



### **History Nugget for November 2017 : Fire Alarm Pillars**

An Ordnance Survey map of 1952 shows the letters F A P at the corner of Upper Green West and London Road, opposite the Kings Arms pub.

This was a Fire Alarm Pillar, according to the book "Ordnance Survey Maps, a concise guide for historians".

Before these public fire alarms were available, the telephone operator would take a call about a fire from the public and then pass the message on to the fire brigade. Sometimes though the brigade was sent to the wrong address, and one reason for this was that there were streets with the same name.

An example was Prince's Road in Colliers Wood. The London County Council said that there were ten roads of that name across London, with four in the SW19 area. Princes Road, Colliers wood, is now Prince Georges Road.

In 1920 Mitcham's chief of fire recommended setting up public fire alarms, having seen them in use in places such as Wimbledon, Epsom and Croydon.

These would be linked by a closed circuit to the fire station. When the lever was pulled and released, a spring-loaded wheel turned and tapped out the alarm's number onto this circuit. At the station, a gong would sound, and the number of the alarm was punched onto paper tape. The fire brigade would then know where to go.

An example was when the lavender distillery in Batsworth Road exploded in 1933. The Phipps Bridge alarm was pulled at five past seven in the morning. The fire engine left the station at six and a half minutes past, arriving at nine minutes past.

The system was withdrawn in 1953, and Mitcham Borough Council asked the Post Office to install fifteen new telephone boxes near where the alarms were.

Other countries have kept these old-style alarms. San Francisco for example regards them as a fall-back option in the event of an earthquake that could disable the cell phone network.

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