

## The Tale of the Middlewich Town Horse

Located on the south side of the church is a memorial plaque to Samuel Blechynden, collector of the town salt duty.

He was born on 4 February 1671 and died on 6 April 1749. When he died he left the sum of £30 (a large amount of money in those days) to the town to be used for the provision of a wooden fire engine with 12 leather buckets with which to fight the blaze.

At that time, Middlewich had a horse belonging to the town. Its jobs included heavy pulling work, ploughing of public land, hauling timber, stones, and as the horse power for the town hearse, one of its less strenuous roles. With the purchase of the fire engine, this same horse would add Fire Duty to its list of jobs. Once the initial training was complete, the routine of fire fighting got underway. When a fire was detected, one person would race to the church and pull on the rope hanging under the bell tower. The bell would ring out loud and frantic, acting as a call up to the men who were volunteer fire fighters, who would stop their work and run to the temporary home of the fire engine, which was said to be in the area of the Kings Mexon.

For a while, all worked well, lots of noise, lots of running around and lots of excitement. The town horse really stepped up to the plate, pulling lots easily. Ploughing was old hat. Pulling the funeral hearse was so slow and boring. Now, being part of a real team, hauling the fire truck, bells clanging and people shouting, this was real horse work. Like most things, routines develop with practice, and so with the fire routine. The church bell rings, along came the townsmen, the horse is put into the traces, and off the team goes. Along with all this, the horse's confidence and enthusiasm for his job grew.

One day, following a particularly dry spell, the fire bell rang out summoning the team to assemble. As all this was happening, the horse was walking slowly in the direction of Wheelock, at the head of a solemn procession, following the undertaker. Pulling the hearse was easy, hardly work for a big, strong horse. At the sound of the bell clanging loud and clear across the town, ears pricked, adrenaline took over and the horse set off. He instinctively responded to the bell, and doing a quick u-turn in the road, set off for the Mexon to report for duty with his team, the Middlewich Fire Brigade. There was only one problem with this, the horse was still attached to the hearse. Off he galloped at full speed and, taking a corner too quickly, it happened. The hearse hit a bump in the road and shook the coffin loose and it flew out of the hearse and rolled, coming to a stop upturned in the dust. On and on the horse ran, the empty hearse rocking and rolling behind him, all the way to the Mexon ready for his fire fighting duties. Here the legend ends, research has not revealed anything about the town horse, over and above this story. Perhaps somewhere, in the dark archives of the town, more will be revealed. Meanwhile, let us leave him with his firemen, content, courageous, always listening out for the clang of the church bell.