and, apparently came from sister unit GXN221. When Frank



sold her, she went back to Cornwall, to Tregadillett, but by 1990 she was recorded as being in the ownership of Richard Wilson from Dronfield near Sheffield.

He then owned a 1931 Leyland Lioness pump escape, which had operated in Wisbech. It was named *Vivienne*. That was apparently the name of the Mayor's wife at the time that the Lioness entered service. Though the appliance was a Lioness, it had a lion on the radiator cap, which had actually been bought by the Mayor's wife. EB9734 was fitted with a 50 foot Bayley ladder, but, as Frank told me, it tended to be very thirsty! It was minus a pump when Frank acquired it, but a Dennis pump was purchased "for all of £20" from the Somerset Fire Brigade workshops at Hestercombe, Taunton, where it had been removed from an accident damaged Bedford TK. "The gearchange on that one was done just by sound, you listened to the engine. There was a lovely little whistle, and when that died, she just dropped into gear. There was sheer joy in driving it, you had to know about braking – you had to plan your driving." The Leyland has now returned to its old stamping ground in the Wisbech area..

Frank recalls that the first Dennis F8 appliances to enter service with the Devon Brigade were OTA48 and OTA49. They were stationed at Topsham and Budleigh Salterton. Three axle ratios were available, coded A,B and C, the latter being the lowest. *Jemima*, registered STT318, was one of a group of four F8s which came on the run with the Devon County Fire Service as it was then called, in 1955. They were registered STT316, 317, 318 and 319. At the end of their service, STT 316 went on reserve; STT319 was converted to a hose layer; STT317 ended up in Scunthorpe.

*Jemima* and her sisters were supplied in unpainted 'stucco' finish aluminium, a popular style at the time, as it was thought that an unpainted finish would be harder wearing. In Devon, they were known as 'Huntley and Palmers' – because they looked like biscuit tins! She was allocated to Dartmouth, and remained there all her working days, which ended prematurely following a catastrophic engine failure when ascending Britannia Hill out of the town. She was towed to Torquay Fire Station and remained in the yard there until purchased by Frank in 1971. She had done just 7,000 miles on the run. Frank suggested to me that this engine failure occurred in 1967, but the Dennis's former crew members that I met in Dartmouth could not actually recall exactly when it had happened. More than 150 F8 models were built by Dennis at their Guildford works between 1948 and 1957. They were fitted with Rolls Royce B60A petrol engines, and five speed gearboxes. They were equipped with a Dennis no 2 pump, delivering 500 gallons per minute at 100 psi, a single 180 foot hose reel, a 200 gallon first aid water tank, and a 35 foot wooden Ajax ladder. Though *Jemima* started her time with a 35 foot Ajax, she later carried a 45 foot Merryweather aluminium ladder when on the run at Dartmouth.

So, how did Frank come to buy *Jemima*? Frank explained: "I was always interested in the Dennis F8's. We had one, PUO928 – that's still going, it's down in Cornwall. In about 1970, the transport officer came out one day to do a small repair, I think it was on a Dodge. He said he'd just been down to Dartmouth, and towed their machine back to Torquay Fire Station. It had seized up going up Britannia Hill out of Dartmouth, and they were going to scrap it. I told him that they couldn't do that, and would there be any chance of buying it. He said that there might be, so I went to have a look at it. Number three piston had seized and shattered, and the pistons either sides had broken the rings. Anyway, she lay in Torquay yard from 1967 to 1972. I brought her home from Torquay Fire Station to a field just up the hill from here, on the eleventh of the eleventh of 1972. The first thing I had to do was sort out the engine. I wrote to Rolls Royce in Crewe – thinking that they'd never bother to answer me, but they did - and explained what I had, the engine number and what had happened to it. They wrote back suggesting that I'd probably find that the pistons had cracked on either side. I had the bores 'miked' and decided that they were standard, so I had four pistons, journals and big ends. On number three, I had the hone put down through. What had happened was that as the sleeve only goes as far as the piston travel, and not the depth of the bore, the piston and rings had gone down beyond the sleeve; luckily it had not damaged the bore. I did the brakes; they were Girling, with servo. You needed a lot of pedal pressure, but you could never hear the servo operating. I got a repair kit from Partco in Exeter,



but when I stripped it down, I found that the operating piston in the servo was missing – how the brakes kept working at all, I really don't know. In the end, a friend of mine knew someone who was a model engineer, and after I had given him a mechanical drawing of the piston that I had got from the technical department of Girling, he made me one. I went to pick it up and asked, 'What's the damage?' he said, 'A bottle of whiskey will do'!! I fitted the new piston, and the brakes worked well – well as well as Dennis brakes would, they were never very good even when they were new. Originally they were issued without a servo. One day the Transport Officer came out and we decided to test the brakes with the meter. The reading was so bad that in about six weeks *Jemima* was taken in to the workshops and a servo was fitted. The brake was definitely better, but not a lot really" Frank then explained that he had been told by the Transport Officer that Blue Circle Cement in Exeter were running a big Dennis tanker lorry at the time, and they had similar trouble with mediocre braking. Dennis fitters came down, and changed drums, tried different linings, but with no real improvement. When they compared the Dennis set up with the brakes on a Bedford in the fleet, the drums on the latter were very much bigger. In short, the Dennis brakes were too small for the job.

So the restoration job was done and Frank headed for his first rally with *Jemima*. "The first rally I took her to was at Clellon Valley, in Paignton, an event put on by the HCVS, in May 1974. In fact, on our way to the rally, we passed the place I bought her from at Torquay" The restoration took just over eighteen months, and Frank had to find many parts, as quite a lot had 'disappeared' whilst she lay out of use, including even small items like the speedometer. She was painted red during Frank's restoration; "The original transfers were there when I had her, and I carefully painted round them – a long old job". It would have been, of course with that 'stucco' panelling. Incidentally, the lettering and crest which are now on the doors were painted by the well known Devon signwriter – and *Vintage Spirit* Contributor – John Corah. *Jemima* was taken to rallies and events at fire stations, often in the company of Frank's friend, Mike Widgery who has an ex-Wiltshire Fire Brigade 1950 Whitson bodied Commer QX appliance. Eventually, Frank sold her in June 1997 to someone in Basingstoke having owned her for 25 years. When her owner found that she was rather heavy on petrol, and was investigating the possibility of converting her to a diesel engine, he visited Devon. There, he expressed an interest in acquiring an ex-Devon Dennis RS, and a deal was done, the Chief Fire Officer of Devon, Mr Paul Young having decided that the Brigade should buy her back. So, *Jemima* returned to Devon, was restored to her silver finish, and has since been in Chris's care, kept in what is the old AFS shed at the Service Headquarters at Clyst St George, not far from Exeter.

Chris and I arranged to meet at Ottery St Mary Fire Station at 7.30 on the morning of April 13<sup>th</sup>, and, after a cup of coffee, we set off in Chris's car to pick up *Jemima* from her 'home' at Clyst St George. Chris had given her a clean on the previous day, and she looked immaculate as we drove in, an important point as this was not only to be her first visit to Dartmouth since she left there on tow the end of her working days, but she was also to be reunited with some of the men who had operated her from the Devon seaside town. We were soon on the way, with *Jemima* running well and the Rolls Royce B60A operating smoothly under the bonnet in the cab. Chris had warned me that it would be noisy, and I had reminded him that I was a Land-Rover driver! In fact as it now has padded insulation over the engine cover, I think that the old Dennis was quieter than my Series One, which in fact also dates from 1955, and spent the early part of its working days a few miles away from where *Jemima* was based. The weather was not kind to us, and as we headed west it began to rain more heavily. After a stop for petrol, we had a good run down the A38 and through Totnes, before making a cautious descent down Britannia Hill to the new Dartmouth Fire Station, actually situated on the hill, where Sub Officer Barry French was waiting to greet us; the trip from Exeter had taken about two hours. In view of the rather damp weather, it was decided to move out one of the station's two MAN vehicles and put *Jemima* under cover. An opportunity was taken to photograph her with her twenty first century successors, before one of the latter went off into Dartmouth to act as a taxi to bring the retired guests up to the station. Meanwhile, we enjoyed a most welcome cup of coffee.



Gradually the retained firefighters who man the Dartmouth station began to arrive, and the invited guests joined us. Barry showed me the photographs permanently displayed in the rest room, some of which included *Jemima*. One such picture is reproduced with this article, for a number of the firemen (as they were in those days) in the photograph were able to join us, including Peter Denning, who was Sub-Officer at the time. The fire station was at Flavel Place in the centre of Dartmouth when *Jemima* came on the run, and many were the memories that were kindled by her return. Peter Denning remembered that her gearbox, whilst working in the normal 'H' pattern, was different in that first and second were nearest the driver, with third and top to the left – in other words the opposite way; Chris had already pointed that out to me. One strong memory was of the amount of cleaning that had to be done, particularly after a shout, as all the fittings on hoses, pumps and branches were brass and had to be polished. Some of their work involved pumping seawater which played havoc with fittings, and one memory was that if you were dealing with flooding, you needed to take a bass broom to clean the basket strainers that went on the hoses, in order to remove the rather questionable material that came out of the drains! High spring tides were a certain cause of flooding in the town, and another set of photographs on display shows a pair of appliances dealing with such an incident, where the water rose from nothing to flood level in just 35 minutes. Though nowadays the terms 'Fire and Rescue' are used due to the number of road traffic accidents and the like attended, even fifty years ago, a seaside town like Dartmouth gave its firecrews plenty of work on the rescue side, whether it be dealing with flooding, or assisting Coastguards with rescue work. They also had to deal with fires on ships, even being taken out by boat on occasion. One veteran recalled that when he was a child growing up in Dartmouth, the fire pump was pulled by a tractor and if it was called to an incident up over one of the town's hills, they could actually run up the hill faster than the fire appliance was travelling!

There was a fair amount of good-natured banter about the comfort and apparently luxurious fittings of the present day MAN appliance that was parked next to *Jemima*. "Where's your coffee maker, then?" was one quip that comes to mind! It was an interesting exercise to consider the advances that have been made in fire appliance design over fifty years, and to hear from the present day men of the various techniques involved in dealing with a wide variety of materials. One thing has not changed – they still have just two hours training a week, just as they did in the fifties; however, present day retained firefighters are required to attend courses, usually in their own holiday time. It was also apparent that the Dartmouth station has always been a 'family' operation, with more than one instance of three generations having served. There are at least two present day firefighters whose fathers had served before them, and who were now present as guests.

It was a great reunion, much enjoyed by guests and hosts alike, but all too soon the time came for Chris and I to take *Jemima* back to her Exeter home. We made our farewells and thanks, then set off down the hill to the town, where our first port of call was to be the old fire station in Flavel Place. The area is due to be redeveloped, so this might be a final opportunity to take the old appliance back for a photograph. In actual fact, filming was taking place, I believe for a film about Churchill, and when we drove up, we were approached by a security man, who asked, "Do you know where they want you?" Chris explained, perhaps rather regretfully, that we were not a film prop, and we threaded our way through the narrow street to Flavel Place, which was lined on one side with caravans and catering vehicles for the film crew; we also passed a number of classic cars being unloaded for film use.

Photograph taken, we then headed for another of *Jemima's* former haunts, the Upper Ferry across the River Dart. During the hours that the ferry is operating, Dartmouth station is responsible for fire cover on the Kingswear side of the estuary, so just as in *Jemima's* day, her modern counterparts cross the water if there is a shout from the far side. When the ferry is not running, Kingswear is covered by Brixham fire station. Our fellow passengers on the crossing were fascinated by the old Dennis. One wonders just how many times she actually crossed the Dart in her days on the run. (As an aside, though Frank sold her with her service log, recording all the shouts she had attended, it was not included in her sale back to Devon, so, unfortunately, the

Brigade do not have this very important part of her 'history'). Just as we left, a train came up from Kingswear hauled by GWR 'Small Prairie' tank no 4555; it reminded me of the occasion a few years ago when we crossed with three traction engines, and none other than *Flying Scotsman* came by. As we were last off the ferry, we did not hold up any traffic up the long slow climb to Churston, which *Jemima* took in her stride, but, understandably, not at any great speed! The rest of the trip back to Clyst St George passed uneventfully, and *Jemima* was put back into her 'home' to rest after her great day out.

I end by expressing thanks to all those who were responsible for *Jemima's* return to her old haunts. To Mr Paul Young, Chief Fire Officer, Devon Fire and Rescue, for kindly giving his permission for the return and reunion to take place. To Barry French and the staff (not forgetting the 'refreshment ladies') at Dartmouth for hosting the event, and contacting *Jemima's* old crew. To Frank Down for so readily giving of his time to tell me the story of *Jemima's* days 'on the run', and in his ownership and allowing me to use the photographs printed with this article. Finally, to Chris Swindle, who came up with the idea in the first place, and for arranging the visit and for inviting me to be a part of *Jemima's* special day.

