



The Branch

February 2022

The Magazine of WILTSHIRE RETIRED FIREFIGHTERS ASSN.

COVID : WE MUST LEARN TO LIVE WITH IT

Relying on the vaccine booster to give protection



Like the flu virus Covid will always be with us and posing a threat but we can live a nearly normal life-style providing as a nation we take the vaccinations on offer.

As we go to press the UK Government is taking a much more optimistic view in the fight to control Covid-19. The rapid fall in the infection rate and the fact that death rates this winter have been *lower* than in the average pre-pandemic years has cast another perspective on the health crisis. The Prime Minister has announced on 19th January that the so-called Plan B restrictions are to be lifted within days. Working from home will not be encouraged and the wearing of masks will no longer be mandatory in shops, public places and on transport.

There is clear evidence that the NHS vaccination programme is being very successful in bringing the virus under control but the advice is that *only those who have had the booster jab after the first two vaccinations can consider themselves as protected to the best possible degree.*

From the very early days of the pandemic the Government said that the policy decisions they were making about fighting the virus would be based on the information supplied by scientists. Repeatedly we heard ministers saying “*we are following the science*” but now much of the modelling and predictions that came from the “experts” has been shown to be little more than misleading guesswork that has led to lockdowns and restrictions that have done great harm to the economy as well as the mental health of many people.

Get a full range of vaccinations including the booster and then get on with your life is the message now coming from Government. We used vaccine jabs annually to cope with influenza and we now should regard Covid-19 in the same light.

A WRFA CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION

Despite the doom and gloom atmosphere that was widespread in the run up to Christmas the WRFA CHRISTMAS FESTIVE LUNCH went ahead very successfully at **BOWOOD HOTEL, SPA & GOLF RESORT** on 20th December. The hotel staff as usual pulled out all the stops to give the 34 who attended a superb meal in an environment that felt very safe and comfortable. No table had more than 9 diners and it was a great shame that 20 ticket holders did not attend and lost their money and the chance to enjoy an outstanding occasion. The raffle added to the fun and raised the very acceptable sum of £140.00 for the Fire Fighters Charity.



Head Waitress, Rebecca, checks to ensure that everyone is happy on this table.



Gerry Barnett captures the festive atmosphere resplendent in his beautiful jacket.
(photos by JOHN CRAIG)

More about our Christmas Lunch



Thank you to all who donated these magnificent raffle prizes. Thank you to YVE BENWELL and JO RIDDIFORD for selling the tickets.



Much to Jo Riddiford's amusement Margaret Craig pretends she is too shy to have her photo taken.



It looks like heads bowed in prayer but they are in fact folding raffle tickets ready for the prize draw.



The 'Table Five All Stars' enjoying good food, comfortable surroundings and each other's company.



WRFA SPRING LUNCH



**Sunday
3rd April 2022**

At the very prestigious

**Rose & Crown
Harnham, SALISBURY**

**Lunch served at 1.00pm in the
Cathedral Suite & Orangery**



MAIN
SEA BASS
With Ratatouille , New Potatoes
ROAST LOIN OF BEEF
With Yorkshire Pudding, Pan Jus
PAN FRIED RUMP STEAK
With minted gravy
DESSERT
RED VELVET BROWNIE
& vanilla ice cream
BAILEY'S CHEESECAKE
& cream & chocolate sauce
CHAMPAGNE & FRUIT POSSET
& shortbread

£30
**Members ,
spouses or
partners.**

£38.95
Guests

Tea or Coffee

Booking form from www.wrfa.org.uk or with hard copy of this publication

NEW MEMBER



SUE PRATT

Sue has been warmly welcomed into membership of WRFA. Not only is Sue coping with the early days of having been widowed following the death of her beloved George, but she is in recovery from breast cancer treatment. We offer Sue all the support and comforts of membership and sincerely wish for her a better year in 2022 than last year proved to be.

Sue is a very skilled skittles player and is the current WRFA champion. Perhaps she will help organise regular skittles events for us.

WRFA ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION

The time for payment of ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION to WRFA is fast approaching. The date on or by which the **£10.00** subscription should be paid is **1st April**.

Those on pension from having finished their fire service in Wiltshire may pay through the scheme to deduct from the April pension payment. Payment by cheque made payable to Wiltshire Retired Firefighters Association is also welcome. Thank you to those who pay by bank standing order or fast transfer. However you choose to pay, it is important that you **DO PAY** in order to secure your continuation in membership.



Charlie Kuhn

CHARLIE KUHN MAKES A POINT

Charlie Kuhn and his wife, Yvonne, are good examples of possibly millions of elderly folk who don't own a computer, tablet, or other means of logging onto the internet. They are part of the generation being left behind as the rest of the world embraces the digital technology and all the advantages and problems that come with it.

Increasingly, Charlie points out that he is encountering situations where without internet access he is blocked from enjoying advantages available to the computer literate. This is blatant ageism that is supposed to be illegal in our country that claims to be diverse and committed to equality. *"They are just waiting for us to die off and solve the problem for them,"* says Charlie.



HEALTH MATTERS
Dealing with illness within WRFA
and beyond

GLENN FOREMAN

Glenn had an appointment to have an eye operation to relieve pressure behind the eye. It was booked for 17th December 2021. The operation was to be a laser procedure and his sight in the eye could be lost if the operation failed. The operation was postponed due to the pressures on the NHS and Glenn has joined the massive and ever-growing list of patients awaiting elective surgery.

We can appreciate the anxiety that this delay must be causing Glenn and Angela. We hope the postponed surgery is performed very soon.



MINISTER CALLS FOR PRIVATE HEALTH TO COME TO AID OF NHS

Faced with the need to find a way to deal with the backlog of patients waiting for NHS treatment, the Secretary of State, Sajid Javid, has encouraged health trusts to enlist the help of private hospitals and clinics in treating some of the patients at the expense of the NHS.

For many years fears have been expressed that the Conservative Party is moving towards a privatisation of the NHS although this has been repeatedly denied. The recent directive by the Health Minister must therefore have been pounced upon by those watching for evidence of the NHS being privatised.

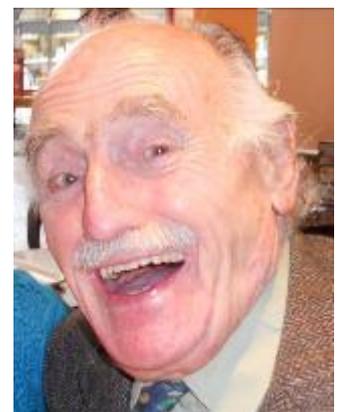


Sajid Javid MP

PATRICK GILLIAM-HILL

Patrick now lives alone apart from his live-in carer at West Lavington. He is 99 and looking forward to celebrating his 100th in a few months time. His family have appealed for his WRFA friends, particularly those who served with Patrick in the Fire Section at RAF Lyneham, to visit him and bring his life a bit of cheer and good humour.

If you intend doing so, please call ahead on 01380 812455 to agree an appointment for your visit.



Health Matters (continued)

Duke Launches 'BLUE LIGHT TOGETHER'.



Part of the personal research that the Duke of Cambridge conducted when formulating the concept of 'Blue Light Together' included a visit to the Fire Fighter's Charity therapy centre at Harcombe House.

The Duke of Cambridge has continued to show his concern for the mental health of members of the emergency services by launching **BLUE LIGHT TOGETHER**. This is a package of mental health support for the police, ambulance, fire & rescue and search and rescue services. It is seen as being a landmark mental health commitment from service leaders. Funding for this new initiative is coming from the Royal Foundation which shows that the Duke is not just giving verbal support but is putting money behind the cause in which he is so fervently interested.



The late Revd Charles Sutherland, ('Charlie the Chaplain') attending the 12-pump fire at The White Hart Hotel in Salisbury. He offered support to Wiltshire Fire brigade members and also to some of the hotel staff who were shocked and distressed.

As 'Blue Light Together' was launched the Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service disbanded its chaplaincy. The chaplains were required to hand back their uniforms. WRFA member, Revd. Canon Henry Pearson, was one of the chaplains who has been told that his services are no longer required.

THE BIG SQUEEZE IS HERE

The Cost of Living Crisis Will Hit Those On Low Incomes Hardest



EAT or HEAT?

Many struggling financially will find themselves faced with only enough money to feed themselves properly or keep warm. Which will it be?

A year ago when the Government ditched the triple lock and ignored its formula that if applied would have raised state pension by 8% and decided to peg the increase at 3.1%, many forecast that the pension rise would probably be ludicrously too small to cope with the economic crisis that was about to hit the British population. Their fears are proving to be justified.

Rishi Sunak, and his Treasury team claimed that to apply the 8% pension rise would be unfair to those not on pension yet. But what about being fair to pensioners on low income who are already facing the impact of rising inflation, energy prices and fuel prices in general rising steeply, and we are told that after April it will all get much worse?

It is appreciated that the pandemic in the last two years has put the Chancellor of the Exchequer under a lot of pressure and he has responded with various financial support packages for industry, commerce, the retail trade and the hospitality industry. Also, he has had to pour money into the NHS. The nation is now keen to see what he can do to help the low income folk.

The WRFA would like to remind all members that if you find yourself with too much month at the end of the money, so to speak, there is help available to you from more than one source. A call to the **FIRE FIGHTERS CHARITY** on telephone **0800 389 8820** will put you in touch with the services of the charity that include the relief of financial hardship.

Further help is available to WRFA members through the **BFSA Members Welfare Fund**. Call Peter Mills on **01672 520466** for a confidential chat about your financial hardship. Or ring John Craig on **01380 726343**.

In this way we hope to be of service in getting the needy through the years ahead.



**FIRE
NEWS**
In brief about fire & rescue issues



NEW CFO FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Peter O'Reilly has been appointed Chief Fire Officer of Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service with effect from 1st September 2021. He started his career in that service and progressed to become CFO of Greater Manchester, a position he held at the time of the Manchester Arena terrorist atrocity, an incident that brought fierce and sustained criticism of the fire & rescue service.

In announcing the appointment the Chairman of the N.I. Fire Authority expressed the authority's complete confidence in CFO O'Reilly.



Car trapped in floods at Bradford-on-Avon

**WATER RESCUE
CONCERNS IN
WILTSHIRE**

Nearly a year ago the FBU stirred public concern about the CFO's decision to withdraw the Water Rescue Units from Chippenham and Trowbridge.



Water Rescue equipment at Chippenham. (photo by J.Craig)

This led to a public petition being started to try to persuade the Dorset & Wiltshire Fire Authority to reverse the decision and keep the two water rescue units. The petitioners claim that areas such as Bradford-on-Avon would not receive a fire & rescue first response in time to actually save lives from flooding. The year long campaign continues.



Sir Tom Winsor

BAN STRIKES BY FBU, says Chief Inspector

Not for the first time the question has been raised as to whether UK firefighters should be legally banned from taking strike action. In a hard-hitting section of his annual report the Chief Inspector of Police and Fire & Rescue Services, **Sir Tom Winsor**, claims that 1970s style unionism is stopping progress being made in the fire & rescue service.

Sir Tom draws attention to the practices of the Fire Brigades Union that he sees as being outdated and restrictive. He quotes as an example the fact that it took three months of negotiations with the FBU before FRS members could be deployed to assist the ambulance service and NHS in dealing with the pandemic.

In his report, Sir Tom states, *"firefighters deserve fair pay, everyone does. But the continued threat of industrial action doesn't help anyone, least of all the public."*

More 'FIRE NEWS'

BRONX APARTMENT BLOCK FIRE KILLS 19

"One of the worst fires in New York history"

A fire that killed 19 by smoke inhalation has been described by Eric Adams, mayor of New York City, as one of the worst fires in the history of the city. 9 children were among the dead and 63 people were injured and needed treatment in one of five hospitals that accepted the casualties.



Saved! An infant rescued.

The fire started in a 19-storey duplex apartment block on 9th January 2022. The fire started on the second floor and like the Grenfell Tower fire the spread of smoke and flames was rapid due to the fire resistant door to the apartment being left open. The other failures of passive fire protection measures coupled with the lack of sprinklers meant that the majority of the building was quickly smoke logged and many residents were trapped and needing rescue by firefighters, 200 of whom attended.

In common with the London Grenfell Tower disaster this fire apparently became a killer because of the failure of passive fire protection measures and a lack of sprinklers.

MINISTER HAS PLAN TO MAKE FIRMS PAY FOR THE REMOVAL OF DANGEROUS CLADDING

The Secretary of State Responsible for Housing, The Right Honourable MICHAEL GOVE MP, has announced his plan that must be 'music to the ears' of the thousands of leaseholders living in high-rise buildings that have external cladding panels that have been shown to be potentially lethal in a fire.

The fire at Grenfell Tower that killed 72 residents happened 5 years ago and since then there has been scandalous attempts by developers to allow the massive cost of removal of the dangerous panels to rest on residents. The fire safety short-comings of these high rise buildings has made apartments within them impossible to sell.



Rt Hon Michael Gove MP

The Minister has allocated £4 billion of taxpayers money as a step towards the costs of the cladding removal but he has also warned the firms that put the cladding on the buildings that he will seek them out and expect them to pay their share of putting right tat which they got so wrong.

LONDON'S FIRE CHIEF SAYS THERE COULD BE ANOTHER DISASTER LIKE GRENFELL

In an interview given to the *Sunday Telegraph* in September last year, the Commissioner of the London Fire Brigade, Andy Roe, gave his honest assessment of the failures of his service at the Grenfell Tower disaster and despite the changes he was overseeing in LFB he could not give an assurance that there could not be a repeat of the fire that claimed 72 victims. The first report by the public inquiry into the fire showed the LFB in a very poor light and made 29 recommendations for improvement. 23 have now been completed and the Commissioner is doing all that he can to restore the good reputation of LFB.



Andy Roe

Commissioner Roe joined the LFB after serving as an Army officer that brought him experience in Northern Ireland. The press see him as being far better grounded for his present role than was his predecessor, Dany Cotton, who lost her job after giving evidence to the public inquiry. The evidence she gave to the inquiry was commented upon by the writer of the interview with Commissioner Roe as being *“crass, foolish and idiotic”*. Commissioner Roe attended the Grenfell Tower fire on 24th June 2017 and 28 minutes after arriving he revoked the “stay put” order that probably condemned so many to an horrendous death. Commissioner Roe recalls standing at the foot of the tower when a man jumped to his death and landed on a firefighter standing right alongside him. The firefighter lost a leg and Andy Roe could so easily have become the 73rd victim of the blaze.

Whilst he does what Dany Cotton failed to do, shoulder the blame for all that the LFB got wrong, he quite rightly points out that the Brigade is but one of a long list of institutions, including Her Majesty's Government, that have an equal if not greater responsibility for those 72 deaths. The journalist, Robert Mendick, who reported the interview states that Dany Cotton gave the impression of being more focused on her firefighters than on the victims and their relatives. Andy Roe's approach is very different. He is scathing in his criticism of the time it is taking to remove the dangerous cladding from the 1,107 high rise buildings in the area protected by the LFB.



He refuses to give any assurances about a second high rise fire disaster in the capital being unlikely until the cladding is removed and builders and developers start giving fire safety the consideration it deserves.

WHO REALLY GOVERNS THE UK?

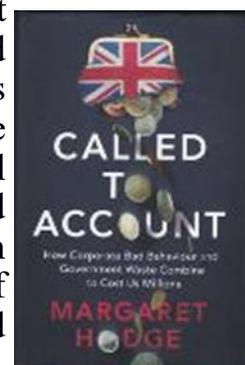
Is it the Civil Service *Tail* wagging the Parliamentary *Dog* ?

As this edition goes to press our news is dominated by the troubles into which the Government has become embroiled. Yet again this places a focus on the relationship between the politicians elected to govern us and the Civil Service that is supposed to be the executive arm of the government of the day, irrespective of which party is in power.

It is quite clear that there are great strains on the relationship. Just taking one example, in a lengthy article for the *Daily Telegraph*, published on 15th January 2022, in setting out his reasons for resigning as the minister responsible for delivering 'Brexit', LORD FROST explains his frustration that although the UK clearly voted for 'Brexit' "certain elements of the establishment" are doing all they can to stop progress and create the circumstances for a second referendum. By "*certain elements*" he is of course referring to the Civil Service. He makes his case with colourful phrases such as "*the PM pulls a lever and nothing happens*". This is by no means an isolated example or something affecting only the current government.



In her book *Called To Account* Lady Margaret Hodge reveals some concerning views gathered during her time between 2010 and 2015 as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. The waste of £billions of taxpayers' money by central government was exposed by Margaret Hodge and she gives opinion on how to correct this. In particular she calls for an end to the principle of ministerial accountability. This was first introduced before World War One when the Civil Service was a fraction of the size it is now.



It means that only ministers can be held to account for the failures and misdeeds of their officers within their various departments. Politicians holding ministerial posts will move comparatively quickly and must rely upon the competence and integrity of their officers to avoid expensive and sometimes fatal mistakes being made.

In the immediate aftermath of the **Grenfell Tower** fire on the *Sunday Politics* TV programme I recall seeing a junior minister interviewed and shown the copy of a letter he had signed in reply to one sent to his boss, Eric Pickles, the Secretary of State for Local Government and Communities. The reply was to a letter from the All Party Fire & Rescue Committee of the House of Commons and it dismisses the fear that a high rise fire in the UK could have lethal consequences unless the coroner's recommendations following the Lacanal House fire (6 dead) are implemented. The letter was written years before the Grenfell Tower disaster (72 dead) and warned it could happen. I saw the minister squirm in his seat and paraphrasing his answer he said that he had no detailed knowledge of building regulations and had to rely on his officers .

In other words, part of his time was spent signing letters the contents of which he little understood. Yet, due to the principle of ministerial accountability the civil servants who drafted that letter are given a “*get out of jail*” card and can escape being held accountable to Parliament for the consequences of their actions. Or can they?

The public inquiry into the **Grenfell Tower** fire grinds on at a snail pace but I was intrigued a few months ago when before scrutiny by the inquiry into the part played by the government in the disaster , Jason Beer QC, a barrister acting for Her Majesty’s Government, gave an apology to the inquiry for the failures, mistakes and omissions which are accepted as being the fault of the Government before the details have yet to be uncovered by the Judge taking evidence from witnesses.



In my experience this was a very unusual step and it points to the probability that the Government know that it is going to have some tough and embarrassing questions to answer at the inquiry.

In the immediate aftermath of the fire with feelings running high, I well recall the attempts by Whitehall to “blame somebody else”. No doubt on legal advice civil servants responsible for the building regulations claimed that they were not in need of amendment and the fault lay with the local authorities who enforced the regulations. With the passage of time and more detailed consideration by the lawyers it appears that a more accurate and realistic view is being taken in Whitehall. By the time the Public Inquiry reports I would take odds that the actual civil servants who got it so wrong will have collected their awards in the honours lists and started drawing ‘gold-plated’ pensions.

This goes right to the heart of the point made by Lady Hodge and many others. We have seen the London Fire Brigade pounced upon by the inquiry. No doubt the Brigade was seen as a soft target and in destroying the reputation of an individual and the London Fire Brigade in general valuable time was gained that allowed those guilty of far more serious errors or failures to prepare their defence or just collect their honour and slink off into the murk and mist of obscurity.

Many politicians have seen their promising political careers come crashing down into the dust, not because of any personal failure on their part other than to fail to exert effective control of their officials. Some who have tried to get a grip have found themselves faced with the accusation of bullying. People I know who have worked at Whitehall have told me that the TV programmes *Yes, Minister*, and *Yes, Prime Minister* are more like documentaries than comedy sitcoms. Our political masters are really just ‘dogs’ being wagged by the Civil Service ‘tail’.

John Craig

Final Salute



ERNEST MICHAEL ('DOLLY') GRAY

The name Ernest was not known by many and was rarely, if ever, used certainly not by Michael himself and those who knew him well. He was always 'Mike', 'Mick' or, in the case of his fire service colleagues, 'Dolly'.

Mike served an apprenticeship as a plumber and he married Ann in 1960, both sharing a passion for animals. He had a strong desire to become a fireman and, in the absence of any vacancies locally, he joined the former Bristol City Fire Brigade in 1963, serving at Brislington Fire Station. While serving in Bristol, he attended an animal rescue incident involving a German Shepherd dog trapped on a weir. Being a strong swimmer and having a fondness for the breed it's not surprising he took a prominent role in the dog's rescue, for which he was awarded a commendation.

Mike transferred to Wiltshire Fire Brigade in 1966 serving at Swindon Fire Station where he earned the nickname, 'Dolly'. He was well liked and respected by his colleagues as a firefighter you would want at your side on the fireground. Mike also served as a Fire Brigades Union representative for several years.. Mike was forced to retire from the Brigade in 1984 due to ill-health and he returned to his old trade as a plumber.

Outside the service his fondness for German Shepherds led him to take up breeding and he subsequently qualified as a show judge for the breed at championship level.

As a husband, father, grandfather and great grandfather he will be sorely missed by his family. As a firefighter he will be remembered as a valued and respected colleague.

Rest in peace, Mike.

John Gentleman QFSM

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