



THE BRANCH

October
2025

Magazine of Wiltshire Retired Firefighters Association

CRISIS!

Pumps called from as far away as Northern England to assist in dealing with Dorset fires.

This summer has seen the Dorset & Wiltshire FRS put at full stretch to meet its operational commitments. The sequence of heat waves turned areas of open land into tinder dry



HOLT HEATH

This fire near Wimbourne kept Dorset & Wilts FRS busy for days and a large attendance of supporting appliances from as far away as Greater Manchester and Merseyside.

Photo by BBC drone

conditions and fires that demanded heavy attendances over prolonged periods, sometimes several days, put the service under great pressure. The lack of adequate resources needed to cope resulted in the National Resilience Scheme being activated that meant Dorset & Wiltshire FRS could call in support from other services some as far away as Merseyside and Manchester.

Other fire & rescue services felt the strain too because years of cutting wholetime firefighter posts coupled with the difficulty in recruiting and retaining on-call fire crews now means that although services have impressive up-to-date fire appliances they lack the crews to use them when the call comes. CFO Andy Cole of Dorset & Wiltshire FRS has reported to the fire authority that this is resulting in attendance times at fires and other emergencies taking minutes longer.

The Fire Brigades Union has issued a statement drawing the public's attention to this worrying situation. The FBU has declared the service to now be in **crisis**. Statistics gathered by the FBU prove that nationally the average first attendance time at fires has increased by over three minutes. The cuts to the numbers of staff operating fire control rooms the union claims is slowing call handling times. (continued on page 2)

(continued from front page)

One fire authority that is having a particularly hard time at present is **Hampshire & Isle of Wight Fire & Rescue Service**. By means of a video **CFO Neil Odin** has passed the bad news to his personnel that despite being in deep trouble already further cuts of £1.6m are coming to the service's budget. The fire authority tried to get the cut delayed to allow more time to consider ways to attenuate the impact of the underfunding that will be forced but the decision to go ahead with the cuts was bulldozed through.

His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary & Fire & Rescue Services submitted the 2025 report on the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Fire & Rescue Service just when the threat of cuts was looming. The inspection revealed important areas of inadequate performance and these included staffing and operational performance. The inspector found that a very significant proportion of the operational fleet was not available due to crew shortage. The wording of the report was strongly critical and lent support to the FBU's concerns and warnings. On his part the CFO, almost as his parting shot as he retired, stated how he had done his best to deal with a service that faced increasing demand with shrinking resources.



Neil Odin

The task facing CFO Odin's successor is without doubt going to be formidable and the person taking up this challenge is **Dr Sabrina Cohen-Hatton**. CFO Cohen-Hatton moves from West Sussex where she has been

CFO since 2019. Dr Cohen-Hatton had a hard time in her early life losing her father to a brain tumour and finding herself homeless and living on the streets of South Wales where she was born. At the age of 18 she joined the fire service in South Wales and rapid promotion followed. Dr Cohen-studied for a degree with the Open University and went on to gain a PhD with Cardiff University. Dr Cohen-Hatton has been awarded the Kings Fire Service Medal and she has had a book published detailing her early firefighting experiences. On the way to becoming a CFO Dr Cohen-Hatton served as Assistant Commissioner in London Fire Brigade and also served a term within Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies & Fire & Rescue Services.



Dr Cohen-Hatton

So now the whole of the British Fire Service watches with interest how Dr Cohen-Hatton brings her experience and contacts to play in dealing with the acute problems facing our neighbours. The FBU are not shroud waving when they state that lives are at stake unless remedial action is taken. Already one of the fire stations on the Isle of Wight could not respond to a house fire that killed a woman and the station and its appliance were within sight of the burning house but there was no crew available for the appliance.



MEDAL PRESENTATION

Mike Grimshaw was presented with the British Empire Medal recently. The presentation was carried out by Dame Rose Troughton, the Lord Lieutenant of Wiltshire. The honour was bestowed by the King in his Birthday Honours List.

Social Events



Our Summer Lunch and Annual General Meeting was held at The Barge Inn, Seend on 10th August. The event was well supported and those attending were treated to a delicious Sunday Lunch at the very popular pub that stands on the Kennet & Avon Canal side. The AGM went smoothly conducted by our Chairperson, Louise Fielding. The only sad note to the occasion was that we sorely missed members who had passed away in recent times.

New faces elected to serve on the Executive Committee were **Mike Pinnegar, Steve Pike and Dave Bradbury**. The long and very valuable service to the committee given by **Jo Riddiford** was noted with much appreciation as she stood down from being re-elected at this AGM. The loss of **Len Benwell** to the committee due to his recent death means that his long and devoted work on the committee will be much missed.

The reports delivered reflected that the WRFA is in very good shape and going from strength to strength.

The following were elected to serve on the Executive Committee:

President : Vacant

Chairperson : Louise Fielding

Vice Chairperson : John Cox

Secretary & Treasurer : John Craig

North Area Reps : Brian Watts, Mike Pinnegar, Yve Benwell

Central Area Reps : Vince Kimber , (2 vacancies)

South Area Reps : Ludo Macaulay, Paul Jaycock, Dave Bradbury

Countywide Rep : Steve Pike

SOCIAL EVENTS (continued)

WRFA VISIT TO MIDDLE WALLOP



Some members of WRFA very much enjoyed being hosted by the Defence Fire & Rescue Service unit at the **ARMY AVIATION TRAINING CENTRE** at Middle Wallop.

We were made very welcome by Station Commander Jason Sims and

the duty watch at the base fire station. The airfield is home to the instructors training army pilots to fly the APACHE helicopter. Being a training centre the risk of flying accidents is significant and the duty watch laid on a demon-



stration of aircraft firefighting for us. This was following the time enjoyably spent examining the Multi Purpose Rescue Vehicle of which the station has 4, two of which are crewed as a minimum. The possibility of a mid-air collision causing two crash sites determines the level of minimum crewing..



It was discovered that several members of the DFRS posted to Middle Wallop also serve as on-call firefighters with Dorset & Wiltshire FRS.

The visit culminated in a visit to Hangar 5 where maintenance is performed on the helicopters. We were able to get very close to the aircraft. Sadly our offer to purchase one as a prize at our Christmas raffle didn't receive a positive reaction.

The visit was so interesting, educational and enjoyable it may well be followed by similar outings.

Christmas Festive Lunch

Monday 15th December 2025 1.00pm

BOWOOD HOTEL SPA & GOLF RESORT

DERRY HILL SN11 9PQ



£35.00 Members, Spouses, Partners

£42.00 Non-members



MENU

STARTERS

- A. Spiced Roasted Butternut Soup , toasted pumpkin seeds**
- B. Smoked Salmon, Scotch Quail Egg, Sauteed Leeks, Caviar Cream.**
- C. Twice Baked Goats Cheese Souffle, Red Onion Jam, Parsley**

MAIN

- D. Turkey Roulade, Pig in Blanket, Cranberry & Chestnut Stuffing, Fondant Potato, Creamed Brussel Sprouts, Maple Glazed Carrots,**
- E, Confit Duck Leg, Roasted Brussel Sprouts, Smoked Garlic Mash, Orange Sauce.**
- F. Butternut Risotto, Balsamic Pearls, Wilted Spinach, Harrisa Foam.**
- G. Roasted Monkfish, Roasted Cauliflower, Leeks, Crab, Peppercorn Sauce.**

DESSERTS

- H. Traditional Christmas Pudding, Brandy Custard, Vanilla Ice Cream**
- I. Mulled Fruit Pavlova, Vanilla Ice Cream, Champagne Sorbet**
- J. Dark Chocolate Delice, Malted Milk Ice Cream, Cocoa Nib Tulle**

TO BOOK

EITHER

Book online at www.wrfa.org.uk

OR

Telephone 01380 726343

LAST DATE FOR BOOKING 1st DECEMBER



Health Matters



NEWS OF THOSE UNWELL OR WHO HAVE BEEN



PETER MILLS

Peter is continuing to receive chemotherapy for cancer at GWH, Swindon. The treatment involves 21 days of treatment followed by a short rest spell before further 21 days of treatment is given. Throughout having to endure this stressful treatment Peter continues to carry on his usual concern for the welfare of others. We sincerely wish for good news of him.

KEN POWER

Ken is enjoying being pain free and with much improved mobility after his hip replacement surgery. After enduring a very long period of great pain that was initially mis-diagnosed as coming from his spine Ken finally found a consultant who got diagnosis and treatment correct. The surgery was performed at New Hall Hospital. Ken is delighted to be feeling better than he has been for quite a long time.



JOHN CRAIG

John was in Salisbury District Hospital for 5 days in early March after having a bleed from the colon. This was diagnosed as diverticulitis and he went back to the hospital in September as a day-patient for a flexi-sigmoidoscopy. This involves having a camera stuck up your bum and it confirmed the diagnosis was correct. There is no treatment and John has been told that it is unlikely he will suffer another bleed.

LOUISE FIELDING

Louise has been suffering from Covid since mid-September. It has made her feel very unwell. Because she is not old enough to have the vaccinations against Covid she lacked the protection the jab would have given her. Les has had the jabs and so has avoided Louise passing the virus on to him. Louise advises us all who are more aged than her to be sure to get the vaccinations when they are offered particularly with winter approaching. We wish Louise a swift and full recovery



COVID 19 NEW STRAIN



A new strain of Covid 19 is sweeping the UK called STRATUS and its forms are designated XFG and XFG 3. Hospital admissions are significantly increasing and XFG 3 is blamed for this. The virus has a new symptom and it is a **sore throat**.

The NHS advice is to ensure that you take advantage of the offer of vaccinations against both Covid and influenza before winter arrives.



AMBULANCE STAFF ARRESTED

Two members of South Western Ambulance Service Trust based at Trowbridge have been arrested and charged with **gross negligence manslaughter**. The charges are in connection with six deaths that occurred in 2023. One of those charged is male and the other female. SWAST has announced that one of those charged is no longer employed by the trust. The trust also announced that as soon as the circumstances of the deaths became apparent an immediate investigation was ordered. This uncovered information that was immediately passed to the police. The two charged have been released on bail.



AGE CONCERN CHARITY RESEARCH SHOWS THAT PENSIONERS ARE GETTING ILL QUICKER

Elderly UK residents have less time in good health than used to be the case

A survey conducted by the charity **AGE CONCERN** has just been published and it carries the depressing message that retired folk in the UK are falling ill faster than they used to do. Over a two year period covered by the survey that time before a person retired and fell ill dropped from 11.7 years to 11.2 years for women and for men it was from 10.5 years to 10.1

The research work done by Age Concern highlights the shortage of frontline NHS resources and the shortfall in the numbers of doctors is particularly worrying.

EDITOR'S COMMENT. A close friend who is a pensioner and has suffered for years from a heart condition recently attended hospital for his routine check of his pacemaker. The consultant told my friend that he was lucky to be having such an appointment because if he was a new referral from the GP, it would be **two years** before he would be seen. **JMC**



PETE WIXEY

Hard to believe but Pete is “in the wars” again. This time his hospital attendance is down to a gardening accident that caused a severe cut on his leg. This bled profusely and needed hospital attention. In fact he is attending GWH daily to have the dressing changed. Fortunately, he is still driving. Best wishes, Pete, and Take care of yourself!

MICK PINNEGAR

Mick gave us all a bad scare when he was recently blue-lighted into GWH feeling very unwell with suspected cardiac problems. He was in fact dangerously ill and at the time of writing he still has a few days left to receive treatment that will be either the insertion of a stent or a pacemaker. We look forward to learning that Mick is back home with Sue and mending nicely.



BRIAN WATTS

Brian has been unwell for many months and at last it seems that he might be nearer to a diagnosis of his illness. He is about to undergo investigation and possible treatment for a spinal condition. In commendable fashion and very ably supported by June, Brian has carried on with his WRFA duties to the best of his abilities. Thank you Brian and best wishes for your recovery.

FRSA PENSION UPDATE

A very unsatisfactory situation has arisen concerning the new arrangements for the payment of a pension to former on-call members of the fire & rescue service.

For many years these men and women were not eligible for a fire service pension but a change in the law allowed and in fact obligated fire authorities to pay a pension to those who were eligible and who made the proper application. Way back in 2014 the **Fire & Rescue Service Association** trade union warned the government that the exercise they must carry out to implement the pension scheme would take funding and considerable administrative effort. The exercise was supposed to be completed by law by 31st March 2025 with all applicants for a pension having been paid a lump sum followed by a monthly pension payment.

The FRSA, led by its chief executive, Tristan Ashby, has been closely monitoring this situation and applying as much pressure as possible to the



Tristan Ashby

government. In particular the union wants to see the exercise extended to March 31st 2026. The government has not yet confirmed that this will happen but the situation is that legally they have no option but to do so. Many applicants for their pension have been waiting and kept in the dark as to why the delay. The lump sum payments are sure to be considerable in the majority of cases and may be this is behind the delay. Another reason is no doubt the extra work which is complicated in calculating the amount to be paid. A small number of applicants have been paid and the FRSA has been carefully checking that the payments are correct. The FRSA has discovered that in some cases the pension calculations have been incorrect and the union has had to step in to prevent the errors having serious consequences.

It is known that there are WRFA members waiting for their pension payment and *The Branch* will keep readers updated with this evolving situation.



ABOUT THE FRSA

The FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE ASSOCIATION is an independent trade union constituted under the Trade & Labour Relations Act 1992. Unlike the Fire Brigades Union the FRSA has no political affiliations and its members' subscriptions are used to promote and protect the interests of its own members most of whom are on-call (formerly known as 'retained') firefighters. The FRSA has its HQ at Attleborough in Norfolk. The FRSA reserves the right to take strike action if necessary but prefers to pursue its objectives by less militant means.

RACHEL WANTS YOUR MONEY!

PENSIONERS LIKELY TO BE TARGETED FOR TAX INCREASES

First the good news! The triple lock formula has been applied to calculate the increase in State Pension from April 2026. Here are the figures :

For those who retired before April 2016

Increase to £184.75 per week, £9,607 per year

For those who retired after April 2016

Increase to 241.05 per week, £12,534 per year

These very modest adjustments to the pension, although very welcome, they are under threat of being wiped out for many pensioners by the tax rises that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, **Rachel Reeves**, by the so called 'Think Tank' of advisors with whom she consults within the Treasury. The expected Budget to be published and announced to Parliament in November this year is widely thought will show that the Chancellor has listened to her advisors who are strongly urging her to go for the pensioners. The advisors have made it known that they are telling the Chancellor that the present tax system favours the retired and is biased against those who are still in employment. If the Chancellor is influenced by this argument it could be very bad news for pensioners and for those who have managed to accumulate some savings.



What is beyond doubt is that the UK is in severe economic difficulties. We heard repeatedly from the Government that when they came into power a year ago they inherited a £20bn black hole in the economy left by the Conservatives. Vowing to fix the foundations of the economy Rachel Reeves came to the office of Chancellor and after just over a year of her measures to fix the foundations it seems that they are more wobbly than ever. The £20bn black hole has grown to £30bn and financial experts are laying much of the blame for this at the Chancellor's door. In her defence it has to be said that the way that President Trump's tariffs have destabilised the global economy is unhelpful to Rachel Reeves but there are other problems that have been self inflicted such as Labour's failed attempt to review the ballooning welfare budget.

So, it looks highly likely that pensioners will be one of the groups that will be targeted to pay with more taxation as the Chancellor tries to balance the books.

SWINDON SHAKEN BY BLAST

PRINT WORKS EXPLODES



The Swindon night sky was suddenly lit up by a huge fire ball accompanied by a very loud noise of an explosion. This happened on the evening of 24th September and the first fire crews to arrive from Swindon, Stratton-St-Margaret and Westlea found a large industrial unit on the Groundwell Industrial Estate to be well alight with flames through the roof. Assistance was requested and ultimately 12 pumps, an aerial ladder platform (ALP) and a water carrier were in attendance. Assistance from Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire FRSs was requested and given.

The building was occupied by a printing company and it was fortunate that no one was in or near to the building when the severe explosion happened.

Ground monitors and the monitor on the ALP were positioned and any serious fire spread to other industrial units was prevented.

An investigation into the cause of the explosion was conducted by Dorset & Wiltshire FRS. The service has announced that the blast and subsequent fire was caused by a fault in a piece of printing machinery.

The Health & Safety Executive have announced that they will be conducting their own investigation into this incident which caused widespread alarm and concern amongst the public.

Final Salute



BRIAN JAMES FEAVER

16th May 1951 : 4th August 2025

Brian passed away from a severe bleed which was a result of the prostate cancer from which he had been suffering for a couple of years. Sheila and close family were with him at the end.

Brian was born in Twickenham, London and he left school at 16 to begin a five year apprenticeship to qualify as a design draughtsman. On completion of this he was made redundant and he decided upon a career change by joining London Fire Brigade. A group of girls for a dare went along to their local fire station to sing carols. A particularly pretty one of them caught Brian's eye and the attraction was mutual. Within two weeks Sheila and Brian were living together. They were married in 1976 and what followed was 49 years of very happy marriage, producing two sons and three grandchildren.



The couple chose to spend their honeymoon in Reigate so that Brian could indulge his lifelong passion for aircraft spotting! He was also a keen amateur sportsman and for 11 years in later life Brian was also a freemason.

Brian transferred from LFB to Wiltshire Fire Brigade in 1978 and after serving in Swindon he was eventually promoted to Leading Fireman and he specialised as a training instructor, a role in which he excelled and led to further promotion.

Brian and Sheila travelled far in their leisure time. They enjoyed cruises and caravanning after Brian retired after 30 years service as a firefighter. He then became a handyman at a care home.

Brian's funeral with fire service honours was extremely well attended at Kingsdown Crematorium on 28th August 2025. **RIP Brian**

Final Salute



LEONARD HENRY BENWELL ‘Len’

28th January 1948 : 28th June 2025

Len's passing has dealt a huge blow not only to his family and friends but to our association because he has contributed to the life and work of WRFA in many ways including serving on the Executive Committee for many years. Len died just six weeks after being diagnosed with cancer.

Len was born in Harringay, London and on leaving school he served an apprenticeship as a cabinet maker. John's father had served in the London Fire Brigade during the Blitz and in 1967 Len followed in his Dad's footsteps by joining the LFB. After 12 years in LFB during which he attended many challenging and harrowing incidents Len transferred to Wiltshire Fire Brigade. Len had family already living in the county and his first posting was to Swindon. Over time he served on all four watches at Drove Road and made a wide circle of work colleagues. Outstanding amongst these was John 'Pumper' Payne with whom Len became a close friend.

Yve and Len first met when they were neighbours and Yve was working as a telephonist at Goddards in town. After chats and exchanges of glasses of wine over the garden fence their relationship grew into a deep and everlasting love. They were married for 42 years. Those years were filled with many happy times that included enjoying caravanning and riding together for many miles on a Honda Goldwing motor cycle.

Len was given a funeral service with richly deserved fire service honours. Rest in peace, Len.



**Here are the numbers to call if you wish to ask for the help of the
FIRE FIGHTERS CHARITY**

Make a note of them!

CRISIS LINE 0300 373 0896 Open all days, all hours



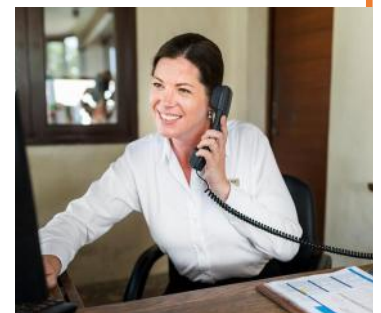
SERVICES ACCESS LINE 0800 389 8820

Open office hours on Monday to Friday



GENERAL ENQUIRIES 01256 366566

Open office hours on Monday to Friday



**WE ARE HERE FOR YOU FOR LIFE
KEEP IN TOUCH**



Final Salute



ANTHONY 'TONY' LEWIS FELLONER **16th May 1948 : 30th May 2025**

Tony fought cancer for months gallantly and after treatment in Bristol he passed away at home with his family at his bedside.

Tony left school in Chippenham and his first job was working for the Co-op. He then became a milkman keeping some of the citizens of Chippenham supplied with their 'pintas'.

He made the wise decision to swap his milk float for a fire engine when he joined Wiltshire Fire Brigade. His initial posting was at Chippenham but his 47 years of service saw him serving in several different postings making him well known and liked throughout the Brigade.

It was at a disco held at Hullavington Camp that Tony first met Sue. Their relationship soon blossomed and they were married on 2nd October 1971. The marriage was blessed with two daughters, Sarah and Alison.

Tony and Sue shared a common interest in railways and trains, particularly steam locomotives. Tony built a train set at home from which he derived many hours of pleasure. Both Tony and Sue enjoyed visits to steam trains that still operate on preserved railway lines.

Tony was afforded fire service honours at his funeral that was held on 16th June at West Wilts Crematorium, Semington. Some of Tony's former colleagues acted as coffin bearers.

Tony made a valued contribution to the fire & rescue service in Wiltshire and he is being sorely missed in many ways.

Tony regularly wrote to the Gazette & Herald newspaper to express his views on local matters. His views published in the 'Letters to the Editor' section of the paper very often took issue with Wiltshire Council policies and made clear his objections to them. Tony's published comments were never nonsense and he would have made a good county councillor.

Rest in peace, Tony



WRFA WALKING GROUP

OUR WALKERS HAVE ENJOYED EXPLORING MALMESBURY

By Colin & Heather Hill

12 gallant members of the Walking Group went to Malmesbury on 25th September and very much enjoyed pounding the pavements and fields in and around this lovely town. Because the town is hilly the walking was more challenging than previous saunters but very enjoyable nonetheless..



**New members wishing to join the
Walking Group are sure of a welcome.
Call Colin Hill on 01249 655688**

The route chosen took the walkers past many buildings with blue plaques and Heather Hill took care to point these out and explain the history attached to them. Of course, a visit to the famous Abbey was made and some of the walking was done by the river. A most enjoyable lunch was devoured at the Whole Hog before the group members returned to the car park for the journey home.

DISCLAIMER

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The WRFA is apolitical and independent of the National Association of Retired Firefighters.