

## **Closure of the London Fire Brigade Museum**

Members will be aware of the proposed closure of the LFB Museum at Southwark TC, which has been an issue over the last three years or so, although a campaign and lobbying by the Friends of the LFB Museum and others prevented its closure in 2008. However, with the financial constraints now facing the brigade the fire authority has decided in principle in conjunction with the eventual vacation of the Training Centre site to alternative purpose-built training accommodation elsewhere in London. This of course includes Winchester House, the present home of the museum. Although evocative of an earlier era of fire brigade history it is nevertheless physically unsuitable as a museum, having limited display and storage capacity and no disabled access.

The Friends of the LFB Museum was formed during 2008 to campaign against the museum's proposed closure at that time. It comprises a mix of members, including retired uniformed and administrative LFB personnel and others from various backgrounds who have an interest in the history of London and/or different aspects of fire service history. Realising that the fundamental issue now was to preserve the collection intact rather than Winchester House itself the FLFBM lobbied this time to try and ensure the collection was not broken up and some of it possibly sold off.

Closure of the museum was included in the recent Budget report to the LFEPA which met on Thursday 24 November and, although closure was agreed for April 2012, members from all parties considered that the collection was an important part of the history and heritage of London and its fire service and should be preserved intact with a view to its permanent display at a future date at another suitable venue. In the meantime it should be stored in accordance with proper museum storage requirements (rather than normal commercial storage). The final decision lies with Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London who is known to support the continued existence of the museum, and there are a number of possibilities for the future accommodation of the museum currently being explored.

Over recent years the museum has seen the number of visitors increase, especially parties of school children, these visits contributing to their history syllabus and giving them an understanding of fire safety education. Museum staff and volunteers also undertake research for people seeking information on relatives who were in the fire service, especially during WWII. These activities have increased the income of the museum and it is felt they can be developed in a future permanent museum.

There are a number of options being considered, one of which would involve the creation of a charitable trust. This would lead to a better long-term future for and management of the LFB Museum, which would eventually relieve the brigade of the financial commitment to the museum and the FLFBM would like to participate in the formation of such a trust. It also wishes to be involved in the closure and storage phase and assist the brigade in developing a plan for the eventual redisplay, aiming for a walk-in rather than a by-appointment museum so that it can be available to a wider public. Accordingly, the Friends are seeking formal recognition by the brigade so that it can participate in the future including the continuation of the provision of volunteers to act as guides and generally support the professional staff.

The LFEPA decision on closure is due to be ratified in the Spring of next year subject to any variation by the Mayor and the Friends will continue to press for the preservation of the museum collection. Anyone wishing to join the Friends can find details on the website [www.flfbm.co.uk](http://www.flfbm.co.uk).