



The Branch

December 2023

Magazine of Wiltshire Retired Firefighters Association



May the blessing of PEACE be with all WRFA members and families this Christmas



From Our Chairperson, Louise Fielding

As I reflect on 2023 it has been a year of highs and lows for me on a personal level as I am sure it has been for everyone of you. I have been privileged to share some of the highs and lows with, not only family and friends, but with members of this association. I am very fortunate to have a close-knit family that I can turn to in my time of need but I know that not everyone is so lucky.

It highlights to me the importance of organisations such as ourselves whose sole aim is for the benefit of it's members. The organising of activities that bring us together, the sharing information to keep us safe, providing a listening ear and giving advice if required or just reaching out to those in need of a support from friends at a time when they are at a low point in their lives. Having this connection is a great strength and with the kindness and thoughtfulness I see in each and everyone of this small community it makes me so glad to be part of it.

I wish you all a very merry Christmas and a happy New Year

Louise

CULTURE SHOCK!

INDEPENDENT INQUIRY REPORT. *“Makes uncomfortable reading...” CFO Ben Ansell*



CFO Ben Ansell

The independent internal inquiry commissioned by CFO Ben Ansell has concluded its work and produced its report. The inquiry was deemed necessary by CFO Ansell to try to give him a clearer picture of what lay behind damaging information that was being fed to the media and press by members of the Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service. Allegations made by the “whistle blowers” claimed that there were some service members behaving improperly with regard to racism and misogyny. It was therefore perfectly understandable that CFO Ansell should wish to find out more detailed information to establish how serious the problems are.

A former female chief fire officer, Alex Johnson, was employed by the fire authority to lead the team that carried out the investigation which cost tens of thousands of £s. Over 200 members of the Dorset & Wiltshire FRS were interviewed. The report revealed that although not all members of the service are blameworthy, a significant minority have been behaving in a way that cannot be accepted and tolerated in a modern public service. CFO Ansell has admitted in a TV broadcast that he found reading about this in the report uncomfortable.

In statements made to the press and on television, CFO Ansell has pledged himself to put right what is wrong in his service. He must deal with the question of why it took outside investigators at considerable expense to find out for him what is happening in the dark corners of the service he leads. There must be a culture change and his reputation rests on how successful he is in achieving this. Within the Home Office the problems are now well known to exist in the fire services in London, Gloucestershire and Dorset & Wiltshire, there has been a call to all CFOs to bring about .



Alex Johnson

Wiltshire have led to a call for all 44 UK CFOs to bring about cultural reform to cleanse their services of misogyny and racism. Just before the allegations of misconduct were made to the press and media, Dorset & Wiltshire FRS had been inspected by His Majesty’s Inspector of Constabulary & Fire & Rescue Service. The HMI gave the highest possible grading of “outstanding” to Dorset & Wiltshire FRS. This surely raises questions about the inspectorate. Perhaps it is not only the fire & rescue services that needs urgent reform?

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YVE HOT FOOTS IT FOR CHARITY

Yve Benwell's latest charity fundraising success was a firewalk carried out to raise cash for the Prospect Hospice at Wroughton, near Swindon. Yve raised the magnificent total of £574.00 which was more than any of the others hot footing it to the hospice on the night of 26th October. To recognise her success in fund raising Yve was granted the honour of actually igniting the coals and getting them glowing with a nice red and orange hue ready for the tender 'tootsies' that were soon to be risking a roasting. Yve kept her cool despite the radiating heat beneath her plates of meat and her masochistic tendency kicked in and led her to do the walk a total of three times! One small blister was her only injury.



Yve, we have for a long time looked upon you with admiration and respect for the lengths you are prepared to go to in supporting deserving causes. Your firewalk venture leaves us worrying about what will be your next challenge. Please take care of yourself. There are safer ways to cure athlete's foot! Well done and we send our warmest, no, "hottest" congratulations!



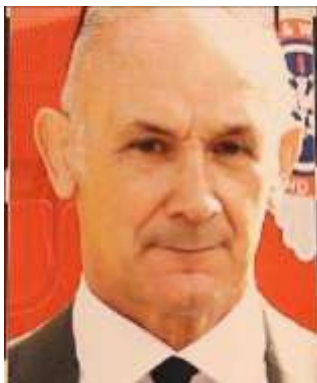
New Members



PAT WILLMOTT

We have been delighted to welcome into full membership of WRFA Pat Willmott, the widow of our late president, Jerry.

Pat has been a stalwart supporter of the WRFA by her unstinting support to Jerry as he worked for our Association over many years. Pat has now moved from Potterne to Swindon. We hope to continue to see her often.



CHRIS WILLMOTT

Chris Willmott is one of Jerry and Pat Willmott's sons and he has been warmly welcomed into membership of WRFA. Chris served in the London Fire Brigade and the Hampshire Fire Service before starting a career outside the service. He lives in Hampshire and we hope to see Chris and his wife, Nicky, at many of our social events.

DENNIS KENT

We have been delighted to welcome into membership Dennis Kent who served in Surrey Fire Brigade between 1953 and 1973. He retired after an on duty injury. He was a Leading Fireman at that time.

Dennis lives with his wife, Gwen, in Warminster. Dennis enjoys eating out and he and Gwen will be attending the Christmas Festive Lunch at Bowood. We wish Dennis and Gwen many happy times of fellowship with us .



NHS announces new PROSTATE cancer screening



The methods used to detect PROSTATE CANCER have for many years been known to have weaknesses. The blood test, known as the PSA test, is the primary approach used by doctors to determine the possible presence of cancer in a man's prostate gland. The test is well known to throw up many false indications, sometimes appearing to show that cancer is present when it isn't and sometimes indicating that cancer is not present when it is. The test is only 55% accurate. To back up the blood test, the doctor may decide to ask for a biopsy but this invasive procedure often leads to infection.

BUT THERE IS GOOD NEWS because the NHS has decided to commit funds to a screening programme for males thought to be most at risk and this will involve using MRI scanning as the primary method of looking for the disease. The screening will be offered to men age 50 to 75 and their GP will refer them for participation in the screening trial which has been given the title TRANSFORM. The earlier prostate cancer can be detected the greater the likelihood it can be cured. The project will carry an initial cost of **£58m** of which the charity **Prostate Cancer UK** has provided **£42m**, leaving the NHS to fund the rest.

Health experts are confident that TRANSFORM is a very significant break-through in the fight against prostate cancer and it will save thousands of lives in coming years. The pilot scheme will start in the spring of 2024 with a full implementation by the autumn.





Death In The Line Of Duty



Mark Hillier Watch Manager



The Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service has been plunged into mourning by the death on duty of Mark Hillier, who was a Watch Manager at Salisbury Fire Station and who also served in an on-call capacity in his home village of Pewsey and it was there that his tragic death happened in a road traffic collision.



Rain was falling when Mark's pocket alerter summoned him to respond to an emergency call with the crew from Pewsey Fire Station. Driving to the station

Mark's Suzuki Grand Vitara collided with a BMW, the two occupants of which were not seriously hurt. Mark was killed and so were his three pet dogs who were in the car with him. Mark was 47 years old and he leaves a wife, Holly, and three children, Jaimee, Hayden and Isla.

From far and wide the tributes to Mark have poured in. He was known by so many to be a devoted family man who was also an outstanding public servant whose bravery and skill is known to have saved many lives. As well as being a very proficient firefighter, Mark was a very skilled carpenter and he could turn his hand to many practical tasks.



The Chief Fire Officer, Ben Ansell, was at the forefront of the many wanting to praise Mark and express sympathy for his family.

THE FUNERAL

10th November

Photos by Dorset & Wilts FRS



Mark's funeral was held on 19th November at Pewsey Parish Church and at the Salisbury Crematorium. A massive attendance of mourners turned out to pay last respects to a brave and greatly admired man. His coffin, draped in the service flag, was carried on an Aerial Ladder Platform and a cavalcade of fire appliances old and new formed part of the cortege. At significant locations firefighters in full fire gear lined the route.

As well as being a watch manager at Salisbury, Mark was the officer-in-charge at Pewsey and he was travelling to the station to try to turn out in charge of the crew when the collision occurred.

Mark's colleagues at Pewsey have opened a fundraiser on JustGiving and this quickly began to raise cash that will go to support Mark's widow and three children, Jaimee, Hayden and Isla. Holly has released a heartfelt tribute to her husband stating *We will forever be proud of you, as we knew you were of us. Your bravery, selflessness and countless lives saved will be remembered always.*



The Last Post

DEATH OF ROY HARRIS

It was with very much sadness that the news was received that Roy passed away in GWH, Swindon on 4th November. He was taken into hospital suffering from an infection and passed away a few days later.

The funeral service was held on 27th November at North Wilts Crematorium.

A full obituary will be published in the next edition of 'The Branch'.



**To access services call
0800 389 8820 (office hours only)**

**FOR 24/7 ACCESS TO CRISIS LINE
CALL 0300 373 0896**

CHARITY HELPING PREVENT SUICIDES

The Fire Fighters Charity is aware of at least 20 fire & rescue personnel who have taken their own lives in the past three years. This has stimulated the charity into action to offer help to prevent suicides and those affected by them.

By working closely with Nottingham Trent University the FFC has developed a suite of online suicide prevention tools that it is hoped will make a significant impact on the problem of in service suicide. Research by the university has been conducted and this produced the belief that the mental wellbeing of the UK's fire service community is being impacted by issues such as sleep disruption, occupational stress, burnout, anxiety and depression.



Dr Jill Tolfrey

Launching the project, **Dr Jill Tolfrey**, the Chief Executive of the Fire Fighters Charity commented "every suicide is a preventable tragedy. As the fire community's charity we have an obligation to do whatever we can to prevent these tragedies and provide hope to those at a point of crisis. "The tools include videos, specially curated content and downloadable PDFs. The suite also includes help to those having to deal with the suicide of a loved one or close friend. The crisis phone line is staffed 24/7

Anyone wishing to access the CRISIS LINE should call
0300 373 0896

SOCIAL EVENTS

Christmas Festive Lunch

**Monday
11th December
1.00pm**

**Bowood Hotel Spa &
Golf Resort**



**An excellent venue
THE KERRY /
WYCOMBE SUITE**



**GRAND
CHRISTMAS
RAFFLE**

**Attentive,
Caring and Competent
Staff
To
Serve Us**





PARLIAMENT & PENSIONS



TRIPLE LOCK SURVIVES! State Pension to rise by 8.5%



Jeremy Hunt MP

In his Autumn Statement delivered to the House of Commons on 22nd November, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Jeremy Hunt, announced that the state pension will rise by **8.5%** next April because the triple lock formula for calculating such rises was applied in full. This surprised some economists who have long argued that the triple lock is too generous and should be scrapped or at least amended. Pensioners can expect a £900.00 per year boost that will be very welcome in present circumstances.

Other measures contained in the statement that will be of relevance to some pensioners is that **Fire Service Pensions** and Universal credit will rise by **6.7%** from next April. With inflation coming down these increases in income should start to make a difference to many but they are only a start on what is needed to reduce the overall burden on tax payers in the UK. With a general election only months away it might be expected that in his April budget the Chancellor will take further tax reduction measures, perhaps on income tax and inheritance tax. Stimulating strong growth in the economy is widely understood to be needed and some of the changes announced in the statement are intended to produce the stimulus.

Linked to the importance of collecting tax revenues fairly and efficiently is the need to ensure that taxpayer's money is being spent wisely by the public sector. To monitor the way the Civil Service is operating and oversee attempts to get the Whitehall bureaucrats to work harder and more efficiently the prime minister has appointed John Glen, MP for Salisbury, as Paymaster General and given him the task of reducing the sums spent by civil servants. In his Autumn Statement, the Chancellor heaped warm praise on the work John Glen is doing. The past experience of many assigned a similar challenge has led to their political career being wrecked by the powerful civil servants undermining and failing to co-operate.



John Glen MP



WHO INSPECTS THE HMIs?



James Cleverly MP
Secretary of State for
Home Affairs

Recent affairs have done damage to the credibility of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary & Fire & Rescue Services. A valid question that taxpayers are entitled to ask is, “ **Why have Dorset & Wiltshire taxpayers had to fund an independent inquiry into misconduct in the local fire & rescue service immediately after His Majesty's Inspector visited the service and gave it a grading of OUTSTANDING.?**” You don't have to be very intelligent to form the view that something is inadequate and inaccurate about the HMI's work.

Most of the inspectors have no background in the fire service. Presumably, they have been given the Royal Warrant because of their other experience and abilities. Did these equip the HMI to give Dorset & Wiltshire FRS an accurate grading? She might not have a deep knowledge about operational efficiency but the general public who pay their significant salaries have a right to expect HMI's to be competent and diligent and to be able to sniff out problems such as those associated with culture. So, who is looking at the work of the HMI's from above and taking appropriate action? Some transparency on this matter would be a good thing.

Mr Andy Cooke, a former police officer, heads the HMICFS and his boss is the Home Secretary, James Cleverly MP. It would be good to know if these two gentlemen are aware of the problem mentioned here. One indication that perhaps they are is a very recent development. I have been contacted by a company employed (more additional expense for the taxpayers) by the Home Office to carry out a survey in all 44 fire and rescue services about how misconduct and disciplinary issues are being handled right throughout the country.



Andy Cooke

Any reader of this article who has served in Dorset & Wiltshire FRS and has had first hand experience of a misconduct or disciplinary matter is invited to step forward to be interviewed by the investigators. Contact me if you are interested.

The fire service disciplinary regulations were repealed taking away a tried and tested disciplinary framework. Could it be that there is realisation dawning that those laws were not so bad after all?

JOHN CRAIG



Lithium-Ion Battery Fires



Those keen to sell more road vehicles powered by electricity (EVs) are fighting a bitter battle with those continually pointing out that the provision of vehicle charging points is lagging well behind the need for them. Now, worldwide the evidence is building that there is a real fire safety problem with lithium-ion batteries.

The fires that have happened on two ships indicate that it is not just road transport to which the fire risk applies. **In February 2022 the car carrier ship, 'Felicity Ace' caught fire and sank in the Atlantic taking 4,000 vehicles with her to the bottom. Lithium-ion batteries were said to have played a part in the fire. More recently, the cargo ship 'Fremantle Highway' caught fire off the Dutch coast and lithium-ion batteries were alleged to have been responsible. Salvage operations were complicated by the re-ignition of some of the battery powered fire damaged cars.**

Then, even more recently came the fire at **Luton Airport** that destroyed a £20m multi-storey car park and the 1500 cars within it. Early comments to the press raised the claim that it was an EV that started the fire. This was disputed by the Chief Fire Officer who stated that he *believed* it was a diesel car that had caught fire. But the press had a witness who photographed the fire in its incipient stages and the car that was the origin of the huge blaze appeared to be a Range Rover Evoque. The eye witness photo record shows that there was an absence of dense black smoke associated with a diesel fuel fire and the heart of the blaze was under the front left seat just exactly where you will find the lithium batteries in that make and model.

Once a lithium-ion battery has begun to burn it poses real problems for those trying to extinguish it. It is known that some fire brigades in Germany **send a special appliance which is a tank on the back of a lorry fitted with a crane. The tank is filled with water and then the burning car is moved by crane and immersed in the water tank.**

Sadly, lithium battery fires are beginning to take a toll of life. In the summer a mother and two children tragically died in a house fire in Cambridgeshire that was definitely started by an e-bike's lithium batteries being put on charge. **12 people have been killed and 190 injured by e-scooter fires in 2023 in UK so far.** The London Fire Brigade has reported that on average it attends an e-scooter fire every two days. The LFB has seen lithium-ion battery fires rise by 60% in the past year.

The political and commercial bodies keen to see more electric vehicles in use are winning the fight to keep the fire safety dangers of lithium-ion batteries out of the public eye.





WRFA Walking Group



Our WALKING GROUP is doing well and welcoming any paid up members of the WRFA to come and join them on their regular walks.

On Tuesday 24th October the walkers met at the *Fox & Hounds* in Nursteed and then set out on a route skirting the east side of Devizes passing the new Medical Centre on Marshal Road. After a mile or two some of the group were feeling the effects of some niggling injuries and split off for a much appreciated coffee at the Sleight Valley Golf Range Cafe. The main group enjoyed reaching Potterne and then the splinter group rejoined the main party for a very enjoyable lunch at the *Fox & Hounds*.

The Christmas Walk will be at Laycock finishing with lunch at *The George*. Contact Louise Fielding for full details.





ON THE MOVE!



Albi and Margaret Richardson have recently moved from Swindon back to their home town of Northampton. Albi says he will maintain his membership of WRFA and he and Margaret hope to occasionally come back to support some of our social events. We wish them much happiness and good health in their new home.



FIRE TRUCKS FOR UKRAINE

The Defence Fire & Rescue Service has donated 16 of the latest type of Aircraft Fire & Rescue vehicles to Ukraine. These trucks can pump on the move giving the capability of applying foam and water in motion. 9 Ukrainians attended RAF Wittering to receive training in how to operate the donated vehicles to the best effect.

DISCLAIMER

This magazine is published by the WILTSHIRE RETIRED FIREFIGHTERS ASSOCIATION. Views and opinions published in it are not necessarily shared by the Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service.