



# The Branch

JUNE 2024

WILTSHIRE RETIRED FIREFIGHTERS ASSOCIATION

## FIRE AUTHORITY CHAIRMAN STANDS DOWN



Rebecca Knox

Rebecca Knox, after leading the Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Authority since its inception in April 2016, has relinquished the Chair by not standing for re-election to Dorset County Council in May. Press reports state that Councillor Knox has been “rocked” by her service being at the forefront of the national bad publicity surrounding culture problems.

These problems have caused the **Home Secretary** to set the Parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee the task of investigating them. **Councillor Knox was called before this committee on 20th March at 10.00am to face questioning.**

Days before being questioned Rebecca Knox had announced that she would be standing down as a County Councillor and as Chairman of the Fire Authority at the local government elections in May. It was therefore clear to the committee, chaired by Labour MP, **Diana Johnson**, that the end to Rebecca Knox’s long tenure of office was in sight.

Councillor Knox began giving her answers by trying to emphasise the dividing line between her area of responsibility and that of CFO Ben Ansell. Councillor Knox stated that CFO Ansell was responsible for operational management of the service and she had full confidence in him. To an observer of the interview this only seemed to irritate the chairman of the committee and some of its members because the tone of their questions became decidedly hostile and accusatory accompanied by much finger pointing and body language.

Being under such ‘fire’ Councillor Knox tried to play what she presumably thought would be an ace by starting to tell the committee that a black manager had been awarded the Kings Fire Service Medal in the last Sovereign’s Honours List but her ace was quickly ‘trumped’.



Diana Johnson MP

*Continued from page one*

Diana Johnson brushed aside the comment about the black manager's award by making the point that it was not racism within the Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service but the way that misogyny had been found to exist within the service about which they had questions to pose.

Councillor Knox mentioned that CFO Ansell had conducted an internal investigation and this had revealed the cases of ill treatment of women. This gave Diana Johnson the chance to point out the committee's concern that the CFO had only initiated the investigation AFTER a television company had broadcast the complaints of the ladies who, when bringing them to management's attention, had not had them properly actioned. Councillor Knox for a moment seemed confused and appeared to dispute that the investigation came after rather than before the ITN broadcast.

Diana Johnson posed questions designed to probe exactly how far Rebecca Knox had taken a personal interest in the problems of mysogerny. It was a matter of fact that when complaints were not dealt with by management the complainants did not go over the CFO's head to the Chairman of the Fire Authority but instead went to the media. The MPs wanted to find out if Councillor Knox would have lent them a listening ear? She replied that she would have done so if they had approached her. The unspoken thought that must have been raised by this answer linked back to the first comments made at the interview by Rebecca Knox when she claimed a close working relationship with CFO Ansell in whom she had great trust.

The interview ended on a final rather sour note to add to those already minuted. Rebecca Knox was asked "*have you ever expressed publicly remorse for what has happened or apologised to the women concerned?*" Councillor Knox gave an unconvincing reply, stating that she thought she had done so but couldn't remember the exact circumstances or the words she had used. Diana Johnson MP closed the exchange by telling Rebecca Knox that she had searched for those apologetic comments but could not find them.

Many will no doubt testify to the many years of faithful public and political service that Rebecca Knox has given. It is therefore very sad to see her final days as a councillor and chairman end in such an unpleasant way.

Any reader is welcome to view the interview in full and form their own judgements. The video is found easily by typing **parliament.tv** in the search engine and then accessing the relevant archive for the **Home Affairs Select Committee, 20th March 2024**. The recording starts at 10.06am and Rebecca Knox is the second witness to be quizzed.

# Welcome **New Members!** Welcome

## **JULIE BENSON**

Julie has joined us and we look forward to welcoming her in person at some of our activities in the future. Julie is the widow of Steve Benson whose loss we are all mourning at present. Julie has been promised the warm and supportive fellowship of WRFA. We already know that Julie enjoys walking and she did accompany Steve when he supported some of the WRFA Walking Group saunters in past years. We hope and trust that Julie will derive much pleasure from being one of our members.



## **Membership Annual Subscriptions**

### **Have you paid?**

It shouldn't come as a surprise to members to learn that annual subscriptions (£15) to this association fall due for payment on 1st April.

- If you have a fire pension from Dorset & Wiltshire FRS you can opt for the AUTO DEDUCTION SCHEME and your subscription will be deducted from your April pension every year. Just inform John Craig. Most ex- WFB use this.
- OR pay by bank STANDING ORDER. Form obtainable from John Craig.
- OR pay by fast transfer from your bank account if you bank online.
- OR pay by cheque made out to Wiltshire Retired Firefighters Association
- OR pay by cash, placing the money in John's hand.
- Contact the treasurer, John Craig, on 01380 726343 if you have any questions.

NOTE : Only paid up members of the Association can vote at the AGM on 10th August

**SECURE YOUR CONTINUED MEMBERSHIP**





# GLOUCESTERSHIRE FRS STILL IN TROUBLE

## Report “*incredibly depressing*”

The latest inspection report on Gloucestershire Fire & Rescue Service published by His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabularies and Fire & Rescue Services indicates that the service still has much work to do in a number of significant areas to correct deficiencies.

Gloucestershire FRS was placed in “special measures” after an inspection in 2021. The latest inspection gives little indication of significant progress. Nine out of eleven areas were deemed “inadequate” or “in need of improvement”.

The member of the inspectorate who carried out the latest inspection was **Mr Roy Wilshire OBE QFSM** who is the former Chief Fire Officer of Hertfordshire and who was for a time Chairman of the National Fire Chief’s Council. Not all members of the inspectorate have a deep knowledge and experience of the fire & rescue service but this cannot be said of Mr Wilshire. His highly critical report therefore carries much weight and must put great pressure on the Chief Fire Officer and political portfolio holder on the county council to “pull their finger out” and sort out the mess into which the service has sunk. One glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel is that Mr Wilshire graded as “adequate” response to fires and emergencies as well as preventing fire and risk. No doubt the people protected by the service can draw some comfort from this.



ROY WILSHIRE OBE QFSM



DAVE NORMAN MBE

The fire portfolio on Gloucestershire County Council is held by **Councillor Dave Norman MBE**. Speaking at the council meeting on 24th May 2024 Cllr Norman said that he didn’t wish to make a statement naming individuals but you would have to agree that the damage done to this service happened a long time before the first inspection. We have to have had to make a significant challenging journey to get us back to a level where I feel confident we are going in the right direction . Which we are.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer Openshaw told the County Council Meeting “There is work that is needed. We were very open with the work that was needed to be taken in Gloucestershire was not simple work that could be achieved in twelve to eighteen months”

So, what were Mr Wilshire’s main areas of concern? These were ; *lack of understanding of fire and risk; response to major incidents; best use of resources; future affordability; getting the right people for the job; managing performance; developing leaders.*

\*\*\*\*\*

A former Chief Fire Officer of Gloucestershire was found not guilty of fraud in October 2021. Stewart Edgar was accused after an investigation uncovered that he had used a third party to bid at an auction on his behalf to purchase a Range Rover that the service he managed was selling. His defence was that he had made an honest mistake while suffering mental illness and depression. The trial lasted a week.





# Spring Lunch



Our SPRING LUNCH was held at the Bowood Hotel Spa & Golf Resort near Calne on 8th April. The event was very successful and it provided those who attended with yet another very precious opportunity to enjoy fellowship as well as the excellence of the cuisine.

The venue has proved to be a favourite with WRFA members and we shall be returning there for our Christmas Festive Lunch in December. The staff always do a great job looking after us.

The part of the hotel devoted to hosting us was the Kelly/Wycombe Suite which is ideal for our needs having a well-stocked bar and a dining room with a particularly pleasant ambience.





# Summer Lunch



**INCLUDING  
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

**SATURDAY 10th AUGUST 2024**

**AGM at 11.00am**

**LUNCH at 1.00am**

## **MARLBOROUGH GOLF CLUB**

**Large car park : easy access to venue**

**Stair Lift**

**Well stocked bar**

**Two Course Carvery for £26,00**



**Self choice first course from traditional roasts**

**Delicious dessert options**

**Vegetarian choices**

## **HOW TO ORDER**

**On line to [johncraig7@btinternet.com](mailto:johncraig7@btinternet.com)**

**Or telephone 01380 726343**

**Or USE ORDER FORM AVAILABLE FROM [www.wrfa.org.uk](http://www.wrfa.org.uk)**

**Pay by fast transfer to**

**Wiltshire Retired Firefighters Association      75 50 05 28196668**

**Or cheque made out to Wiltshire Retired Firefighters Association**

**LAST DATE FOR BOOKING 31st July**

**Ask for help with transport if needed when booking**

# Health Matters



## DEANA GENTLEMAN

Deana is continuing to have chemotherapy at GWH, Swindon to treat leukaemia and blood tests are showing that some improvement is evident.

Deana is grateful for the support she and John are receiving from family, friends and WRFA.

## JOHN GENTLEMAN

The investigations into how to diagnose and treat John's heart problem have now been passed from GWH to the consultant at Harefield Hospital.

We all wish John and Deana good progress towards better health.



## GERRY BARNETT



Gerry has a long and complicated story to tell about his eye health. Around the start of the year Gerry developed a condition in both eyes that meant he was virtually blind. His eye surgeon based in London recommended a cornea transplant on both eyes. The NHS waiting list for this treatment is two years. Gerry opted to have his right eye done first as private treatment. This has been a success and he now has good vision in one eye.

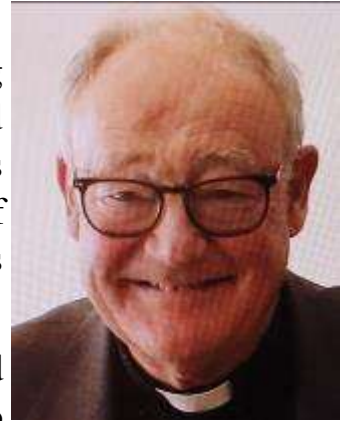
He will later need his other eye treated in similar fashion. The last few months have been extremely stressful for both Gerry and Maureen and we send them both our best wishes and the hope that we shall soon be enjoying their company again at our social events.

## Health Matters continued

### CANON HENRY PEARSON

Henry has been through a very serious situation recently following an accident he had aboard a cruise ship. He had a fall that resulted in him having a serious head injury and a fractured spine. He was taken to GWH, Swindon for treatment. He was in danger of paralysis from two fractured vertebrae and surgeons stabilised his spinal column with steel rods.

He is now at a stage in his recovery where he may need physiotherapy. As an ex-retained firefighter and also Chaplain to Dorset & Wiltshire FRS Henry is entitled to the services of the Fire Fighters Charity and he is considering applying for treatment from the FFC. We wish Henry a full and speedy recovery.



### MICK PINNEGAR

Mick is slowly but surely recovering from hip replacement surgery performed at GWH, Swindon.

Because it is not long ago that he had a heart attack Mick was not given a general anaesthetic but an epidural instead. This has had a side effect he would rather not have but he is led to believe that this is only temporary.

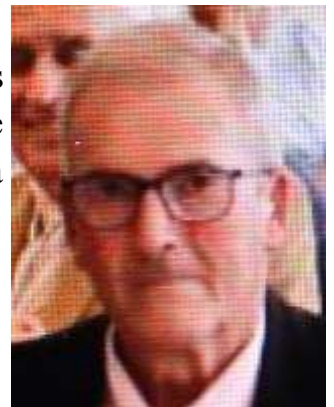
We wish Mick all the very best.



### PETE WIXEY

Two things have happened recently to bring good cheer to Pete's life. The first is that he has purchased a new car under the Motability scheme. The second is that he is learning to use a computer. His tutor is his WRFA Area Representative, Brian Watts.

We wish them both all the very best. Keep up the good work!





## AN EARLY EXPERIENCE OF



### No.3 in the series about fire ventilation by John Craig

One particular fire had a lasting impact in stirring my interest in tactical fire ventilation. It was on a summer evening in 1969. I was station officer in command of Eastern Station, Leicester. It was an old station opened in 1899 on the north east side of the city. It was at the time reported to be the fourth busiest one-pump fire station in the UK.



At about 7.00pm we were turned out to “*smoke issuing from factory*”. The address was a short distance from the house where I lived as a child so I had a good idea of what we could expect on arrival. The factory was mainly single storey covering an area about 60m x 30m. It began life as a commercial laundry in the 1930s but was post war being used to collect scrap woollens, launder them in the original industrial washers and driers and then cut them into cleaning rags. After coming out of the drier the rags were compressed into bales about 3m cube and placed on a mezzanine floor for storage.

We were the first of two pumps on the predetermined attendance and I heard over the radio the pump escape from Central Station booking mobile but the area we were in was called Belgrave and it was a fair run even for a Dennis F12.

The factory was closed and shut down for the weekend. Smoke was indeed issuing but it was grey in colour and emitting from under the eaves very lazily giving the impression of a smouldering fire being its origin. Nevertheless, I didn't want to wait for a keyholder and we forced an office window to gain entry.

While I went alone to find the seat of fire I ordered the crew to bring the hose reel in after me. The smoke layer was beneath a high ceiling and so I was not troubled by the need for breathing apparatus. I initially convinced that this was going to be a routine type of fire and one hose reel was going to be more than adequate to deal with it once we had found it.

The deeper I progressed into the building the more I began to have doubts. The Dennis F8 appliance that had brought us to the job had only 60m of tubing on the hose reel and I began to fear that it would be too short to reach the fire. I got to the steel staircase giving access to the mezzanine floor (a floor within a floor) and I could clearly see that origin of the smoke was at that level on the mezzanine floor. (continued on page 10)

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As I climbed the stairs I shouted to the crew ordering a jet by 'baby length', our words for a main jet fed by 45mm hose. I realised that we didn't have enough hose reel tubing to reach the fire.

Arriving at the mezzanine floor I saw that it was about 20m x 12m and it was filled by baled rag stacked to a height of 4m. There was a wisp of grey smoke issuing from one of the stacks of baled rag.

Even as I watched a change of fire behaviour took place. The wisp of smoke changed to a flame. A second or two later and the layer of smoke beneath the ceiling ignited into bright orange flame that rippled across the room. With a ferocity that shocked me suddenly the stacks of bales erupted into flame as the heat radiated down from the layer of flame at ceiling level played down upon them. **I had witnessed a classic FLASHOVER!** I was forced to retreat to the head of the staircase where I was pleased to meet the branchman bringing the main jet.

The water jet began the attack but fire spread was taking place at an alarming rate. I saw the lateral spread of the fire and the pump escape from Central Station had only just arrived. Their support was urgently needed and even with it I thought it probable that we would have our work cut out to save the rest of the factory which lacked fire compartmentation and sprinklers. I decided to send an assistance message making pumps up to four.

I ordered for two more jets to be got to work and set about looking where best to site them to begin the process of trying to surround the fire. **Then came a remarkable change that tipped the balance in our favour after we had been on the backfoot since the flashover.**

We heard a series of loud bangs and cracks that resembled gun shots. Immediately following these sounds the fire changed its behaviour again and lateral spread changed to an updraft. This made fire spread much easier to control. I later discovered that the improvement in our fortunes was down to the failure of the roof covering that was corrugated asbestos sheeting supported by steel trussing. **The roof had self-ventilated .**

The arrival of the supporting pumps and crews enabled another main jet to be brought to bear, making a total of four to achieve the fire stop. Divisional Officer George Alexander arrived with the additional pumps and he assumed command of the fire. With the stop message sent I toured the fireground with D.O. Alexander and it was very pleasing to see that severe fire damage was limited to only about 25% of the factory. The washing and drying machines so vital to the firm's operations were undamaged and it seemed very probable that the factory would be back in production very quickly.

I described to George Alexander the flashover I had seen take place and he showed no surprise having probably faced similar situations himself many times. I had learned of the way that in the USA, Canada and some other countries it was routine for firefighters to open up the roof of a building purposefully and if necessary very aggressively cut open a roof to fire vent. This eased the task of pump crews needing to stretch attacking hose lines into the building.



American firefighters venting a fire.  
Photo by Shutterstock

I could see that in the UK the fire service had turned its back on tactical ventilation and instead opted for sending breathing apparatus wearers into situations where a fire was still bottled up and very often ready to flashover. It wasn't hard to find recorded deaths and injuries to firefighters who were victims of the lack of fire ventilation.

*I invite other readers of 'The Branch' to offer their experiences of flashovers and fire ventilation. John Craig*



## CHANGE AT THE TOP

The Fire Fighters Charity has a new Chief Executive Officer. Her name is SHERINE WHEELER and she took over from Dr Jill Tolfrey on 31st May.

The FFC is one of the top 500 charities, in the country and so it is a very prestigious appointment within the charity world.

Sherine has an extensive background working for other charities. The last one she served was a charity called Mayhew that was concerned with animal welfare and veterinary matters. Sherine has also served the Marie Curie charity on her path to the top.



Sherine Wheeler



Dr Jill Tolfrey

Dr Jill Tolfrey leaves our charity in a much better state than she found it. She served the charity for much longer than previous CEO;s having done an outstanding ten years of service in both quality and length. Under Jill's guidance and management the FFC has developed and in particular she identified and actioned a need to cater for mental health crisis in the members of the service. This was even noticed by the Prince of Wales who made an informal visit to meet Dr Tolfrey, some of the FFC staff and clients. The WRFA wishes Jill Tolfrey all good fortune.



### **TO ACCESS THE CRISIS LINE**

**To talk to independent, professionals in complete confidence call  
0300 373 0896**

**This number is available to you at ANY TIME**

### **TO ACCESS ALL OTHER FFC SERVICES**

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**Bereavement**

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**0800 389 8820**



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# DEATHS

**Reporting with sorrow the passing of the following NON-MEMBERS of WRFA who were known to some of us.**



## KEITH WRIGHT

Keith served for many years as the Stores Officer of Wiltshire Fire Brigade and a very efficient one he was too! True to his Yorkshire county of birth he viewed every item on the shelves as having been purchased with his own money which is exactly what is needed in a good stores officer. Keith lived in Worton and he was an active and very popular member of the village. His beloved wife, Prym, predeceased him by a couple of years.

Keith died with his family around him on 4th May 2024. His funeral was held at Christ Church, Worton on 29th May 2024. Rest in Peace, Keith

## SYLVIA EASTWOOD



Sylvia was married to Malcolm Eastwood who was Chief Fire Officer of Hampshire. Malcolm and Sylvia were good friends of WRFA and Malcolm remains so. As a couple they supported many WRFA social events. Sylvia passed away in hospital with her family by her bedside. Sylvia's funeral was held at Romsey Crematorium and was attended by a very large number of both serving and retired fire service personnel.

Rest in peace, Sylvia

## MICHAEL JOHN STOTT 'MIKE'



Mike Stott died on 28th January after struggling with gradually deteriorating health for several years. Mike was a stalwart member of Westbury Fire Station and he was the officer-in-charge there for many years. His commitment and devotion to the Wiltshire Fire Brigade and to Westbury in particular was exemplary.

His funeral was held on 26th February at Semington Crematorium and the high numbers of mourners were a tribute to him.

Rest in peace. Mike



# THE LAST SALUTE



## Kenneth Andrew Griffin

12th August 1950 - 26th March 2024

Ken was born on 12th August 1950 to Joan and Tim Griffin. He was the fourth of five children, following Michael, Gerald and Derek and preceding Tony. As a young boy, Ken attended Frogwell School, Chippenham and Chippenham Boys Secondary Modern.



At the age of 13 Ken joined the **Army Cadets** and unbeknown to him at that time, this would become a major part of his life, maintaining a role within the Cadets right through into his 50s, He played the big bass drum in the Cadet band, and was ultimately promoted to the rank of Major. This was something of which he was incredibly proud.

When Ken left School he initially worked for a telephone company in **Westinghouse, completing an apprenticeship there.**

However, it was when he joined **Wiltshire Fire Brigade in 1974**, initially based at Swindon, that he really found his niche.

After several years he transferred to Chippenham, remaining at that station until his retirement as an operational firefighter in 2004.

Ken still had the desire to serve the community and became a Safe & Well Officer based at Chippenham.

Due to the onset of poor health Ken retired and at that point would have been working for the Fire Service for 47 years.

During his career Ken would occasionally attend the same incidents with two of his brothers, Tony, who was in the Police and Derek who was with the Ambulance Service.

During his career Ken gained many skills and attributes that he would pass on to the younger developers and budding potential crew managers (Leading Fireman in 'old money'), and guidance in his role as Station Representative of the Fire Brigades Union.

Ken's service to the community through the Fire Service or the Army Cadets was second to none. His caring, kind and considerate nature touched everyone who met him and particularly those who worked with him.

Ken's health continued to decline and a short time after he was admitted to hospital he died with his family around him.

Ken's **funeral** was held at Semington Crematorium on 15th April. The funeral cortege started at Chippenham Fire Station with many firefighters forming a guard of honour, in full fire kit, as the hearse entered the fire station yard.

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It was fitting that Ken's final turnout was from Chippenham Fire Station with the turnout system sounding, the hearse slowly passing through the guard of honour, followed by Chippenham's second appliance.

On arrival at the crematorium an appliance from Trowbridge joined and its crew formed a guard of honour through which family and friends filed into the service. Six fire fighters from Chippenham were pall bearers carrying Ken on his final journey.

The crematorium was full of family, friends and work colleagues, both those still serving and those who have retired. The very large number of mourners was testimony to how well Ken was liked and admired by those who knew him and worked with him. He will be sorely missed.

Rest in peace, Ken



## **Lesley Betts**

**24th April 1950 - 9th June 2024**

Lesley has been a valued member of WRFA since she joined us on the death of her beloved husband Jim in March 2016. The news of Lesley's death after a short illness on 9th June, came with much shock and sorrow.

Lesley was born on 24th April 1950 and she met Jim at a Wiltshire Fire Brigade dance. They married on 15th February 1975 and set up home eventually in Chilmark. They had two children, Jayne and Rachel. Jayne had three children and two step children. Rachel has two children. The children and grandchildren were Lesley's absolute world and her loss is a huge blow to the whole family, particularly as it comes so soon after Jayne's death in July last year.

Before she retired Lesley was the manager of the health food shop in Salisbury called 'Well Natural'.

In her leisure time Lesley enjoyed reading, gardening but most of all spending time with her family.

The family felt that they could not bear the emotional strain of a formal funeral service and so they opted not to have one.

A Just Giving page has been set up in memory of Lesley and the proceeds from it will go to Dorothy House who did a marvellous job caring for Jayne during her last illness.

Rest in peace, Lesley

### **DISCLAIMER**

**THE BRANCH is published by THE WILTSHIRE RETIRED FIREFIGHTERS ASSOCIATION.**

**Views, opinions and comments should not be attributed to Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service**

**Contact with the editor, John Craig, may be made via the contact form on [www.wrfa.org.uk](http://www.wrfa.org.uk)**