

FEBRUARY
2026



The Branch

MAGAZINE OF WILTSHIRE RETIRED FIREFIGHTERS



FIRE STATIONS CLOSURE PROPOSAL BASED ON “FLAWED DATA”



Faced with a short fall of £1.2m in next year's budget Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Authority has decided to propose the closure of eight fire stations, identified as Bradford on Avon, Charmouth, Cranbourne, Maiden Newton, Ramsbury, Mere, Wilton and Hamworthy. Andy Cole, the Chief Fire Officer, is declaring his reluctance for stations to close but is providing guidance to the authority members one of whom is **Councillor Pete Miles** from Bournemouth. He has published a detailed

CLLR MILES

statement in social media putting his views that the closures should not go ahead, one reason being that the data being used he claims is **flawed**. Cllr Miles has added to the information supplied by the CFO by speaking with some of the firefighters “at the sharp end”, hence his conclusion that the official data is not the full and accurate picture. He has identified that the data concerning the use of stations and crews is selective and does not cover for example how often the relevant stations are used on standby or as reliefs.

In his statement Councillor Miles reveals that the fire authority fears that if it does not close the eight stations the Government will step in and do so. It is clear from his statement that Cllr Miles feels that the Government should carry the blame and responsibility and not the fire authority if the station closures happen.



ANDY COLE

A **public consultation** started on 13th February and it will end on 15th May. The final decision on station closures will be taken by the fire authority on 30th June 2026.

The Chief Fire Officer is urging members of the public to engage with the public consultation process and make their views known. Despite being cash strapped the fire authority has employed a private company to manage the public consultation.

The **Fire Brigades Union** has lost no time in starting to campaign to fight the fire station closures proposal and has broadcast that it may feel it necessary to ballot its members for industrial action. The FBU believes nearly 100 redundancies may result if the campaign fails to stop the station closures.

The Storm Clouds Gather

FBU TALKING OF INDUSTRIAL ACTION

The FIRE BRIGADES UNION is the first trade union to call for Sir Keir Starmer to be replaced as Prime Minister amidst the political storm that has engulfed Sir Keir over what has become known as the Mandelson scandal. Probably because of the FBU's views the union's General Secretary, Steve Wright, was invited to be a panelist on the Laura Kuenssberg programme on BBC One on Sunday 8th February. Mr Wright explained why FBU members are so disappointed at the lack of Government support for the fire & rescue service which the FBU claims is in crisis. He stated that during the 14-years the Conservatives were in government 12,000 firefighter posts were cut and the cuts have continued since the government led by Sir Keir Starmer took power. A further 1,000 firefighter posts have been slashed since the last election. To emphasise that the FBU means business Mr Wright broadcast that meetings would take place with consideration for industrial action on the agenda. An attempt was made to draw Mr Wright into naming who he would like to see replacing Sir Keir but he avoided giving a personal view.



In both Oxfordshire and Dorset & Wiltshire the fire authorities are considering closing fire stations. The politicians claim to be under severe financial pressure. Locally, VAL HAMPSHIRE has been making the case for the fire & rescue service to be properly funded. Val is a long-serving member of Dorset & Wiltshire FRS and represents FBU members in the South West of England on the FBU hierarchy. Val has used every opportunity to bring to public attention to how close the fire & rescue service is to failing to meet the demands made upon it already. Further reduction in resources Val feels will make a bad situation even more serious with a risk to life.

The question now hangs in the air about whether FBU members will vote for industrial action if a ballot is taken and if the vote is for action what form will it be. In 1977 a Labour government led by Jim Callaghan clashed with the FBU which led to a national strike by the FBU for the first time. The strike lasted for 9-weeks and thousands of soldiers, sailors and airmen provided a rudimentary firefighting service during the strike. It is very unlikely that the armed forces could do so again. **SEE PAGE 13**



ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS

Due on 1st April



**Still only
£15**

The date will soon be here when the **£15** annual subscription to WRFA will be due for payment. The critical date is **1st April**.

There are several ways that you can pay.

AUTO DEDUCTION. If you receive your fire service pension from Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service you may ask for your annual subscription to be automatically deducted from your April pension and then this is passed onto WRFA. To use this system all you need to do is inform the WRFA treasurer of your pension payroll number and the job is done.

BANK STANDING ORDER : Inform your bank that you wish to pay £15 every year to WRFA on 1st April The bank will need the details of this association's and they are:

Account name : Wiltshire Retired Firefighters Association

Sort Code : 77 50 05

Account Number : 28196668

FAST BANK TRANSFER : If you bank online you may prefer to pay by fast online cash transfer between your account and that of this association. The bank details above are those that you will need.

CHEQUE : Send your cheque made out to Wiltshire Retired Firefighters Association to the treasurer on 1st April or very close to that date. .

CASH : Yes, we welcome payments in hard cash if this is your preference.

THE TREASURER WILL BE HAPPY TO GIVE YOU FURTHER ADVICE AND THIS WILL BE JOHN CRAIG. WE HOPE YOU FEEL THAT YOU GET GOOD VALUE FOR MONEY FROM YOUR ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION.

NEW MEMBERS



SUE FELLONOR

It has been a delight to welcome Sue into full membership and to see her already supporting our social life by attending with Alison our Christmas Festive Lunch. Sue shared with her late husband, Tony, a love of steam trains and any other members with the same interest might like to chat when you meet.



SHEILA FEAVER

Sheila is another lady who has joined us soon after losing her husband, Brian, who was a WRFA member. We are so pleased to have Sheila now as a full member and therefore entitled to all the support and care that we can give to her. We look forward and hope for her presence at some of our future social events. Sheila lives in Swindon. A warm welcome to you, Sheila. May you enjoy many years of fellowship with us.



YVE BENWELL

Following the passing of her husband, Len, recently Yve has very sensibly opted to secure her future membership of WRFA by applying for full membership as a widow member. Of course, the Executive Committee had no hesitation in agreeing to this. Yve is planning to move house away from Wiltshire but she has made it clear that she is keen to maintain her membership of WRFA which she values greatly. Yve, our love and interest in your welfare will go with you always.





Our Spring Lunch



THIS IS A DOG FRIENDLY PUB

THE WHEATSHEAF

LOWER WOODFORD

SUNDAY 19th APRIL

Chef is preparing new and exciting menu that will be available from 18th MARCH.

BOOK YOUR PLACE NOW by email

johncraig7@btinternet.com or phone 01380 726343

MENU WILL BE FORWARDED WHEN AVAILABLE

NOT TO BE MISSED!

HEALTH MATTERS

News of our members dealing with illness



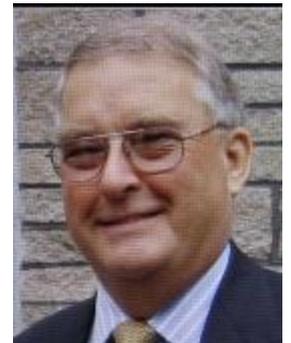
PETER & FRANCES

Peter and Frances Mills are continuing their long fight with ill health. Peter is regularly having chemotherapy and Frances awaits new attempts at diagnosis of her gastric ailment. We wish them both well.



BRUCE BRINGLOE

Bruce is suffering from several chronic illnesses which means he frequently attends hospitals and clinics for treatment or consultations. He has Parkinson's Disease and diabetes plus an irregular heart beat. Bruce can no longer walk and now gets himself around in an electric mobility scooter. Janet recently broke her arm which was a mishap both Janet and Bruce could have done without. We miss this lovely couple at our social events but are keeping them in our thoughts.



YVE BENWELL

When you are grief stricken soon after losing a dearly loved husband the last thing you need is a painful illness but sadly that's what happened to Yve. She has had shingles. Fortunately, the treatment soon put her in recovery. Yve is intending to move to Wales as soon as she can sell her house in Blunsdon. If you are interested in buying a house there let the WRFA put you in touch with Yve and/or her estate agent. We shall very much miss Yve.



HEALTH MATTERS CONTINUED

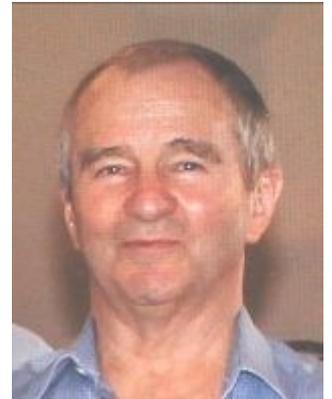


PETE WIXEY

Pete continues to throw out challenges to the NHS. He has diabetes, asbestosis and now he has injured a knee and his knee cap has become detached from the ligaments that should hold it in place. He has attended hospital in Swindon and in Oxford and awaits further news on how his knee is to be treated. Best of luck, Pete.

JOHN COX

For several years John has had a Bluecrest Health Check regularly which is outside the NHS. Although he was not feeling unwell and is very active his most recent test results showed an abnormal ECG result. He is now awaiting investigations into his heart by the NHS. His GP is keeping a close eye on John and has advised him to take life easy for the time being. We hope that if John does have a heart condition early diagnosis and treatment will bring about a pleasing outcome.



BLUECREST

The mild heart condition that John Cox now knows he has was detected when he purchased a routine health check provided by BLUECREST. Other companies provide a similar service. John did not feel unwell and the check has found a condition he didn't know he had. Under the NHS a watch can be maintained on John to keep him in the best possible trim.



The Staines Air Disaster



By JOHN COX (ex-Surrey Fire Brigade)

On Sunday 18th June 1972, a BEA Trident1, PAPA INDIA, flight number 548, passenger aircraft crashed following take off from Heathrow resulting in 118 deaths comprising all passengers and crew. The accident became known as the STAINES AIR DISASTER and remains the deadliest air accident (non-terrorist) in British aviation history. I will briefly outline the reasons for the crash at the end of this article. BEA and BOAC subsequently merged to become British Airways.



Earlier in my service I had been posted to Horley Fire Station which was on the first attendance to all incidents at Gatwick Airport and we regularly exercised with the on-site CAA Airport Fire Service. I served my last three years in Surrey Fire Brigade as Sub Officer in charge of Red Watch at Sunbury-on-Thames fire station, three miles from Staines.

On 18th June I was spending that afternoon with my parents at their house in Staines. My Dad, also John Cox, was ADO in charge of Staines and Egham fire stations. At approximately 17.20 he received a call from Surrey fire control alerting him to an air crash, believed to be on the A30 Staines bypass. However, multiple calls were being received from members of the public and there was much confusion as to the exact location of the incident. Heathrow air traffic control had not noticed PAPA INDIA dropping off the radar. My Dad proceeded and I made my way to Sunbury for the night shift.

On arrival at Sunbury the day shift had already proceeded with the Water Tender Ladder and the Rescue Tender. I had a very young watch who habitually arrived at least half an hour before their shift and they were all there waiting for me. Control instructed us to proceed to the incident in the Land Rover.

There has been much criticism of the behaviour of the general public in connection with this particular incident. It was unfortunate that the BBC and other radio stations had reported the incident so promptly. When we turned onto the Staines bypass there were cars parked nose-t-tail on both sides of the west bound carriageway. People were walking four abreast and some dads seen carrying children on their shoulders. We even saw ice cream and hot dog vans pulling up close to the scene. They were of course sent packing.

The first Surrey crew to arrive declared it to be a major disaster and control mobilised the predetermined attendance of 20 pumps plus multiple special appliances including 2 Emergency Tenders. Because there was a risk there were two incidents, London Fire Brigade Control mobilised a further 20 pumps which subsequently arrived at Staines Bypass. We actually had 40 pumps turn up and the LFB pumps were promptly returned to home stations or standby locations. A number of foam tenders attended from Heathrow.

The crash site was a grassed meadow on the south side of the busy A30 Staines bypass and less than a mile from Staines High Street. The meadow lay approximately three metres below road level and was surrounded by high trees and hedgerows, concealing the crash site.

As we descended into the meadow it felt eerie. There was a light mist and an overwhelming stench of aviation kerosine fuel. The fuel tanks had ruptured on impact and much of their contents was soaking harmlessly into the soft earth. PAPA INDIA had literally dropped from the sky after stalling, hitting the ground tail first.

The tail had detached and the rest of the aircraft lay 50 metres beyond. The rest of PAPA INDIA remained almost intact although the fuselage had split open in three places. Rescue operations were underway and it became apparent that the majority of the occupants had died on impact. Two passengers were found still alive. One died on scene and the other died on route to hospital. A total of 118 passengers and crew had perished.



With my young crew I led an extrication team from the rear of the fuselage. Passenger seats had been torn from their floor mountings and impacted into the seat in front, all the way forward. Cabin lining had collapsed exposing the bare metal shell of the fuselage. Steel control cables had become detached and entangled with passenger seats. Miles of electrical wiring had also become detached and entangled with passenger seats and bodies. I am

avoiding going into gory detail in case it upsets some of our readers.

The extrication process was intensive, challenging and took an estimated three hours. We were supported by police officers standing alongside the fuselage and holding black plastic bags, collecting items of evidence we were passing to them. I understand they found this experience particularly harrowing. Within the aircraft we were concentrating on extrication and less on the carnage that surrounded us. At one point I found myself working waist-deep in bodies. At the same time, we made every effort to treat every victim with the dignity they so deserved. We were not as well equipped as today's fire service and often had to improvise. In those days many firefighters carried a personal knife in their belt when on duty. These were effectively used for cutting electrical cabling.

We continued to work our way forward within the fuselage. Because extrication was proving so difficult and time consuming it was decided to open up a forward section of the fuselage. It was cut down one side with a heavy disc cutter and peeled open using a small crane that had been brought on site. This allowed more firefighters access and speeded up removal of bodies until a fire occurred. I was working alongside a Heathrow firefighter who was using a disc cutter the sparks from which started a fire in the cabin lining. The lining had become doused from smashed bottles containing duty-free spirits. As we were climbing out I was hit in the chest by a foam jet and tumbled back into the open fuselage. The fire was quickly brought under control and extinguished and operations continued.



The last two bodies to be removed were the pilot and co-pilot. At this point I wished I had been wearing gloves. Firefighters were not issued with gloves at this time. My Dad remained in tactical charge throughout this phase of the incident.

I recall returning to station later that evening with my young crew. I was impressed by their resilience and how well they coped following a particularly harrowing incident, the likes of which they were unlikely to ever see again. Openly talking together about the incident around the mess table I believe, helped everyone, as per fire service tradition. Stress was not something that was really recognised in those days and anyone who could not cope left the service either willingly or were sacked.

PAPA INDIA was one of 24 Trident 1's operated by BEA. It was designed for short and medium range operations. In 1972 it was the fastest passenger jet in the world. However, it had a higher stall speed than other aircraft. Strict noise abatement regulations apply at Heathrow and other airports requiring pilots to throttle back while still climbing after take off. In order to achieve this the Trident was fitted with retractable flaps on the leading edge of the main wings. These had to be extended to avoid stalling when taking off. Once the aircraft had ceased climbing and in level flight the flaps were routinely retracted.

It is believed there was bad feeling on the flight deck that day due to an ongoing pilots' dispute. It has been established Captain Key suffered a heart attack during this critical period of take off.

It has been proved that the leading edge flaps were prematurely retracted whilst still climbing causing the aircraft to stall. The aircraft ceased actually flying and just fell out of the sky. It just missed a series of high voltage power lines and came down just short of Staines High Street. **The requirement for cockpit voice recorders was introduced following this incident.**



One month earlier a major multi-agency exercise was staged at a rural location just south of Dorking. It was a simulated passenger aircraft crash with actual pieces of wreckage provided by the Air Accident Investigation Branch at Farnborough. Approximately 200 members of the Casualties Union were realistically made up to simulate seriously injured victims. The exercise was not a resounding success but many valuable lessons were learnt.

Weeks later the Trident crash occurred at Staines, when all the preparation and training came together and the performance of all three emergency services exemplary.

At any large incident it is always the fire service that arrives first in numbers, often demonstrating the adaptability of the firefighter. At the Staines incident this had to include casualty assessment and management of the deceased following extrication, assisting the police with perimeter security in the initial stages and preventing members of the public and the press from accessing the scene.

Whilst writing this article I was able to clearly picture the scene and the operation as it unfolded. In 2022 I was contacted by the Surrey Herald newspaper and invited to contribute to a 50th-anniversary article they were compiling on the Staines air crash. **Some incidents are never forgotten.**



Who Takes The Blame

If fire service cuts lead to tragedy?

The Dorset & Wiltshire Fire Authority has let it be announced that 8 fire stations are under threat of closure because they face significant financial pressure. The Wiltshire stations named are Wilton, Mere, Bradford-on-Avon and Ramsbury. No doubt, with reluctance, with reluctance the Chief Fire Officer, Andy Cole, has done his studies and come up with those names. Some may accuse the Fire Brigades Union of shroud waving by stating that these cuts will put lives of both the public and firefighters at risk, But are they? Recent 21st century history has shown that there can be a heavy price to pay



Danny Cotton



Sadiq Khan

if fire & rescue resources are cut significantly. You need to look no further than the horrific **Grenfell Tower** fire in June 2017 when the performance of the London Fire Brigade was strongly criticised by the Public Inquiry, the final report of which revealed that the gallant fire crews who faced an impossible set of tasks on that dreadful night were ill equipped, undertrained, and lacking preplanning for a major incident. The mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, was heard recently admitting that the LFB had been “hollowed out” before Grenfell but he was not admitting to it being the political control of the LFB that caused this. There had to be a ‘sacrificial lamb’ to appease the public crying out for justice and Commissioner Danny Cotton lost her job. To be fair to the mayor the Public Inquiry did identify deficiencies and faults some of which were down to Danny and her predecessors but the matters relating to under funding are the responsibility of the politicians. For example, the aerial platform seen on film and photos working hard at Grenfell I believe came from Surrey FRS. After the disaster at what must have been considerable expense the LFB purchased a fleet of aerial ladder platforms and turntable ladders making it the envy of fire services world wide. What a pity those magnificent appliances were not available in time for the Grenfell Tower fire.. All UK fire & rescue services are subject to inspection by the Home Office. Did inspectors notice the long list of faults



and failures during the inspections preceding Grenfell Tower that the Public Inquiry uncovered? If they did not it calls into question the quality and experience of the inspectorate. A cynic might think that the Home Office was more concerned with diversity and equality than operational efficiency.

THE PENHOLLOW HOTEL

The Penhollow Hotel was a 54 bedroom, four storey hotel in Newquay, Cornwall that was gutted by fire on 18th August, 2007. Three guests at the hotel died in the fire. One of them, an elderly lady, was seen calling for help from her bedroom window on the top floor but she was not rescued much to the disgust and deep concern of the crowd that gathered to witness this night time fire. The bystanders noted and commented that the single fire engine that arrived lacked a ladder long enough to reach the lady calling for help. An aerial ladder platform or turntable ladder was needed for the rescue. Cornwall FRS only had one turntable ladder based at Truro and it was off the run on the night of the fire. A turntable ladder was ordered but the nearest was at Plymouth in the neighbouring county!



Newquay Fire Station at the time had two fire engines and operated the day crewing duty system which means that a small number of fulltime firefighters were on duty in the daytime and responded to call from home at night. The second fire engine was crewed by on-call (part-timers). On the night of the fire only enough firefighters responded to the call to crew one fire engine which went to the wrong address initially. On arrival, this crew faced the daunting task of the worst fire Cornwall has seen in four decades. Assistance messages were of course sent and eventually 100 firefighters attended the fire but were unable to save the three people who perished on the top floor. The hotel was so badly damaged it had to be demolished.

The coroner at the inquest into the fire deaths which reported in 2009 had some stinging criticisms to level at the under performance of the Cornwall Fire & Rescue Service. As the coroner was announcing his verdict and comments the chief fire officer in Cornwall changed and Des Tidbury took over. On his advice the staffing of Newquay Fire Station was upgraded to a fulltime shift pattern but only for the summer months when the population of the town increased from 25,000 to around 100,000.

LESSONS LEARNT?

The two fires mentioned here are but a couple of examples drawn from history that give weight to the FBU's warnings that if you "hollow out" the fire & rescue service lives may be lost. If there are fatalities you can be sure to see the buck passing done by those who thought that running the fire & rescue service on a 'shoe string' was a good idea and/or a risk worth taking. History has lessons to teach but are those in power listening?

A public consultation process on the proposal to close 8 fire stations in Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service is about to begin.

John Craig

FIRE STATION CLOSURES PUBLIC CONSULTATION BEGINS



PAUL OATWAY QPM
Chairman
Dorset & Wiltshire FRS



FINAL DECISION
30th JUNE



ANDY COLE QFSM
Chief Fire Officer
Dorset & Wiltshire FRS

The Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service claims to be facing significant financial pressure. The Fire Authority met on 10th February under its chairman, Councillor Paul Oatway QPM and after studying the report of working groups set up to investigate fire station closure proposals the decision was taken to move to the **public consultation phase**. This commences on the **13th February and ends on 15th May**.

As far as Wiltshire is concerned the public are being invited to comment on the proposal to close the fire stations at **Wilton, Mere, Ramsbury and Bradford-on-Avon**. A further four stations in Dorset are under consideration for closure. The results of the public consultation will be passed to a consultation company that has been contracted to manage the process. To balance the books the fire authority has to find savings of £1.2m. Public meetings are being arranged where the public can express their feelings.

NOMINATIONS FOR ELECTION

OUR EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

This is the time of year when our constitution requires an invitation to be extended to members to either self-nominate or nominate another member(s) to stand for election to the EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE. If you are submitting your own nomination you will need two other members to nominate and second your submission. If you are nominating some one else, you must ensure that they agree to being nominated.

The election will take place at the Annual General Meeting the date of which will probably be in August on a date yet to be arranged.

Nomination forms are available on our website <https://wrfa.org.uk>.

Executive committee post to be filled are

Chairperson

Vice Chairperson

Secretary/Treasurer

North Area Representatives (3)

Central Area Representatives (3)

South Area Representatives (3)

County Wide Area Representative (1)

Honorary Auditor

The position of President is currently vacant and it is for the Executive Committee to appoint the President if and when an opportunity arises.

To obtain more detail on what being an Executive Committee member involves please contact JOHN CRAIG on 01380 726343.

Sorely Missed



DEANA



JANE

The last few months of 2025 were very sad ones for the WRFA. Not only did we suffer too many members answering their last call and to whom tribute has been paid, but we were plunged into deep sorrow by the passing of **Deana Gentleman** and **Jane Cox**. These two lovely ladies graced and brightened many a WRFA social event and their absence at our Christmas Lunch meant it didn't quite feel the same.

Deana was married to John Gentleman QFSM and a long and successful marriage it was.

Deana was not only an outstanding wife and mother but during her years of employment she proved herself to be a brilliant accountant. Her last few months fighting leukaemia must have been very tough for Deana and John too.

Jane met John when they lived in Surrey and Jane was a hairdresser. They had two sons, Philip and Stephen. In recent years Jane was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. This required her to take very powerful medication and to see the way that Jane fought the illness that gradually reduced her mobility was inspirational. She smiled through her pain and frustrations, always with John and in the last few years Poppy cat to support and comfort her. Then, out of the blue Jane suffered a stroke in the form of a bleed on the brain. We all hoped she would draw on her resilient spirit and come back to us but it wasn't to be.

We are so privileged to have known these two lovely ladies. May they rest in peace.

THE LAST SALUTE



DAVID JOHN HINTON

John was born in 1934 and he lived to be 90. His very well attended funeral was held on 13th November 2025. John preferred to be called John and most people knew him by that name. John did his national service in the Royal Wiltshire Regiment and then trained as a plumber, United Dairies factory provided employment for many men and women in Royal Wootton Bassett and John was one of them. He was a general maintenance engineer, a sort of “Mr Fixit” for the whole factory.

He married Mary, the love of his life and they had two daughters Wendy and Sal.

Working in the same factory as John were several men who like John were retained firefighters at Station 1/6 Wootton Bassett. A never to be forgotten occasion was when a serious fire broke out in the factory and the flames were through the roof. The firefighter element of the factory staff ran to the fire station within sight of the fire but John at first refused to let them turn out stating they must wait for fire control to operate the call out system. *“They might be wanting us to go somewhere else”* was John’s explanation. The fire demanded the attendance of four pumps and the turntable ladder and John had his leg pulled for a long time.

John’s service to the Wiltshire Fire Brigade was outstanding. He rarely missed a call and when on the fireground his practical skills were often put to good use. He had a sound knowledge of firemanship and passed this on to recruits to their great benefit.

John was a heavy smoker and was rarely seen without a cigarette in his mouth and had mastered the method of rolling a cigarette from one corner of his mouth to the other while talking. John will always be remembered with great respect and affection by those privileged to have known and worked with him. Rest in peace, John.

DISCLAIMER

The views and opinions published in this magazine are not necessarily shared by the Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Authority.