

Letter by Drogheda man Joe Shiels on the history of the Drogheda Merryweather Fire Engine which returned to Belfast for the Blitz 75th anniversary service.

My father, John Sheils, was the first officer and driver of the engine that went to Belfast in April and May 1941. The other crew were Superintendent Dan Lennon, Firemen Michael Moore, 'Synnott' Craven, Peter Farrell, Paddy McEnaney, Sammy Gallagher and Paddy Harrison. These men were employees of Drogheda Corporation and only part-time firemen. When they were called to fight a fire, their Corporation employment ceased for the duration and they were paid the fireman's rate. My father complained that this was less than their normal rate of pay.

The engine was a Merryweather, the most common in use at that time. Interestingly, it was painted green, the only engine in the world so painted, I suspect. This came about because sometime TD and frequent mayor of Drogheda Laurence (Larry) Walsh insisted that his town's engine should not be painted in a livery he associated with the British Empire! He took the same view of the Corporation's ceremonial robes. My father recalled that not all of the citizens of Belfast were enthusiastic about the arrival of the green engine!

The trip to Belfast took two and a half hours, which averages out to a speed of approximately 30mph/45kph. Obviously this was a much longer journey than was usually undertaken and not without its hazards. The roads in April were frosty and the engine's heavy ladder and the pumping gear loaded to the rear made it difficult to control, especially when cornering.

My father and Superintendent Lennon sat in an open cab, protected only by a windscreen. The other men sat on the outside of the engine, no doubt holding on to the ladder for dear life. All were undoubtedly cold and uncomfortable. The Drogheda engine reached Belfast before the Dublin ones, which explains why 'Drogheda . . . slept soundly as we sped northward'—the Drogheda fire service was already in Belfast!

I am uncertain of the duration of their stay in Belfast but I think they returned late the next day. They worked at an air-raid shelter that had taken a direct hit. My father was a veteran of the First World War, but even he spoke of the trauma he suffered as a result of this work among the mangled remains, especially those of children.

It must have been much worse for the other men, who had had no preparation for what awaited them in the bombed city. There is also a report that Sammy Gallagher was injured in the course of their work.