The MFB is one of the Melbourne’s oldest organisations. The first known volunteer fire brigade operated in Melbourne in 1845. In 1890, the first fire brigade act was introduced – leading to the establishment of the Melbourne Fire Brigade (MFB) in 1891. In 1893, the Eastern Hill fire station opened and today it is MFB’s headquarters.

Volunteer fire brigades in Melbourne

The first known volunteer Fire Brigade in Melbourne was the Melbourne Fire Prevention Society which commenced to operate in 1845. With the development of early Melbourne came the inevitable increase in fire risk. Over a period of years a number of volunteer Brigades were formed bearing the names of insurance companies and municipalities, and other institutions eg. Carlton Brewery, Fitzroy Temperance. Intense rivalry existed between Brigades. Buildings had wooden or metal plaques in the form of an Insurance Brigades coat of arms or Firemark affixed to their exteriors denoting which insurance company had the building under its care. When the fire alarm was given many companies would rush to the scene, the mark would be inspected, and only the Brigade that owned the mark would fight the fire while the other companies would do their best to hinder the operation.

The Fire Brigades Act

The 1890 Fire Brigades Act had its genesis because of these chaotic conditions which existed at the time and the many serious fires causing loss of life and property. Several major fires occurred in 1889 with substantial property damage, and six firefighters lost their lives that year. This was the catalyst that caused the unification of the rival Brigades. The Melbourne Fire Brigade was established under the Act passed in December 1890. The first meeting of the Board was held on March 6 1891. Shortly afterwards, on April 30 1891, the then existing 56 volunteer Fire Brigades operating in Melbourne were disbanded. Any firefighters who wished to join the new Melbourne Fire Brigade were given the option to do so.

The Melbourne Fire Brigade

On May 1 1891 the Melbourne Fire Brigade became the main Fire Brigade in Melbourne. The first Annual Report gave the strength of the Brigade in 1891 as 59 permanent firefighters, 229 auxiliary firefighters, 4 steam fire engines, 25 horse drawn hose carts and 58 hose reels. There were only 33 horses and 48 stations in 1891, and the Brigade attended 816 calls and 485 fires, of which 188 fires were classified as "serious".

The MFB crest and motto

When the Metropolitan Fire Brigade was formed back in 1891, the then Fire Brigades Board designed a corporate shield based on that of the Council of the Town of Melbourne, now known as the City of Melbourne.
The Brigade's corporate seal depicts a crown and cross representing allegiance and loyalty to Great Britain, a bull, fleece and whale, the chief exports of the day, and unlike the Town’s seal – a steam pumper rather than a sailing ship, depicting the Brigade’s mode of transport.

Contrary to popular belief, the badge currently worn on the uniform of all MFB Firefighters is not very old. It was in fact designed in 1979 by the then Chief Fire Officer, Mr Ern Osborne, and introduced to uniforms in 1980.

Featuring a flaming torch and crossed axes, the badge also incorporates the original shield at its centre. The flaming torch and crossed axes are among a number of symbols used to identify fire services around the world. Their addition along with the word ‘Melbourne’ to the badge proved a success, providing strong recognition for Firefighters from the MFB among the community.

In 1997, the wording around the badge was changed to read ‘Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board’, and remains unchanged to this day.

The shield and badge will always have a special place within the MFB and will continue to be worn on official uniforms. A new corporate logo was introduced in 2002.

The MFB motto is ‘Audax et Promptus’, which can be translated as ‘Audacious and Prompt’.

This motto appears on the badges, seals, and crests of a number of fire services around the world, especially those in the United Kingdom, from where much of the MFB fire service ancestry derives.

Another translation is ‘Bold and Ready’, which is the translation used by the Douglas Clan of Scotland.

Depending on which handbook of mottos or Latin dictionary you refer to, you can come up with a number of other variations for ‘Audax et Promptus’.

It is unclear who chose the motto originally or which translation they preferred, however, since October 1989, the officially accepted translation has been ‘Brave and Swift’, a very accurate motto for a thoroughly modern fire service.

**Equipment and working conditions**

The 1890 Act provided for the establishment of a permanent salaried Fire Brigade. In 1890 the starting salary for a firefighter was £100 a year. The auxiliary firefighters were paid a retaining fee of 16 shillings a week, and hourly rates ranging from 2 shillings and sixpence to six shillings for attendance at fires. In 1892 firefighters were granted one day off a week, and three days annual leave. From 1891 until 1950 the Melbourne Fire Brigade worked a system of continuous duty. They lived on or near the fire stations and they made their life ‘on the job’. The basic equipment at most stations in 1891 was a hand pulled hose reel. The number of hose reels peaked at 105 in 1896. Other equipment was very limited. The Brigade had 3 extension ladders, 3 fire escapes and 4 ladder trucks. There were 8 exercise carts.
for keeping the horses fit and one salvage van. Wooden fire poles were installed at the Eastern Hill station in November 1892.

**Brigade motorised**

From its beginning in 1890, a gradual and continuous process of evolution has seen the Melbourne Fire Brigade adopt new technology whenever possible. By 1918 the Brigade was fully motorised. General, electrical and motor repair workshops were established early in the 1900's, a tailoring department in 1915 and a printing department in 1918. These shops proved invaluable during the 1939 – 1945 World War, enabling the Brigade to function without suffering from shortages in spare parts etc. Electrical fire alarm equipment was manufactured and sent for installation throughout Australasia. Through developing a system in use for many years prior, the Brigade was by 1945 almost completely equipped with two way A.M. radio.

**Fire prevention**

Fire Prevention has formed an important role for the Brigade and was in fact established by the then Metropolitan Association in 1888 when firefighters were placed on theatre and inspection duty. It has developed into a large and self supporting valuable adjunct to the Brigade's activities. Over the years firefighters have patrolled live show theatres, certain valuable public buildings, racecourses etc and a considerable business evolved maintaining privately installed firefighting equipment and drilling staffs in the operation thereof. The work of this department, coupled with the Fire Prevention reports provided to owners of various properties, can be said to have contributed to the good fire record of Melbourne as compared to some other large cities.

**Reticulated water supply**

In the early days in Melbourne, the reticulation of water was scattered and the availability of water to fight fires was uncertain. The local Brigades were unable to have changes made to this situation, but the unified control of fire fighting by the Melbourne Fire Brigade allowed the Melbourne Fire Brigade to press for the complete reticulation of water to the metropolitan area.

**Volunteers disbanded**

It was not until 1950 that the volunteer and partly paid firefighters were disbanded and the Brigade employed only fulltime firefighters. In the same year the Industrial Appeals Court introduced a 40 hour 5 day week which meant the old continuous cycle of duty could be replaced by a platoon system. This was further streamlined during the 1970s with the advent of the 10/14 shift structure.
Changing times
Between 1945 and 1960, there was a tremendous increase in the work of the Brigade and this period was one of enormous change as Melbourne grew. The average number of fires per year between 1956 and 1960 was more than double the average for 1941 to 1945. The numbers of firefighters also increased from 346 in 1945 to 888 in 1960, although this was more a result of the introduction of the 40 hour week in 1950 rather than an attempt to allow for the increased workload. In terms of equipment to cope with the changing job, appliances that carried water and pumps were used from 1952, and then further modifications resulted in first turn out appliances that carried a pump and hose plus a hose reel and a 150 gallon water tank.

In the 1960s the volume and variety of hazardous chemicals stored in and transported through Melbourne increased and this led to increased fire risks. In August 1962 there was a fire at the Box Hill gasworks involving an LPG gas tanker. The fire led to a new series of recommendations on the safety precautions required during the transport and storage of LPG.

Breathing apparatus
Smoke inhalation and carbon monoxide poisoning have always been hazards of the job for firefighters and even as late as 1966 fire fighters had very little protection against the damaging effects of exposure to this. Following a fire in a hostel in 1966 in which some of the hostel dwellers died from carbon monoxide poisoning, the Brigade purchased compressed air breathing apparatus sets, and firefighters gradually came to accept the wearing of breathing apparatus as a normal part of the job.

Road accident rescue
The Brigade has always been involved in rescues of one kind or another eg. from buildings, wells and lifts but most of all the Brigade rescues people from crashed motor vehicles. From 1978 the Brigade developed a small fleet of specialised salvage/rescue vehicles which were stationed at strategic points around the Metropolitan Fire District and manned with specially trained crews.

Multipurpose vehicles
The 1970s and 1980s saw an enormous increase in the range and complexity of firefighting equipment. In 1969 the Brigade had acquired a Snorkel. In 1973 another Snorkel arrived. Also added to the fleet during this period were 2 turntable ladders, Dennis pumps, a hydraulic platform, mobile water tenders with 5455 litre tanks, and low profile ladders that required less head room for travelling and could be operated to gain access to areas below as well as above the horizontal. The trend was towards multipurpose vehicles.
Placards and the hazchem code

In 1980 the Brigade adopted a placarding system to provide instant working information for dealing with hazardous chemicals. The placards on the containers and tankers were coded to enable the firefighters on the first appliance to the scene to begin work even if they had no specific knowledge of the chemicals involved. The Hazchem code advises on whether to use water or foam and also notes any risk of explosion and whether or not the chemicals involved are safe to dilute with water and wash away, or whether they have to be contained.

Training

From 1891 to the late 1960’s, training for MFB firefighters consisted of turning up on a nominated date and joining the ‘Drill Squad’ at headquarters in Eastern Hill (now the Fire Services Museum of Victoria).

In stark contrast to the rigorous selection process and demanding 14 week course undertaken by Recruit firefighters today, which results in a prestigious career highly respected by the community, historic recruit training included sporadic, ad-hoc classroom tutorials with a Drill Instructor and becoming an expert in polishing brass and cleaning the station.

Firefighter training was only slightly more sophisticated and consisted of tutorials, hose drill, squad drill and the use of extinguishers. Actual hot fire training came when ‘catching the gear’ to emergency calls.

Although varied, 3 months was the average probation time for a Recruit, who was not supposed to turn out unless assigned to the Salvage Van, one of the few regular chances to gain experience.

In one case around 1918, a Recruit just two weeks on the job ‘jumped the Dennis’ as it was responding to a ship fire at Port Melbourne with just the driver on board. Returning to the station, he was called before Deputy Chief, J.T.WILKINS, expecting to be sacked and only to be told he "was OK as a fireman" and to "apply for his helmet and turning out gear."

This system worked well, when only 2 or 3 Recruits commenced each year. After 1937 however, when larger numbers were accepted, the classroom sessions became more formal and Instructors were allowed more time to concentrate on training duties.

Progressively shorter hours in the1950’s and 60’s saw a significant increase in Recruit numbers. The ‘learn as you go’ system could no longer cope and after some industrial issues and a Board Inquiry, training was reformed. Squads of Trainees were established under the command of a dedicated Instructor who followed a defined syllabus.

Eastern Hill’s facilities could not accommodate the modern training regime. As recommended in the Board Inquiry, the first formal Recruit Training, in the form that it is now conducted, began in 19XX at Richmond fire station. This relocation didn’t address the need for formal training for Officers, so vacant space at Carlton fire station was utilised as an Officers Training Centre. At different times, due to
numbers, multiple courses or the need for drill space, Officer training was also conducted at Thornbury in part of the workshops buildings.

Meanwhile, the site of the old Mauri Brothers and Thompson Factory in Victoria Street Abbotsford was purchased – part of the deal being the retention and relocation of ‘Audrey’ the Skipping Girl Vinegar sign. A development committee was set up and construction commenced.

For some time during the ongoing construction of the Abbotsford Training and Community Safety College, training was undertaken in all 4 locations – Richmond, Abbotsford, Carlton, and Thornbury. Stage 2, the main administration building was completed and occupied in 1972.

Asbestos was frequently used during this construction period and was the root of the College’s closure in 2002.

In 1992, the Brigade became the first fire service in Australia to obtain State registration as a private provider of training and education, in recognition of its fire service training capability and excellence in providing quality training programs Australia wide.

**Communications**

Over the years the notification to the Brigade of fires requiring attendance has moved from the very early street fire alarm system directly connected to the nearest station to the telephonic system. Dispatch of appliances following telephone notification was by telephone calls to the relevant District Station where a decision was made as to which two stations would be turned out. In April 1971 this system was modified when the Control Centre at No 1 Station began operations. The Control Centre had a large map on the wall with a system of lights which could be operated for each station to indicate whether the appliances were in or out and there were tapes to record the radio but not the telephone. A Computer Aided Communications Centre was commissioned in October 1983. The new Centre processed 25,884 of the 33,384 calls received and responded to by the Brigade during the year. Significantly, Board analysis of the new Centre’s effectiveness showed that the computer system achieved a reliability rating of 99.5%.

**Fire Investigation Unit**

Further to the introduction of the Communications centre was the formation of the Fire Investigation Unit in July 1983, with the aim of further improving operational effectiveness and fire prevention techniques. The Unit attends and investigates fires of unknown origin and aims to identify the cause of such fires.

**Datachem**

In 1984 the Brigade saw the introduction of Datachem, a comprehensive database of hazardous chemicals, including their Hazchem codes. Upon request to the communications Centre the information for any chemical will be provided to the
Officer in charge at a fire or incident involving hazardous chemicals. The 1984 plan to increase operational strength to 1,805 staff by the end of 1986 was disrupted by the introduction of the 38 hour week, a commitment to hazmat and optional retirement at age 50. Consequently six recruit courses were conducted in 1985/86.

**Design Council Award**

In 1986 the MFB won the Australian Design Council Award for its design and construction of the Mark 3 Pumper. Operational, Engineering and Workshops personnel were active in the design and implementation of the Mark 3’s world first design.

**Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme**

The Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme was introduced for MFB members in January 1987 and subsequently all but approximately 400 members have transferred to the new scheme.

**First Female Firefighter**


**Centenary**

A Mark 3 Pumper being painted white to highlight the occasion.

**Acknowledgments**

This short history of the Melbourne Fire Brigade has been drawn from "Life Under The Bells" by Sally Wilde (ISBN 0 582 87023 2) published by Longman Cheshire in 1991 on the occasion of the centennial of the Board.