James Braidwood, the Father of the Modern British Fire Service
By Diana Hamilton-Jones,
Great Great Great Granddaughter of James Braidwood

James Braidwood was born on 3rd September 1800 in Edinburgh, the son of a cabinet maker, Francis Braidwood. He was educated at the Royal High School and at the age of 14 he joined his father’s firm where his training as a Surveyor gave him exceptional knowledge of the behaviour of building materials and housing conditions in the Old Town of Edinburgh. Following a series of deadly fires which culminated in the Great Fire of Edinburgh in 1824, the police authorities and insurance company brigades, who up until this time had been responsible for extinguishing fires, were persuaded to work together, rather than competitively, and, at a meeting of the Fire Engine Committee recommended that an ‘effective Establishment for the speedy extinguishing of Fires’ should be set up without further delay. One of the only three effective fire engines in Edinburgh was run by the Caledonian Fire Office which was managed by James Braidwood’s uncle, William Braidwood and it may be due to this connection that in October 1824 James Braidwood was appointed as the first Superintendent of Fire Engines. He was only 24. Thus the world's first effective municipal fire brigade was formed.

By 1830 James Braidwood had developed a scientific approach to firefighting and written the first book on the subject in the English language, ‘On the Construction Fire Engines and Apparatus’ and his beautifully kept log books show that he studied every fire with a view to increasing his knowledge and improving the service. A first edition of his manual on fire fighting and fire engines has since been signed by every Fire Master of the Edinburgh Fire Service. Some of the more basic principles contained in the manual are still quoted during fire training today. He also invented one of the first forms of breathing apparatus to be used by firemen and stressed the importance of fire prevention surveys.

News of his success spread to London and in 1832 he was invited to London where he became the first Superintendent of the London Fire Engine Establishment. In this capacity, he also carried out fire prevention surveys at, for example, the Royal Naval Dockyards, the Bank of England and Buckingham Palace. Making changes to established behaviours and challenging large institutions to review the manner in which they operate was as difficult then as it is today, but James Braidwood’s quiet determination and professional knowledge eventually brought about a change in attitude and approach to firefighting in London. The newspaper The British Workman of September 1st 1861 wrote: ‘His career in London was at first very difficult. He had all sorts of prejudices to contend against. The dislike to innovation was so great that nothing but the utmost tact and kindness, combined with unwearied perseverance, could have overcome it. He possessed the qualities needed’. He was considered a worldwide authority on fire fighting and was much respected in high places and revered by those who worked for him. The London Fire Brigade was second to none in the world.

In 1838 James Braidwood married a widow, Mary Ann Jane Jackson in St Mary Aldermary on Watling Street, close to the brigade headquarters. She already had four children and their marriage produced six more.
Unfortunately, not all the advice he gave on fire prevention, especially concerning the building of warehouses and the storing of goods within them and the necessity for more fire plugs (hydrants) and fire stations was taken in time to save him from a premature death on 22nd June 1861 when he perished during the Great Fire of the Tooley Street Warehouses.

The fire began on Cotton Wharf and Braidwood would have been well aware of the highly combustible materials stored there and of the structure of the buildings. Despite his repeated warnings about the lack of fire plugs in London little had been done to rectify the problem and the level of the Thames was too low at this time to provide much assistance in dousing the flames. The fire had been raging for hours and had spread, providing the 30,000 spectators on the river, on London Bridge and in the surrounding streets with a frightful sight. Braidwood moved between his fire crews all day to provide advice, support and assistance, but when a loud explosion was heard he paused to ensure that all his men were safe from falling masonry leaving himself open to danger. A wall fell on him and he was engulfed by tons of red-hot rubble and died instantly.

The fire continued to burn for two weeks, consuming 1,000 tons of hemp, 3,000 tons of sugar, 500 tons of saltpeter, 5,000 tons of rice, 18,000 bales of cotton, 10,000 barrels of tallow and 1,100 tons of jute, together with vast quantities of bacon, tea, spices and other merchandise.

Queen Victoria was notified of Mr. Braidwood’s death and wrote in her diary ‘poor Mr. Braidwood of the Fire Brigade has been killed, that the loss of property was fearful, a good deal of shipping had been destroyed & the fire was still raging. It made one very sad’. The Illustrated Times wrote of his funeral: ‘No event of the kind has excited so much general interest since the burial of the Duke of Wellington...Braidwood seems to have been a man of singular worth – such a servant as the public seldom has’. His funeral procession stretched for one and a half miles, thousands lined the route to pay homage to him and his funeral remains to this day, one of the biggest ever accorded to a commoner in London. He is buried in a quiet corner of the Abney Park Cemetery in Stoke Newington, North London.

James Braidwood was a devoted Christian, a man of vision with enormous energy, unfailing courage and an unflinching devotion to duty. What little spare time he had he gave to the Ragged Schools which offered free education, food and clothing to poor children.

In September 2008 a large bronze statue of James Braidwood was unveiled on Parliament Square in Edinburgh by Dr. Frank Rushbrook, himself a former Fire Master of Lothian and Borders, Edinburgh, for whom James Braidwood was a hero, and on 11th April 2014 I unveiled a smaller version of that bronze at Brigade Bistro Restaurant on Tooley Street, where it is on loan.

The site in London was chosen for several reasons, one of them being that the building was erected in 1879 as a fire station by the then Metropolitan Fire Brigade as a direct result of the recommendations of James Braidwood to expand the fire service and provide more fire stations throughout the capital. Since it has been in the hands of PriceWaterhouseCoopers the old fire station
has been transformed not only into the restaurant Brigade, but is also the vibrant hub for social enterprise. Using the same values of business and social responsibility espoused by James Braidwood the old fire station now houses programs which develop opportunities for vulnerable people.

In 2000 Brian Henham wrote the biography of James Braidwood entitled *True Hero* and I conclude with a quote from his book: 'Today, James Braidwood is very much an unsung hero, which almost certainly is the way that he would have preferred it, but not the way that it should be. He was a true pioneer, a man of vision, a man for his time, a man strong both in body and mind. He created a new science where none existed before. He gave his life's effort often against overwhelming odds and finally he gave his life, all in the struggle against the scourge of fire. In so doing he became the Father of the Modern British Fire Service and it is as such that he should always be remembered'.