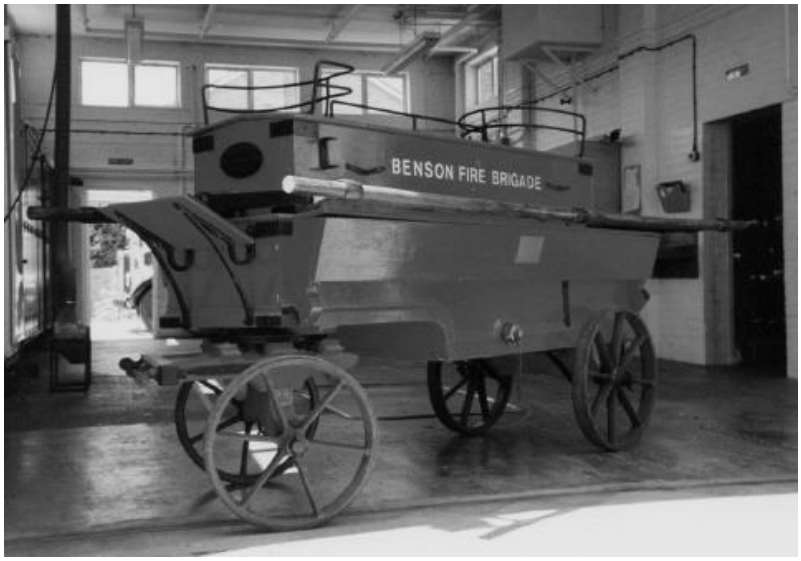
The Benson Fire Brigade by David Lane

According to a report in the local paper, a fire broke out at Benson Flour Mill In October 1890. Many villagers turned out to help and, at that time, John West was in charge of the Benson Fire Engine. Later Henry Lane is mentioned in the Vestry Minutes and the Parish Council Minutes book in connection with the Benson Fire Engine. This old horse drawn hand pump was housed in an old wooden shed that used to stand opposite the entrance to Birmingham Yard, to the right hand side of the White Hart's driveway in Castle Square. This same shed was sometimes used as the village mortuary as well.



Benson Fire Engine

When called to a fire, the horse used was sometimes the one the Lane's owned, as it only had to trot across the road. Henry was probably involved as a fireman for most of his adult life but it is not until 1892 that his name appears in the vestry minutes in this connection. Although a fire engine is mentioned in records as early as the 18th century it was manned by volunteers when needed and, there was no organized fire fighting force until the beginning of the 20th century. It was on 20th November 1902 that Henry was asked to get the names of ten men willing to serve as retained firemen. So Henry, along with his own three sons and six others, namely Charlie Lewendon, C Bonner, G Smith, H Cook, W Gurney and E Strainge formed the very first properly organized retained brigade in the village.

When it was in service the engine was usually tested in Castle Square and on one occasion the engine was duly filled with water and the men began to pump the water through the hose. The nozzle was aimed at one of the houses next to the 'Castle' and the men decided to see how high the water would go. No one realized that a dormer window was open to a room where an elderly man lay in bed. It wasn't until the poor chap was quite wet that anyone could stop what was happening. Considering the height of the buildings in the square it seems quite impressive that they could manually pump the water high enough to go across the roofs.