

# William Pett Medal



The medal awarded to William Pett

**A**lex Gloster, training manager at eThekweni Fire and Emergency Services, received a number of badges and medals from the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (MOTHs). On further research of the medals, some proved to belong to the fire services. One medal in particular, the Pett medal, was awarded to William Pett, chief officer, fire brigade headquarters, New North Road, Exeter, Devonshire, UK. Pett was one of the original eight to sign the Institute of Fire Engineers (IFE) agreement dated 30 June 1924.

Gloster officially handed the medal over to the IFE's South African branch during their annual general meeting for safekeeping on 2 November 2016. When Fire and Rescue International spoke to Gloster, he explained that there was limited information on the medal at the time he received it from the MOTHs. He set out to do

some research. However, it has proved difficult to undoubtedly say for what reason the medal was awarded to William Pett.

## William Pett

Fire and Rescue International did some research and was able to gain the following information on William Pett, superintendent, Exeter Fire Brigade.

In the 19th-Century, Exeter in the United Kingdom had already acquired the nickname 'The Fiery City', by the time of the tragedy of the 5 September 1887 when the Theatre Royal burned with the loss of 186 lives. This single event was the catalyst that forced the city council to take on the responsibility from the fire-insurance companies for fire fighting in the city. To control the new force, William Pett was appointed as the superintendent.

William Pett was born in Kent, on 5 July 1858, into a long established family of whom, Peter Pett (1610-1672) was a respected shipwright at Chatham and Sir Peter Pett was advocate general of Ireland. William Pett's branch of the family ended up in Sevenoaks, after the shipbuilding industry declined, to establish an engineering works. He joined the Sevenoaks Fire Brigade at the age of 16 in 1875 and became the sub-engineer and later the chief engineer of the Sevenoaks service.

By the time that Pett applied for the new superintendent's post at Exeter, he was a married man with two sons. Pett was one of 38 candidates interviewed for the job, emerging from a short list with the most votes from the councillors. He was appointed in January 1888 and on 1 March 1888 the Exeter Fire Brigade was formed.

Pett immediately set about organising an efficient fire fighting service, introducing the latest equipment and methods, along with a training programme for his

newly recruited firemen. The service initially employed an engineer and fourteen firemen, recruited locally. Pett liked to lead from the front and would not allow any man to do anything that he was not prepared to do himself. He was very competitive and in June 1893 he was national champion for single-man fire engine drill.

In the same year at the Grand International Fire Tournament and Exhibition, his brigade won the International Challenge Trophy outright. The solid silver cup is on exhibit in the Guildhall. In 1896, the annual Exeter Fire Brigade Competition was held at Baring Crescent Field, Magdalen Road. The competition was held to encourage the firemen in their efforts in saving life and the speedy extinction of fire in the city. It is interesting to note that superintendent Pett was first in the single man, manual engine drill with a time of 50,5 seconds, followed by fireman Winsborrow with a time of 53,25 seconds. Pett was also second in the bicycle hurdle race and first in the special single man drill.

Pett was an ambitious man for he applied for the post of superintendent at Aberdeen in 1896. William Inkster, a former fisherman from the Okneys, was appointed after receiving one vote more than Pett. One of Pett's sons, William Montague Pett joined the Exeter Fire Brigade before going to South Africa during the Boer War, as part of the 98th Ambulance Brigade. Later, he was appointed superintendent of the fire brigade in Singapore. Pett's youngest son, Algernon was the first person to take a fire engine to South Africa. His family now live in the United States.

An innovative man, Pett was responsible for several patents of fire fighting equipment including an arrangement for directing water at the top of a fire escape, improvements to sprinkler systems and a way of dealing with fire in



William Pett's headstone in Higher Cemetery, Exeter, UK  
Photo credit: David Cornforth, Exeter Memories



William Pett from a photo  
in the Flying Post in 1899

a ships' cargo. He also devised a system of coded whistles instead of shouting directions to his men. He travelled widely, inspecting other fire stations, both in Britain and Europe, looking for new ways of efficient fire fighting. In January 1914, Pett introduced Exeter's first motor fire engine, the Merryweather Limited, FJ450 Exonia, that also towed the old steam driven Devonian pump.

One of the earliest fire appliances in the country was rescued from a barn by William Pett and restored. It dated from 1626 when it was stationed at the Guildhall. In 1903, he loaned the ancient apparatus to the International Fire Exhibition at Earl's Court.

Pett lived on the premises at the Fire House, New North Road and was often the first to pick up the phone when a call was made for assistance from the Fire Brigade. When a fire was discovered at 05h10 at the Victoria Hall in 1919, it was Pett who took the call.

After an active and popular time as superintendent of the Exeter Fire Brigade, William Pett retired in May 1927 from the service that he had created. He died on the 15

July 1934 and was buried at Higher Cemetery, where there was placed a headstone that befits his lifelong passion, a carefully carved, stone fire fighters' helmet.

#### Montague William Pett

Montague William Pett of Exeter Fire Brigade was the son of William and Emily Pett. He was born in Sevenoaks in Kent, England in the September of 1880. He volunteered to go to South Africa to serve in the 98th Ambulance Brigade and his name appears on a board in Exeter's Guildhall. Pett was the first professional fire fighter from England sent to Singapore to organise and head the Singapore Fire Brigade in 1905. He was instrumental in reorganising the Singapore Fire Brigade and establishing the Central Fire Station at Hill Street, Singapore's oldest surviving fire station. Pett resigned from his post in 1912 and went on to command the Shanghai Municipal Fire Brigade.

#### Early life

Pett's grandfather was one of the founders of the Kent Volunteer Fire Association, which served the area before a proper fire fighting force was set up. Pett's younger brother, Algernon, was the first to introduce a fire engine to South Africa.

Pett received his education at Hele's College and the Albert Memorial College in Exeter. Upon graduation, he worked in an electrical engineering firm and was subsequently appointed a member of the Exeter Fire Brigade. Before long, he had assumed the position of second engineer at the fire brigade and was placed in charge of the fire alarm and telephone communication systems. He was later promoted to second officer.

Following the outbreak of the Second Boer War in South Africa in 1899, Pett volunteered to serve with the 98th Ambulance Brigade. His name appears on the Boer War Memorial Tablet in the Guildhall. Upon his return to England, he joined renowned fire engineers, Merryweather and Sons, to gain more technical knowledge and experience in working with fire engines.

#### Major accomplishments

Pett was appointed superintendent of the Singapore Fire Brigade and assumed duty on 1 January 1905. As the first professional fire fighter commanding the brigade, Pett initiated the building of the Central Fire Station, streamlined operations and brought more modern fire fighting equipment to Singapore. ▶

## Heritage

- ▶ When Pett first arrived, there were a few small fire sheds and stations that were inadequate in terms of equipment, space and capabilities. One of the immediate changes that Pett introduced was to transfer the telephone call system from the Central Police Station to the telephone exchange so that the public could call the fire station directly in the event of a fire. He advocated the building of the Central Fire Station and oversaw its planning and construction.

The Central Fire Station was completed in 1909 at a cost \$64 000. The station, with its distinctive red and white brick façade features a 110 feet high watch tower, which was the tallest structure in the city when it was built, providing a vantage from which a 24 hour watch could then be kept over the city. It also served as a hose drying tower, a feature in many fire stations. As the main headquarters of the fire brigade, the new station had an engine house, living quarters for the firemen and their families, a repair shop, a carpenter shop, a paint room, a training yard and a lookout tower. The Central Fire Station was

gazetted as a national monument on 18 December 1998.

During his tenure as superintendent of the Singapore Fire Brigade, Pett also replaced the outdated horse-drawn fire engines with modern, motorised fire engines from England. The new Merryweather fire engines had greater power and capabilities, encapsulating a fire pump, fire brigade tender, hose reel and escape in one machine. These reforms revolutionised the fire brigade, making it a more effective force. The Central Fire Station in Singapore was gazetted as a national monument on 18 December 1998.

In addition, Pett pushed for better working conditions for firemen in order to raise morale. He increased their pay, made changes to their uniforms as well as implemented a three-tier categorisation, first, second or third class for the firemen. Pett also instituted fire safety measures for public buildings. He served a total of seven-and-a-half years as superintendent until his resignation from the fire brigade on 28 November 1912. Under his leadership, Singapore's fire

fighting force was professionalised and made more efficient and response-ready.

Pett returned to England on home leave for a period of six months before taking up his new responsibility in Shanghai in December 1912.

### Shanghai Fire Brigade

Pett was the chief officer of the Shanghai Municipal Fire Brigade from 1912 to 1926. There he introduced street fire alarms and wireless telephones to prevent delayed responses by the fire brigade.

### Death

Pett died at his home in Exeter on 10 November 1940 after battling a long illness. He left behind a daughter, R Richards. Pett's wife had passed away in Shanghai in 1934.

### Family of William Pett

Wife: Emily Annie Pett

Sons: Montague William Pett and Algernon Pett

Sources include Cherylyn Tok, Alex Gloster, training manager, eThekwini Fire and Emergency Services, Wikipedia and Exeter Memories. ▲

*The Central Fire Station, Singapore was gazetted as a national monument on 18 December 1998*

