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Fire Insurance Marks

Fire insurance marks are metal plaques marked with the emblem of the insurance company which were affixed to the front of insured buildings as a guide to the insurance company's fire brigade. These identification marks were used in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in the days before municipal fire services were formed. The UK marks are called 'Fire insurance plaques'.

The first to use the mark was the Sun Fire Office which was established in 1710.

Barkway Local History Group has in its possession part of a copper fire mark at one time mounted on the Half Moon ale house at 24 High Street. It was issued by Norwich Union and has been confirmed by them that it dates from the period 1797 to 1820. Unfortunately, the relevant registers no longer exist.

The bottom half of the fire mark displaying "Norwich" may or not have existed but has long ago vanished.

Only two other fire marks are still in place in Barkway. One of Sun Alliance's is mounted on the front of Berg Cottage, and the other of the Hand in Hand company at Cokenach.

The single event which had the most profound influence on the introduction of fire insurance was the great fire of London.

The first insurers were men of property. With the passage of time insurance cover crept down the social scale and even those with modest possessions began to take an interest in its advantages. Some companies issued special marks to show that goods were insured as well as property. Once the idea of insurance had been established in London, companies began to extend their business to other places. Certain towns were favoured with a company fire brigade; but a large volume of business was transacted in towns and villages where insurers simply enjoyed a financial protection. Old county directories show just how well fire offices advertised and how many agents existed, even in the most remote corners of the land.

Various materials were employed in the construction of firemarks. The oldest and individually numbered ones were usually made of lead. In the early 1800s copper was favoured. Iron and tin came into use about 1820-25.