

The Branch



September 2023

Magazine of the Wiltshire Retired Firefighters Association

WILL YOUR LOCAL FIRE ENGINE BE THERE WHEN YOU NEED IT?

Summer 1976. Having dealt with a fire and booked available, they were directed in most cases to another fire. The public in the street paused to applaud when they saw a fire engine rushing to answer a call.



Although holidaymakers were disappointed by the poor weather in July and August, it is likely that chief fire officers are thankful that their services were not stretched by heat waves that usually put fire services under pressure. The difficulties in recruiting and retaining on-call firefighters appears to be a national problem and worsening.

The problem of crewing appliances extends to the wholtime service too. London Fire Brigade had 25 pumps and 8 specials off the run due to crew shortage on 2nd September.

During the Great Drought of Summer 1976 when no rain fell for 9 weeks, those who served at that time will recall the dire situations that arose when all the resources of fire brigades were committed to fires and on extinguishing one exhausted crews were directed by radio to another. The on-call (retained) service saved the day because compared to today part-time stations were well-staffed and rarely went off the run. Morale was sky high despite the call rate being unprecedented in peacetime. What if those times come again? You may have a fire station just across the street but will it have a crew available?

OUR PRESIDENT HAS PASSED AWAY

With the utmost sadness the death is reported of the President of the WRFA

JERRY WILLMOTT CBE, QFSM, MIFireE

Jerry died after a long illness on 29th July 2023. He was just a few days short of his 91st Birthday. The funeral was held on 25th August at St Mary's Parish Church, Potterne.

Our sincere condolences go to Pat and the family. See page 13



Jerry was carried to the funeral aboard this 1943 vintage turntable ladder



SUMMER LUNCH & AGM



Our AGM and Summer Lunch was held on 6th August at The Hourglass Pub Restaurant on the Kennet & Avon Canal in Devizes. The Sunday Lunch was a delight to all who stayed to sample the excellent cuisine at this venue.



Our social events continue to provide a very pleasant opportunity to meet up with old friends and colleagues and to make new friends. Good food eaten in an attractive venue with valued mates. Photos by John Craig



EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE RE-ELECTED



Louise Fielding
Chairperson



John Cox
Vice Chairperson



John Craig
Secretary & Treasurer



Neil Wright
Honorary Auditor



Yve Benwell
North Area



Brian Watts
North Area



Glyn Moody
North Area



Jo Riddiford
Central Area



Vince Kimber
Central Area

**Vacant posts in
Central &
South Areas.
Applicants welcomed**



Ludo Macaulay
South Area



Paul Jaycock
South Area



Len Benwell
Non-Specific Area



ABOUT YOUR PENSION



The **cost of living** crisis continues to be a matter of grave concern to millions in this country, particularly those relying on the state pension as their main source of income. It is therefore a blessing to pensioners that the triple lock policy, introduced by the Conservative Government in 2010, is still in force. Triple lock uses the inflation figure in September to calculate the annual state pension increase the following April if this produces a higher figure than consumer price index or average wage rises.

At the time of going to press the announcement of the increase in next year's pension is still awaited but **economy experts expect the announcement will be for about a 7% increase, bringing the basic state pension up to £11,342 per annum.** The Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have given an assurance that the triple lock policy will be used to calculate the pension increase. There are a growing number of economists and politicians who cast doubt about whether the UK can afford to continue using the triple lock and they want it scrapped. One wonders how many of these have been through the experience of having too much month left at the end of the money? How many of them have ever had to resort to going to a food bank to feed their family and/or themselves.

Warnings have been issued by the Whitehall that the so called "generous" pension increases awarded this year and probably next year may result in tax rises to meet the cost. If the civil service could avoid wasting taxpayer's money on the ever growing file of their costly incompetence (see page 8 for one such example) this nation would probably be able to comfortably afford pension increases that keep pace with inflation.

Another idea said to be circulating in the corridors of power is that the state pension should be means tested so that only those deemed to need the cash will get it. To actually introduce and manage such a scheme would be an administrative nightmare. The civil service would no doubt appoint huge numbers of extra staff and the cost of paying for them would probably wipe out any cost benefit from means testing.

LONG LIVE THE TRIPLE LOCK!

Health Matters



BRUCE BRINGLOE

Bruce has not been well recently due to heart problems. He hopes to resume getting out and about using his mobility scooter once his health improves enough to do so. We wish him and Janet well.



RON LAYCOCK

Ron and Val went to Nigeria in July and unfortunately Ron returned with a chest infection that prevented him attending the AGM and Summer Lunch. We sincerely hope that the infection does not develop into anything more serious and he soon responds to treatment.

FRANCES MILLS

One of the first to book for the Summer Lunch, it was therefore very unfortunate that Frances was struck down by a nasty throat ailment that meant a referral to GWH. We missed her and hope that Frances is already recovered or will be so very soon.



HILARY VENN

Hilary spent six days recently in RUH, Bath having assessment and treatment for a heart complaint. She is now home in Trowbridge and taking medication which it is hoped will mean more invasive treatment is unnecessary. We wish Hilary a good recovery and look forward to seeing her attending our social events again

PETE WIXEY

Pete has been troubled by a lady living close by whose dog has attacked Pete's dog and been threatening to him. This person is well known to the police and they are taking action in support of Pete. However, this unpleasantness has taken a toll on Pete's health and he has had to seek medical help from his GP. We wish Pete a rapid improvement in his situation.



JOHN GENTLEMAN

John has had a patch of skin cancer surgically removed from his leg. This didn't prevent him and Deana from attending the AGM and Summer Lunch just days after the surgery. We hope that John makes a complete and swift recovery.

JUNE WATTS

June has tried to invent a new sport called 'The Staircase Hi-Dive' and you need to do it on a staircase. Sadly, the staircase won and June got the runners up trophy, a set of crutches! The good news is that June is on the road to recovery and the crutches will soon be for display purposes only. Best wishes, June.

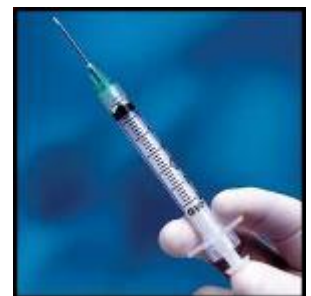


MARGARET CRAIG

"Send me a photograph of the problem so that I can diagnose", said Margaret's GP over the telephone. Margaret had an infection on an eyelid called a sty. John duly took the required snaps, all the time giving thanks that the ailment was not piles! Margaret has binned the eye make-up that probably caused the infection.

KATH PENFOLD

Kath has been troubled by arthritis in her hands that she understands is probably a complication brought on by having had Covid-19 earlier. After a miserable and pain filled few weeks the GP gave her an injection of steroids that has done much to ease the pain and disability in her hands. Kath is keeping quiet about the site where the doctor injected her. Perhaps we shall get to the bottom of it in time! We send Kath best wishes.





CHRISTMAS FESTIVE LUNCH



**Sunday 10th December
1.00pm
(Cash bar from Noon)**



**BEECHFIELD HOUSE HOTEL
BEANACRE, MELKSHAM**



**Prices for members , spouses and
partners
will be subsidised generously.**

**Chef is finalising the
Festive Menu.**



**Booking expected to be
available by October.**



**WATCH FOR FURTHER
DETAILS**



Disabled access



Christmas Raffle



Emergency Services Network Project in Deep Trouble.

**Years overdue and £ billions
over budget.**

The Home Office managed project to replace the emergency services radio scheme called '*Airwave*' with a system called **Emergency Services Network (ESN)** is attracting bitter criticism from the Public Accounts Committee. The project to create ESN for use by police, fire and ambulance services as a replacement for '*Airwave*' was first envisaged by the coalition government in 2010. The intention was to have ESN up and running in all blue light services by 2019 and work began in earnest in 2015.

The contractor is Motorola and the great selling point was that it would cost £250m a year compared to £450m , thus making huge savings for the UK taxpayer. The latest scrutiny of the project by the committee is showing little progress towards completion and the budget is £2.1 billion 'in the red'. One forecast has shown that if (and its a big 'if') ESN is ever set up the final cost might be in the order of £11 billion.

**Home Office “disconnected from reality”
Dame Meg Hillier , Chairman, Public Accounts Committee**

The Home Office has given a guarantee that ESN will be a radical improvement over '*Airwave*' by delivering faster, safer and more secure communications. But police chiefs question this by claiming that ESN will make it harder for police officers to do their job and operational safety will be undermined.

Because the life of '*Airwave*' has had to be extended much longer than anticipated transitional costs are falling on the emergency services. In the case of the ambulance services this has so far amounted to £9.5m and £6.5m for the fire & rescue services. The police estimate they will have been forced to spend £150m on transitional costs by 2026.

The 'Sir Humphreys' in the Home Office and other Whitehall departments have a shameful record of responsibility for disastrous IT projects but the ESN looks set to be the worst so far. The ESN technology is already out of date. Meanwhile, Motorola continue to enjoy taxpayer's cash rolling in reliably.

HISTORY OF WILTSHIRE FIRE BRIGADE

(Part Two)

Continuing the article written by ANDY WRIGHT

MISCELLANY & RANDOM FACTS : WFB has had nine Chief Fire Officers; Albert Thomas, John Broadbent, William Chadwick, George Clarke, Dennis Robins, John Craig, Neil Wright, Andrew Goves and Simon Routh-Jones. Two CFOs came after the amalgamation of WFB with Dorset; Darren Gunter and Ben Ansell, each leaving their respective legacy.



**Wiltshire Fire Control , circa 1970,
Located in The Manor House
Potterne**



**Dorset & Wiltshire Fire Control, Potterne
2023 (photo by Dorset & Wilts FRS)**

There have also been nine Control Rooms used for receipt of emergency calls and mobilising appliances and officers. The first ones quite simple with everything recorded with pen and paper moving to the first computerised system in 1984 when the purpose built facility, affectionately known as ‘The Bungalow’, was opened at Potterne. As technology developed more sophisticated facilities were introduced at the Emergency Communications Centre in Devizes that was shared with Police, Fire and Ambulance Controls.



This has now run its course and Fire Control for the entire Dorset & Wiltshire area now operates from Potterne with technical wizardry aplenty to assist the Control Staff.

Thousands of people have served in the Brigade, some for short periods of time before moving on to pastures new, but many remained for decades. Through the years many characters have left their mark and if you give a little thought to your service with WFB you will, I’m sure, remember people who, for a variety of reasons, brought something special. No matter where you served or, in whatever role, you helped to shape the service we have today, not forgetting personnel from the military fire units and works brigades who have given valuable support.

Many readers will recall with varying feelings time spent at the Fire Service College at Moreton in Marsh, and some may have had secondments at this worthy establishment. How many of you took part in the annual Technical Quiz or can remember being grilled by Her Majesty's Inspector during his annual visit or performing all sorts of activities in the large exercise put on for his amusement?

Charitable activities have always been undertaken by Fire Brigades and Wiltshire is no exception in raising thousands of pounds over the years. Who recalls BBC Children In Need being broadcast live from Salisbury Fire Station?



Again, I urge readers to think about your involvement in car washes, sponsored walks, quizzes and social events and open days that in times past were so much a part of fire station life.

MEMORABLE EMERGENCIES

One of the first incidents attended by WFB was on 1st April 1948 when a Spitfire crashed near Kingston St Michael. Since then, thousands of incidents have been attended. I have randomly listed a few notable incidents for each decade:

County Hall, Trowbridge : The upper floor and roof of County Hall, Trowbridge were severely damaged in January, 1958. Paper records were lost to the fire, most belonging to the Education department.

Tannery, Marlborough : Again in 1958, a major fire caused damage to a tannery off the High Street in Marlborough.

Polly Tea Rooms, Marlborough : In 1966 a fire at The Polly Tea Rooms in Marlborough High Street, occurred with three members of the local station being awarded Queen's Commendations for Bravery for their actions in rescuing two children and their grandmother from an upper floor. Only the ground floor remains, the top two floors were not rebuilt due to funding problems.

HANDY'S HARDWARE, SWINDON : A very dramatic fire happened at Handy's Hardware Store, Newport Street, Swindon in 1973. Flames were visible for many miles and the noise of exploding gas cylinders was heard up to 3 miles distant. It was also reported that radiated heat from the fire caused plastic fittings on new cars in a car showroom some forty feet away to melt.

DIBLE & ROY, HIGH STREET, MARLBOROUGH : Marlborough High Street in 1975 saw a large fire seriously damage the premises of Dible & Roy.

CHILMARK VICARAGE : The tragic fire at Chilmark Vicarage in 1989 remains with me to this day. The Vicar had four children, only one of which did not perish in the fire.

WINDSOR CASTLE : WFB crews were involved at the Windsor Castle fire in 1992 providing cover with other crews for Royal Berkshire's fire stations.

MARLBOROUGH HIGH STREET : In the early hours of New Year's Day 1993 saw crews called out to tackle yet another major blaze in Marlborough High Street affecting a number of commercial properties.

RAF HULLAVINGTON : Another multi-million £ fire in 1993 destroyed a parachute packing and storage hangar at RAF Hullavington.



Photo by Roger Hyslop, WFB

The fire at RAF Hullavington that destroyed a very high proportion of the parachutes owned by the Ministry of Defence. Two RAF airmen were convicted and jailed for arson.

MARLBOROUGH HIGH STREET : In 1998 a fire broke out in a butcher's shop in Marlborough High Street and spread to adjoining properties that included the Bear Hotel.

SWINLEY FOREST : WFB assisted in the early stages and with relief crews at Swinley Forest in Royal Berkshire that burned for six days in 2011. Appliances from twelve fire & rescue services attended.

CHOLDERTON MANOR : The three-storey Cholderton Manor was almost completely

destroyed by fire in 2012. Twelve appliances from WFB and from Hampshire & Isle of Wight FRS attended. The building has now been fully renovated and is now on the market at £4 m.

SALISBURY NERVE AGENT ATTACK : Finally, I must mention the part played by Dorset & Wiltshire FRS in the Salisbury Novichok incident in 2018 as well as delivering fire & rescue services during the Covid-19 pandemic and for its sterling efforts during the recent extreme temperatures in 2022.



Salisbury based fire crews were some of the first responders to the lethal attack using a nerve agent in the centre of the city. This picture shows full protective clothing and breathing apparatus being worn by a firefighter in the very early stages of the demanding work needed to remove the poison.

Photo by Dorset & Wilts FRS

Many other equally significant incidents could be mentioned but space prevents it so once again this is an opportunity for you to reminisce on your notable incidents. Sadly, most editions of 'The Branch' contain obituaries or reports of ill-health of retired and sometimes serving personnel, and you will all, I am sure, be able to remember colleagues and friends and the contributions they made to making WFB what it represents today.

My own recollection of WFB began in the 1950s when my father was a part-time fireman and hearing our house bell ring for either a call-out or the morning test. Penning this article made me think about my father's and my own service and by sheer coincidence our combined years add up to 75 years! Thanks for reading my ramblings. Perhaps you might like to write a short piece about your favourite Fire Service memory for a future edition of 'The Branch'.



Andy Wright



THE LAST SALUTE



DENNIS JAMES WILLMOTT CBE, QFSM, MIFireE 'JERRY'

10th July 1932 ~ 29th July 2023

Our president, Jerry Willmott CBE, QFSM, MIFireE passed away at the home of his son, Andy, in Swindon on 29th July, 2023. Jerry's wife Pat and his close family were with him as he died. Jerry had been ill for several months and had been admitted to hospital on several occasions. His death brought him release from pain and disability.

Jerry was born in Teddington, Middlesex and while he was still an infant the family moved to Fulham in London. As war clouds gathered in 1939 the family moved again, this time to St Alban's in Hertfordshire. Times were hard and they were not a wealthy family despite Jerry's parents being hard working and his father turning his hand to many different ways to bring an income. With the introduction of rationing, Jerry grew up knowing what it was like to be hungry.

At school, Jerry worked very hard and won a scholarship to St Albans Grammar School. He joined the Army Cadet Force and his qualities of leadership saw him rapidly rising through the ranks to eventually become Company Sergeant Major. He left school at 16 and was employed in the print room of a local newspaper but his time in the Army Cadet Force had instilled into him a yen to become a fulltime soldier. He left printing to join as a regular soldier in the East Surrey Regiment.

He was later transferred into the Royal Norfolk Regiment and found himself being sent with his regiment to fight in the Korean War. He was just 19 when embarking on the troopship HM Empire Orwell for the six weeks voyage to war. Jerry was promoted to corporal on the voyage. *(continued on page 14)*



Jerry's regiment was part of the Commonwealth Division and they were soon engaged in fierce fighting with the North Koreans and Chinese. Jerry was 19 when he arrived in Korea in 1951 and despite his tender years such were his leadership qualities that he was promoted to Sergeant.

On withdrawal of the Royal Norfolks from the war and returning to UK, Jerry was posted as a Sergeant Instructor first to an English Base and then one in Wales. In 1957, Jerry left the Army with his record showing the grading 'exemplary'. He decided to join the London Fire Brigade where he was comfortable serving in operational ranks alongside men who were mostly ex-servicemen like himself. He also liked the fact that promotion was in those days on merit which gave everyone an equal chance to make progress.

Jerry learnt the basic skills of the job from good instructors and from attending many incidents, one of which was the 40-pump fire that destroyed the Smithfield Meat Market in January 1958. Two members of the LFB tragically died at this fire.



**Smithfield Meat Market
January 1958
"Make pumps 40"
Teams of firefighters in
Proto breathing
apparatus preparing to
enter the basement where
a Station Officer and a
Fireman became trapped
and died.**

Photo LFB

Jerry began to progress his career and moved on promotion to **Hampshire Fire Brigade**, serving under CFO Edward Ashill, a chief who Jerry greatly admired. When the post of Deputy Chief Officer in **Isle of Wight Fire Brigade** became vacant Jerry applied for it and was successful.

He did, however, long for a greater challenge and was delighted to be appointed Deputy Chief Fire Officer of **Wiltshire Fire Brigade**. He moved Pat and the family with him to Potterne, near Devizes and settled very happily there. Then, an even more demanding post as DCFO came along, this time taking Jerry back to serve in **London Fire Brigade**. It was almost inevitable that Jerry would make it to the very top as a CFO and this came when he was appointed CFO of **Merseyside**.



**Chief Fire Officer
Merseyside**

**Chairman
Of
Wiltshire County Council**



Despite being a Londoner when they moved to Wiltshire mid-way through his career he and Pat fell in love with the county and Potterne village in particular. They still owned the house in Potterne and they retired there.

Jerry received two awards in the honours list. In 1980 the Queens Fire Service Medal was bestowed on him. In 1988 he was further honoured by a CBE (Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire). This double recognition from the Sovereign was proper reward for a distinguished fire service career. They were truly and richly deserved in his case. On retirement Jerry had an outstanding political career as a councillor on Kennet District Council (KDC) winning seven elections, and he was elected to Wiltshire County Council becoming its Chairman.

Jerry has left behind for us all the memory of a man who was good company, had integrity and was utterly trustworthy, always gave good advice, loved England, the British Army and the Fire Service of yesteryear. He loved and was devoted to his wife and family. It was a pleasure and a privilege to have known him. His death has left a big hole at the top of our Association and he is sorely missed. This is often a phrase trotted out about the departed and in Jerry's case oh how much we mean it!

May he rest in peace.

JMC

JERRY'S LAST SHOUT

The bells go down at Devizes Fire Station to signal the turnout of the cortege to the church funeral.

Jerry's coffin is carried on 'Martha' a vintage turntable ladder with full Guard of Honour as its crew.



The colours of the Korean War Association and Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service are dipped as the cortege passes.



In addition to the turntable ladder bearing the coffin, a Dennis Pump Escape (ex-Dorset) and a modern Water Tender Ladder escorted the funeral coaches carrying the family mourners. The service was conducted by Liz Starling, Licensed Lay Minister of the Wellsprings Benefice.

John Craig delivered the eulogy and a tribute to her Grandad was delivered by Sarah-Jane Willmott. Francesca Willmott read a poem. The wake was held at Potterne Social Club.

DISCLAIMER

Any views and opinions published in this magazine are not necessarily shared by the Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service