

The Branch

APRIL 2024



MAGAZINE OF WILTSHIRE RETIRED FIREFIGHTERS ASSOCIATION

FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE SINKS DEEPER INTO CULTURE 'MIRE'

The flow of allegations by 'whistle blowers' claiming misconduct, misogyny, bullying and racism throughout the UK fire & rescue service is not slowing. In the last few days the Welsh Government has placed the Mid & West Wales and the North Wales FRSs under scrutiny. South Wales FRS has already disclosed these problems. To try to get these matters under parliamentary focus the Home Office Affairs Select Committee has been meeting with FRS culture on its agenda. The committee is chaired by a Labour MP, **Diana Johnson**. At the committee meeting on 5th March The General Secretary of the **Fire Brigades Union**, **Mr Matt Wrack**, was invited to be quizzed by the MPs forming the committee.

It can be seen from the video recording of that meeting (available on Parliament TV) that Mr Wrack became very uncomfortable when Ms Johnson pressed him to answer her questions about the use of non-disclosure agreements recently by the FBU when they are in fact condemned by the Trade Unions Congress (TUC). Mr Wrack chairs the TUC at the moment. NDAs are often referred to as 'gagging orders' because in return for a payment employees leaving an organisation are prevented from becoming 'whistle blowers'. It is alleged by *The Campaign for Democracy in the FBU* that recently three national officers of the FBU accepted NDAs on leaving FBU head office.



Diana Johnson MP

Ms Johnson brought to an end her clash with Mr Wrack by mentioning that she had noted that a significant number of the females attending the FBU conference complained of suffering harassment at the event.



Matt Wrack

Mr Tristan Ashby, CEO of the Fire & Rescue Service Association was another called before the select committee and he spoke with an obvious deep understanding of the on-call service. He referred to obvious errors made by HMIs and questioned whether the right people were used as inspectors. He also blamed slow progress in culture reform on FRS leadership. Continuing giving evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee on behalf of the Fire & Rescue Service Association Mr Ashby's comment that inferred that leadership failures were to blame for lack of progress on culture reform, prompted a committee member to ask Mr Ashby for his views on managers being appointed to run fire & rescue services from outside the service and who lacked operational knowledge and experience.



Tristan Ashby

Mr Ashby answered that this was already happening and one example was Norfolk FRS, the service in which Mr Ashby himself served. Mr Ashby explained that the present day CFO of Norfolk had no experience of the operational functions of a fire & rescue service and was having to be given special training in these matters.

FORMER RUGBY STAR WINS INDUSTRIAL

TRIBUNAL CASE AGAINST AVON FRS



Sasha Acheson played rugby for England between 2014 and 2017. After her rugby success Ms Acheson, who is a lesbian, joined Avon Fire & Rescue Service. On her watch

she was subjected to derogatory , sexist and discriminatory remarks and behaviour. This became so serious and ‘toxic’ that she submitted a formal grievance. Her watch manager refused to forward the grievance and this led to Ms Acheson resigning in April 2022. She immediately submitted a claim for **constructive dismissal**.

The evidence submitted in support of the claim named crew manager, Dean Davies, and watch manager, Simon Bailey, as being at the root of Ms Acheson’s treatment. Not only did Davies and Bailey fail to stamp out improper behaviour in many cases they were instigators of it. Remarks reported to have been made to Ms Acheson included, *“women belong in the kitchen”* and *“the fire service is a sexist organisation”*.

The Avon Fire & Rescue Service admitted to the tribunal that *“persistent sexual derogatory and offensive”* comments about or towards women had been made.

The Bristol Tribunal was chaired by Employment Judge Paul Cadney. In delivering the tribunal’s decision in favour of Ms Acheson, Judge Cadney said, *“We are satisfied that dismissal was discriminatory in so far as all of the fundamental breaches of contract that we have upheld are in and of themselves acts of discrimination.”*

Details of any award to Ms Acheson are not available at this time.

TWO WELSH FRSs UNDER CULTURE REVIEW

Whistle blowers in two Welsh fire & rescue services have turned to the media to find ears prepared to listen to their complaints of improper treatment and the ‘toxic’ working atmosphere in their services.

The two services concerned are **North Wales FRS** and **Mid & West Wales FRS**.

Having had the concerns of complainants brought to their attention by an ITV Wales investigation the Welsh Government has set up an independent investigation into the culture of the two above mentioned services.

The third FRS in Wales, **South Wales**, is experiencing a crisis of management and this has caused the Welsh Government to appoint four commissioners to run the service.



SEX OFFENDERS IN D & W FRS. ACFO GIVES CLARIFICATION

The Dorset & Wiltshire FRS has given clarification by email to all employees in the aftermath of the press report recently that stated that eight members of the service were reported to the police recently and two convicted of sex offences were allowed to continue as firefighters.

The email clarification is said to have been issued by Assistant Chief Fire Officer Jenny Long. The document has not been seen by 'The Branch' but a copy has obviously been acquired by the local press.

The facts concerning the police investigations came to light through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request sent to the Chief Fire Officer.

Appreciating that the publicity that followed revelations in the FOI might be unsettling to members of staff, ACFO Long explained that the two firefighters who were allowed to keep their jobs were convicted of offences that were not of a sexual nature but were domestic in nature.

Last year an independent report was conducted in response to allegations of misogyny, sexual harassment, sexism and misconduct. The report provided information that the allegations were not groundless and the service has vowed to address these issues.

New Members!



It is always a great pleasure to welcome new members to our Association and on 21st March four new members were joyfully accepted. All four served at Pewsey Fire Station before retiring from the Wiltshire Fire Brigade.

They are : **Chris Wootton, David Winter, Roger Cope and Stephen Mercer**

We look forward in the hope of seeing these colleagues and their spouses at future social events. It seems likely that we shall be able to allocate a dining table to be occupied solely or predominately by ex-Pewsey Fire Station folk. Local EC Member, **Vince Kimber**, is to be congratulated for his recruiting efforts.

Our webmaster, **John Cox**, has very successfully upgraded our website so that **applications to join can now be made online**. The need to download a paper form, complete it and post it is no longer the only option. A digital solution has been found. This was a complicated task for which John was pleased to have the assistance of a local web-developer.

From time to time our Secretary/Treasurer still gets requests for information or help from or in connection with non-members of WRFA. Our constitution is very clear on the policy that WRFA resources, both money and time, are for the use and support of paid-up members. **If you know of anyone who might be eligible to join WRFA please do what Vince did and encourage them to apply to join.**



HEALTH MATTERS

News of members
facing health
challenges



AUDREY WANNELL

Audrey is living through tough times at present due to her health having taken a downward trend. She has been in hospital after a mild stroke and is deeply troubled by a bowel disorder. The GP is being about as much use as an ash tray on a motor bike telling her she is “low priority”. Audrey’s daughter, Heather, is giving much needed support despite having problems of her own. Audrey and Heather have been to Marine Court, Littlehampton in early March for a much needed therapeutic break courtesy of the Fire Fighters Charity. We wish both Audrey and Heather much healthier times ahead.

DEANA GENTLEMAN

Deana has been diagnosed with a type of leukaemia. She has taken careful note of the information and advice made available to her from her consultant and other clinicians and as a result she is preparing to start a long course of treatment. Although there are no guarantees that the treatment will result in remission Deana and the family are well aware that it does offer real hope. We all send Deana our warmest and most sincere best wishes and we will keep in close touch as Deana progresses towards what we hope will be victory over this set-back.



JOHN GENTLEMAN

Troubles sometimes don’t come alone. At the same time that Deana is about to begin dealing with her leukaemia John has been diagnosed with a heart problem. First symptoms were shortage of breath. Medication is helping with this but further treatment, possibly surgery, is being researched and considered by his consultant. We wish John warmest good wishes on the road to what we hope will be a speedy recovery.



PETE WIXEY

Pete has been suffering ill health for several months. This has caused him to be admitted to GWH, Swindon on occasions for investigation and treatment. He is currently at home in Latton after a particularly unpleasant treatment that was aimed at getting drugs into his bladder. Whatever challenges life drops in his lap, Pete displays remarkable resilience in coping with them. Get well soon , Pete.

GWH, SWINDON ORDERED TO IMPROVE

Inspection reveals serious failures & shortcomings



In September 2023 the **Care Quality Commission** carried out an inspection of **Great Western Hospital, Swindon**. The inspection report has just been published and it highlights a number of areas of serious concern This has resulted in the hospital trust being ordered to improve the unsatisfactory matters revealed by the inspection.

Many WRFA members have received treatment at GWH recently and some are still in the process of doing so. This magazine has received varying opinions on the quality of care they have or are receiving at GWH. It is likely that some of our members will have reacted to the news that the CQC has issued a damning report on the hospital with the words or thoughts , *“I’m not surprised”*.

The CQC identified that GWH is missing national targets on waiting times and the inspectors were not assured that there was enough oversight of risks to the services delivered.



Surgery service “did not always control infection risk well”. (CQC report)

The inspectors were so concerned by what they found at GWH that they downgraded it from “good” to “**requires improvement**”.



Staff levels in the maternity unit were found to be inadequate to meet the planned need **“putting the safety of women, birthing people and babies at risk.”**

Indeed staffing levels were found to be an issue throughout GWH.

The GWH NHS Foundation Trust received the inspection report on 8th March and has said it is disappointed with the report.

The trust claims that in the six months between the visit by inspectors and the publication of their findings much has been done to address the matters requiring improvement. Among these is the **mandatory training compliance among staff**, an area where significant improvement has been made.

“We recognise there is still more work we need to do”

GWH NHS Trust

WRFA members living in the north of the county need the Great Western Hospital to deliver a good service. We look to the trust to put right the wrongs quickly.

DEVIZES HEALTH CENTRE HAS SUCCESSFUL FIRST YEAR

The NHS Health Treatment Centre at Marshall Road, Devizes is celebrating having completed a year in service of the people of Devizes and district. The centre cost £11m and the staff and patients all seem very happy with this investment.



The NHS officially opened the centre on 22nd February 2023 and in its first year just short of 60,000 patients have been treated. The feedback from those treated has been overwhelmingly positive. As one of those treated I can speak from personal experience and I have nothing but praise for the staff and facilities at the centre. Car parking is very easy and so much in contrast with the fight for a parking space at so many NHS establishments. The atmosphere and ambience when you step through the door is one of calmness and peace which again contrasts with the frenzied activity so often encountered if you attend an appointment at one of the major hospitals. The staff are friendly and exude an image of competence and control and when you speak to them they will tell you of how happy they are to be based at Marshall Road.



Its not news that the NHS is failing in many areas and the people of central Wiltshire can feel very fortunate to have this new facility at their service.

The success of the centre is attracting attention from far and wide for all the right reasons. It is being described as a “trailblazer” that may be copied in other parts of the country. **John Craig**



Community Safety Plan

HAVE YOUR SAY!

In common with other fire and rescue authorities under the **Local Government Act 1999** the Dorset & Wiltshire Fire Rescue Service is required to consult with those who pay for and receive its services.

The service has now published its **Community Safety Plan** for the period 2024 to 2028. **Your views on the plan are being invited.**

The plan runs to over 80 pages and it can be accessed and downloaded from the service website. Also available from the website is a link to a video that is perhaps the easiest way to learn about the plan.



The plan is divided into chapters dealing with such matters as **PROTECTION, PREVENTION and RESPONSE.**

“How do I give my views?” you ask. The requested method is by email on consultation@dwfire.org.uk

If emailing is not available to you, write to Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue HQ, Health & Wellbeing Centre, Hulse Road, Salisbury SP1 3NR.

A part of the plan deals with the recruitment and retention of **ON-CALL FIREFIGHTERS.**

These men and women form a vital part of the service and attracting enough of them to join and then stay in service is challenging.

Do you have any views on how the local service intends to attract recruits to join their local fire station?





REACHING OUT TO THOSE IN CRISIS



**A TELEPHONE LINE OPEN
ALL DAY & ALL NIGHT
0300 373 0896**

**To apply for the services of the Charity
for rehabilitation, hardship grant,
bereavement, counselling etc**

**Monday to Friday
9.00am to 5.00pm
0800 389 8820**



British Fire Services Association Members Welfare Fund

**Members of the WRFA are eligible for support from this charity
Hardship grants have been made to WRFA members
All grant applications and processing is confidential.**

**Application for a grant is simple
CONTACT PETER MILLS 01672 520466 or
JOHN CRAIG on 01380 726343**





SOCIAL EVENTS



ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

**Saturday 10th AUGUST
Marlborough Golf Club**



10.30am Coffee/Tea

11.00am AGM

1.00pm Lunch

Easy Parking Stair Lift

SPRING LUNCH

**Our Spring Lunch
held on 8th April**

Bowood Hotel Spa & Golf Resort

**A report will be published
in the June edition of The Branch**



SMOKE GETS IN YOUR EYES

Amongst other places!

Continuing my story of fascination with fire ventilation

John Craig OStJ, QFSM, FIFireE

Chapter Two

MY FIRST HOUSE FIRE

After joining Leicester City Fire Brigade on 17th June 1963 and completing basic training I was posted to G Section at Lancaster Place Fire Station, the brigade's central station. The section was led by a very experienced man, **Sub Officer Walter Overton**, who joined the service in 1937. I quickly learnt that I could not have asked for a better guide and mentor.



Under an agreement made under Section 12 of the Fire Services Act, 1947, the Leicester City Fire Brigade provided fire cover for a significant area of the county on behalf of Leicestershire & Rutland Fire Service and at Lancaster Place a pump was maintained and

crewed specifically for over the city boundary emergencies. It was given the designation 'Country Pump' and in 1963 a Dennis F8 appliance was used as Country Pump.

On 7th January 1964 at 0800hrs the crew sheet on the notice board showed me (Fireman 133) down to ride the Country Pump as 'branch'. Other riders were designated as 'feed' and 'hydrant' and 'driver'. The watch was under the leadership of Station Officer Bill Grimes.

At 0930hrs the bells went down and I was thrilled to see the indicator panel in the appliance room showing 'COUNTRY PUMP'. We four junior crew members jumped aboard, still dressing, and Walter Overton joined us in the rear cab. The station officer jumped in the Oi/c seat and we all heard him instruct Jim Physick, our driver, to head for St Austell Road, Thurnby Lodge. We had about five miles to run but fortunately traffic was light. Station Officer Bill Grimes informed us that we were going to a bedroom fire. After all the training and preparation for it, at last I hoped I was going to get stuck into some real fire fighting. We were a single crew and unless the station officer called for assistance the job was down to us.



The Country Pump in 1963

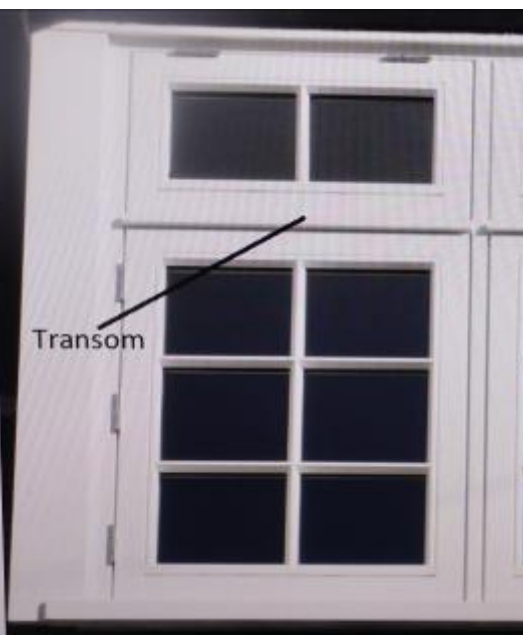
We arrived to find the street of modern, post-war detached houses all quiet and not a soul in sight except for a man waving to us from a garden gate. My first glimpse of the stricken house showed a lot of smoke percolating through the roof tiles giving the impression that spread to the roof might have happened. Smoke was also showing at every nook and opening at first floor level. I heard Bill Grimes ask if all occupants had escaped safely and being assured that they had done so unharmed. Bill then headed for the front door shouting for the hose reel. As branchman it was my job to provide the hose reel so I grabbed the Meynell branch on the 180' of rubber tubing wound on the drum at the rear of the F8 and

took the hose reel into the front door and started up the stairs. Bill Grimes was ahead of me and he snatched the Meynell branch from me and started to crawl along the landing in thick smoke towards the burning master bedroom. The smoke layer was down to the landing floor and I thought that if the station officer could take the heat and smoke, so could I. But as I moved forward to begin to crawl after Bill a hand grabbed the seat of my pants and pulled me back into a crouched position on the head of the stairs. It was the sub officer and Walter was obviously not going to let me out of his sight. We could hear Bill starting to hit the fire with the hose reel jet and doing a fair bit of coughing in the process.

“Shouldn’t we be getting BA on?” I asked Walter. He didn’t answer the question precisely but offered the belief that right across the landing from us was the door to a bathroom.

“See if you can open a window in there?” was Walter’s instruction.

I inhaled deeply before holding my breath and plunging into the smoke to find the door to what was indeed a bathroom. There was a window and I could not open the mullion part of it but there was a transom section above the main window and it opened easily.



I re-joined the sub officer on the staircase. Together we witnessed the way that opening that relatively small area of glazing was improving working conditions for us. The base of the smoke layer rose quickly as the venting removed any need of resorting to breathing apparatus (BA) and answered my question of a few minutes before.

Bill Grimes then retreated leaving the hose reel branch at the door of the bedroom. He had taken a beating from the smoke and declared to Walter and I that he was handing over to us the task of finishing the fire fighting.

We entered the bedroom that contained the still smouldering remains of a double bed. All of the bedroom furniture was badly damaged too. It was in the days before double glazing became popular and the large picture window in the bedroom was single glazed. The glass was turned a yellow-brown colour by the smoke

and heat. Eyeing the window, Walter decided to teach me another lesson in ventilation.

“Hit the centre of that glass with the jet” were Walter’s words and as I did his bidding the large window shattered when the cold stream of water hit it. Immediately, working conditions took a turn for the better as the large area now open to fresh air allowed the acrid smoke from burning wool, linen, rubber and plastic to escape from the room.

A little later when we were removing the burnt and soggy debris into the back garden I saw the shards of glass in the garden from the window I had broken with the hose reel jet. Seeing me clearing up the glass fragments Walter commented that it might have been a good idea to shout a warning before breaking the window just in case someone was in danger of being caught in the shower of glass. The lessons in practical firemanship were coming thick and fast and this was only my first working job!

I pinned back my ears as I heard our station officer conducting the investigation into the cause of the fire. From a neighbour’s house the lady occupant of the fire damaged house appeared and was able to inform Bill that her four year old little boy had got hold of some matches and started the fire by playing with them on the bed.

This had been a very much routine house fire and I had learnt a great deal from it. The relatively early ventilation had been of particular interest to me. This was because all that I had been taught so far and all that I had read about using ventilation as a fire fighting tactic seemed to fly in the face of what I had just seen done so successfully. The general teaching seemed to me could be summarised as “*don't start ventilating until the fire is extinguished*”.



So I turned to the *Manuals of Firemanship*, published by the UK Home Office in several volumes. I was disappointed and puzzled by the lack of information and guidance on the subject within these books that were regarded as the source of wisdom and wise guidance for UK firefighters. In all the pages of these volumes I could find only a cursory half-page that had any relevancy. It was headed ‘**Back Draught**’ and the author appeared to know more about Lancashire boilers than fire fighting. The general theme of the piece was warning of the dangers of admitting air to a fire by opening doors and windows because this might mix with smoke to form an explosive mixture. The guidance stopped short of mentioning the value that could be gained by venting the fire skilfully to reduce or avoid the risk of a smoke explosion , sometimes called a back draught or flashover.

As my service grew longer the seed of doubt and perplexity in my mind grew stronger too, particularly when all too often somewhere in the UK firefighters were being killed by flashovers. The procedure of sending teams of firefighters in breathing apparatus (BA) into a smoke logged building or compartment that was *inadequately ventilated* was widely seen as being normal and correct in the British Fire Service even though time after time the BA teams were chased out of the building by a flashover , often being injured or worse if they could not escape in time.

My attention was taken by the fact that in North America and in many parts of Europe fire fighters were taught to fire vent BEFORE or at least SIMULTANEOUSLY with the committing of crews to find the seat of fire and attack it. But the opening of windows and doors in the early stages of fire fighting was clearly indicated by the British Home Office to be potentially the cause of a flashover or back draught. The guidance could and should have extended to at least a full chapter rather than just a half-page. The benefits of tactical fire ventilation were obviously not understood by the author(s) of the *Manuals of Firemanship* so they were never explained and never taught. As a result the build up of explosive gases in a building or compartment was a common occurrence at British fires and for decades the list of dead and injured firefighters has continued to grow.

How lucky I was to be tutored by Sub Officer Walter Overton who was attending fires and venting them safely long before the publication of the *Manuals of Firemanship*.



To be continued

FINAL SALUTE



STEVE BENSON

21st September 1947 - 2nd January 2024

After bravely fighting dementia for two years we were shocked and deeply saddened by the news that Steve had died on 2nd January, 2024.

Steve was born on 21st September 1947 when his family lived at Highworth. Steve's father died when he was 13 and led by his mother the family moved to Stratton-St-Margaret.

Steve attended St Joseph's School and began to show his prowess at sports, particularly rugby and cross country running. He was such a good runner that he represented not only his school but also Wiltshire.



At age 15 Steve left school and joined the Royal Navy. His service gave him lots of opportunity to travel the world. During one time in home port he made a blind date and met a very attractive young girl called Julie. Julie wrote to Steve while he was at sea and the relationship blossomed into a lasting love for each other. Steve left the Royal Navy in 1971 and soon afterwards he and Julie were married.

The newly weds decided to accept training for pub management which they did at Southsea in 1972. This was followed by them taking over the 'Bow Bars' pub in Ryde, Isle of Wight. They then came back to mainland England to run 'The Iron Duke' in High Wycombe in 1976.

The couple felt the call back to Wiltshire and in 1978 they settled in Juniper Close and Steve joined the **Wiltshire Fire Brigade**. Steve was a valued member of the brigade who made friends easily and who quickly won respect for his competence too. He served on Red Watch and then Green Watch at Swindon and the fact that he was highly respected by his colleague firefighters came when they elected him to represent them as Brigade Secretary of the **Fire Brigades Union**.



Steve retired from the fire service at age 55, the statutory age limit in those days. Steve quickly took up a new challenge and signed up to study for a teaching degree. This led to him being employed as a college lecturer on public service for five years at New College.



He was never a man to sit still for long and Steve found plenty with which to fill his time. He took up bowls, golf, enjoyed walking and following rugby. His more sedentary occupations included listening to music. Whatever he was doing Steve's impish sense of humour would soon creep in. For example, golf opponents would have to tolerate him munching noisily on a carrot or a packet of crisps just as they were trying to tee off.

Steve joined the Wiltshire Retired Firefighters Association and both Steve and Julie became loyal supporters of the WRFA Walking Group.

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Coming high above his interest in rugby, golf, bowls, motor cycling and walking came Steve's devotion to Julie and the other family members, Paul and Becci, Mark and Lisa, and the grandchildren Dulcie, Barney, Sienna and George.

With the support of his family's unflinching love Steve struggled against a particularly unpleasant form of dementia that cruelly took two years, taking away his brain functions until it finally ended his full and productive life.

Steve's funeral was held at Kingdown Crematorium and the massive attendance of mourners bore testament to how many lives Steve had touched. The fire & rescue service turned out in strength to pay last respects. The funeral cortege was headed by a preserved Dennis Pump Escape and a modern day fire engine also formed part of the escort. The cortege drove up to the crematorium along a path lined by firefighters from Swindon and Stratton wearing full fire kit.



All who attended the funeral surely felt that the honours done to Steve were no more than he deserved. He leaves behind memories of him as a devoted husband, father and grandfather; a loyal and trustworthy friend, a competent firefighter, a keen sportsman, and a man who loved to laugh and make others laugh. He is sorely missed by many people in many places. Rest in peace, Steve.

MORE SAD NEWS

With much sadness the news was received of the recent deaths of **MICHAEL STOTT** and **MAURICE HANCOCK**. Both served for over 30 years and retired as Station Commanders at Westbury and Corsham respectively. Mike died on 28th January and Maurice died on 7th March. Neither were members of the WRFA. **RIP Mike and Maurice.**

DISCLAIMER

The views and opinions published in this magazine are not necessarily shared by the Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service. Contact with the editor may be made via the contact form on website www.wrfa.org.uk