

## **A LONG HOT SUMMER**

### **A report on the fires in Gloucestershire during the summer of 1983 with emphasis on R.A. Lister, Dursley and Safeways Supermarket, Gloucester**

Most of us will long remember the glorious summer of 1983, the Gloucestershire Fire & Rescue Service with more reason than most. In the space of eight weeks from the middle of July, the Brigade dealt with nine fires requiring the attendance of five pumps or more.

The most costly and spectacular incident occurred at Dursley on the afternoon of July 27<sup>th</sup>, the handful of Society members who visited the works Fire Station of R.A. Lister & Co. Ltd. (world famous manufacturers of diesel engines and pumps) in June could not have imagined the devastation that was to take place on the site a few weeks later. Cheltenham Fire Control received a call to the works at 12:49, Dursley's two retained pumps (WrT and WrL) were mobilised and with only a short distance to travel were in attendance at 12:55. The fire had been discovered at "about 1240" by a foreman in a workshop on the ground floor of the largely deserted two-storey office block - it was not only the lunch hour but also the Company's annual two-week holiday with only office and maintenance staff on site. Attempts to extinguish a fierce blaze with hand appliances were foiled by large quantities of choking smoke, the works Brigade were alerted and soon in action outside the building with a jet from their ex-Oxfordshire Karrier WrT. On arrival of the first County appliance, it was clear that a severe fire was taking hold in the centre of the seventy-year old building with increasing quantities of smoke breaking forth. The Sub-Officer in charge of Dursley's WrT immediately made pumps 4 and launched an attack with BA and two jets to locate and extinguish the seat of the fire. Rapid spread of fire within the building, due both to its construction and contents, and considerable smoke logging frustrated this internal attack and before the source could be found flames were through to the first floor and into the predominantly timber roof. On a very hot day with a stiff northerly breeze blowing along the line of the 150m x 30m office block which contained no effective fire separation, fire-fighting was going to be exhausting and difficult. The initial attendance was quickly overwhelmed as flames raced through the close-boarded roof both with and against the wind. While senior officers sped to the scene, pumps were successively increased to ten and a hydraulic platform requested, the Gloucester Control Unit and extra pump crew were sent on automatically. Make-ups of this size take some time to bring together in a rural area and the fire situation continued to deteriorate faster than assistance could be mustered. It was soon decided that there was no way the office block could be saved and that available resources should be concentrated on protecting unaffected, vulnerable areas of the site and making a fire stop towards the southern end of the office block. To this end, jets at ground and first floor levels and the HP were re-positioned to the south and the quickly advancing flames awaited. The fire duly arrived at the stop within a few minutes but the tactic proved successful and fire was prevented from making serious inroads into production areas.

As the fifty sweating firemen at last began to gain the initiative, fate took a cruel turn. Opposite the blazing office block stood another old four-storey building, latterly only used for storage purposes and known locally as the Churn Works. Again there was a considerable proportion of timber in its construction and contents, the floor soaked in teak oil during the years of use for the manufacture of garden furniture. Protecting jets were in use on the side of the building directly opposite the fire when about 90 minutes after the first call, fire took hold in the roof on the blind side. Pumps were made twelve to deal with this new crisis but within minutes the building and adjoining sheds were ablaze from end to end. These buildings were due for demolition and so their loss may be regarded as fortuitous but the threat to adjacent production areas (and the works Fire Station which escaped the inferno) was extremely serious and another (the last) assistance message was passed to Control - "Make pumps 15, TL or HP required". Of the three

extra pumps requested, two were provided by Avon Fire Brigade joining two already on the fireground as was the TL (from Avonmouth), Gloucestershire's second HP being unavailable.

Two hours after the call the incident was by no means under control and as if to underline the still serious state of affairs, at about 15:00 the whole town was rocked by the explosion of an oxygen cylinder. Shortly after this, CFO Wilson arrived to take command of the incident, there were now 22 appliances on the fireground: R.A. Lister WrT and L4P, Gloucestershire 13 pumps, HP, CU; Avon 4 pumps, TL. Including cover to key stations 18 of Gloucestershire's 33 major pumps were mobilised as a result of this incident (not including reliefs) and the four pumps contributed by Avon F.B. all came from ex-Gloucestershire stations transferred in 1974.

A determined effort to assert control was now mounted by the eighty firemen present using no less than thirty jets together with HP and TL monitors. Fortunately the site has several open water points as well as hydrants, nevertheless the water consumption, probably well in excess of twenty tons per minute caused an alarming decrease in mains pressure in the town which the Water Authority were unable to remedy. Within the hour the toiling firemen had gained the upper hand, at 16:11 the CFO was able to send the "Fire surrounded" message followed at 16:38 by the detailed Stop "Range of buildings of 1, 2, 3 and 4 floors 300m x 80m used as engineering works; 50% of buildings and contents severely damaged by fire; 30 jets, 1 HP and 1 TL monitor, 6 BA; all appliances detained some considerable time". The first appliances were released at about 17:30 and gradually the attendance reduced to five pumps (plus HP and CU) at which level it was maintained throughout the night with reliefs provided as necessary, these included the WrT from Tewkesbury at the other end of the county. At 18:20 on the 28<sup>th</sup> the last pump at the scene returned to Gloucester, although both Dursley crews were recalled to the fireground on the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup> to deal with troublesome hot spots.

The scene on the evening of the fire was one of unbelievable destruction; the building losses alone are estimated to be in excess of £9 million. The dangerous skeleton of the Churn Works was demolished within a few days and clearance of the remains of the office block is expected to take place soon. Fortunately all workers were safely evacuated although five firemen suffered minor injuries in the battle. The press claimed that it was a blessing that the incident occurred during the company holiday with few workers on site, it does seem likely however that this led directly to the fire remaining undiscovered for several critical minutes and contributed to rapid spread of fire as the temperature in the deserted workshops, due to lack of ventilation, was far higher than would normally be tolerated. Intensive investigations into the cause of the fire were carried out in the weeks following the incident, results have not so far been made public although it has been reported in the press that the CFO is "80% certain" that the primary cause was an electrical fault. Although the office block was probably doomed before the arrival of the first County appliance, determined firefighting did prevent any serious disruption of production areas and the factory resumed normal working at the end of the holiday. Office workers were less fortunate and many irreplaceable documents were destroyed, wisely most of the important records had been duplicated on computer files which were safely removed from danger.

The Brigade was in action at another serious fire just a week after the Dursley blaze, this time the scene was a modern Supermarket in a suburb of Gloucester. At 19:09 on August 4<sup>th</sup>, a public call was received at Cheltenham Control stating that "packing cases were on fire" at the rear of the Safeways Food Store on the Glenville Estate, Gloucester. The normal PDA for rubbish fires of one pump was despatched from Station 5, but over the next few minutes further calls were received suggesting a more serious incident, it was confirmed as a full fire call and a second Gloucester pump sent on. The first machine booked in attendance at 19:16 and confronted with a developing fire situation and extensive smoke logging, the Sub-Officer in charge immediately

made pumps 3. BA teams were rigged to locate the seat of the fire, this operation proved to be difficult and a further assistance message "Make pumps 4, HP required" was sent by the Station officer now in attendance, some minutes later a further two pumps were requested. At 19:42 an informative message "Single-storey building 40m x 40m; 30% of ground floor and roof well alight; 5 jets, 4 BA in use", was transmitted. Within the next few minutes a DO and the Chief Officer booked in attendance and at 19:54 the final assistance message "Make pumps 8" was sent. Then began a determined attack in which the seat of the fire was located under extremely difficult conditions and the assault pressed home. At 21:04 CFO Wilson passed the Stop message, "Single-storey building 40m x 40m used as Supermarket; 25% building; 50% roof, 75% contents severely damaged by fire; 8 jets, 2 hose reels, 8 BA". Shortly afterwards the presence of the Salvage Tender based at Cheltenham was requested to assist in clearing-up operations. Pumps had been reduced to four by 22:00 and by 02:00 only one (WrL Gloucester) remained on the fireground.

The final appliance left the scene at 06:22 although regular inspections were carried out throughout the day. The cause of the fire was clearly due to the ignition of rubbish stored near to the building, this fire quickly spread to the roof canopy.

## Timeline

Brief details of the major incidents in this period are as follows:

- July 15<sup>th</sup> Hatherop, Nr. Fairford; 38 acre field of barley; Five pumps including one Oxon and one Wilts. An unfortunate change in wind direction led to the destruction of Fairford's WrT.
- July 17<sup>th</sup> Nether Lyppiatt, Nr. Stroud; Three-storey cottage, roof fire; Make pumps 6 for water relay, Salvage Tender required.
- July 21<sup>st</sup> Aldworth, Nr. Northleach; Two dutch barns; Six pumps including one Oxon.
- July 23<sup>rd</sup> T.C. savage & Son Ltd., Ebley, Nr. Stroud; Two-storey building in timber yard; Six pumps. Ignition believed due to lightning strike.
- July 27<sup>th</sup> R.A. Lister & Co. Ltd., Dursley; Fifteen Pumps, HP, TL; Details above.
- August 4<sup>th</sup> Safeways Food Store, Glenville Estate, Gloucester; Eight pumps, HP, ST; Details above.
- August 19<sup>th</sup> Tutshill, Nr. Lydney; Stables and barns; Make pumps 10 for water relay; Six jets, five hose reels.  
Attendance: WrL, WrT Lydney; 2 x WrL Chepstow (Gwent); WrL, WrT. L4P Coleford; WrL, WrT Cinderford; WrL Newent; WrL, WrT, CU Gloucester. WrT Painswick was mobilised to standby at Coleford and formed part of 01:00 relief together with WrT Dursley, WrL Wotton-Under-Edge and WrL Caldicot (Gwent). 09:00 relief WrL Dursley and WrL (retd) Stroud.
- August 29<sup>th</sup> Cambridge, Nr. Dursley; Barn: Six pumps for water relay.
- September 2<sup>nd</sup> St. Briavels, Nr. Coleford; Barn; Six pumps for water relay. One notable feature is that the WrT based at Painswick, a station under threat of closure a few years ago, was involved in four of these incidents and performed standby or relief duties at another two.

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## **R.A. Lister & Co. Ltd., Dursley August 27<sup>th</sup> 1983**

### **MOBILISATION SUMMARY**

<b>Event</b>	<b>Unit</b>
First call (12:49)	210, 310
Make Pumps 4	309, 307
Make Pumps 5 for BA	205, 905 (CU), 407 HP reqd. 805
Make Pumps 8	222, 208, 308
Make Pumps 10	Standbys 212 to Station 7, 206 to Station 10 A61, 206 X RT Standby A72 to Station 10
Make Pumps 11 for GU	A72 X RT Standbys 212 from Station 7 to Station 10 421 to Station 7
Make Pumps 12	212 X RT, 421 X RT
Make Pumps 15, HP or TL reqd.	A52, A71, 321, A35 (TL)
Standbys	305 to Station 7, 312 to Station 5, 405 to Station 10, 220 to Station 21, Retained crew (412) at Station 12 CIU (907) mobile to incident at 16:14 but only to convey reserve fuel.

### **Reliefs**

at 18:00	Wholetime crews Stations 5 and 7 changed. Pumps in attendance at 19:30 - 310, 309, 307, 205, 206
at 21:30	405 (to allow changeover of Painswick crew)
at 23:00	214, 412 (to standby at Station 7 00:26) Fresh crew Station 6
at 00:00	Fresh crew Station 10
at 06:00	Fresh crew Station 10 Attendance now 310, 307, 205; 206 and 214 making up. Final appliances released 307 (12:57), 310 (16:00) and 305 (changed with 205 – 18:20)

## **Safeways Food Store, Abbeydale, Gloucester, August 4<sup>th</sup> 1983**

### **MOBILISATION SUMMARY**

First Call	305, Further calls 205
Make Pumps 3	212
Make Pumps 4, HP reqd.	307, 805 Standby 206 to Station 5
Make Pumps 6	405, 312 (as CU), 206 X RT
Make Pumps 8	407, 412 Standbys 204 to Station 5 208 to Station 7 214 to Station 12
ST required	912

My thanks to the Chief Officer and staff of the Gloucestershire Fire & Rescue Service for providing information on which this report is based.

T .W. Larkham - September 17<sup>th</sup> 1983

## **GLOSSARY**

BA	Breathing Apparatus
CFO	Chief Fire Officer
CIU	Chemical Incident Unit
CU	Control Unit
DO	Divisional Officer
HP	Hydraulic Platform
L4P	Four Wheel Drive Vehicle with Pump
Pump	Fire Appliance
ST	Salvage Tender
TL	Turntable Ladder
WrL	Water Tender Ladder
WrT	Water Tender

## **FIRE STATION LOCATIONS**

Station 5	Gloucester
Station 6	Painswick
Station 7	Stroud
Station 10	Dursley
Station 12	Cheltenham
Station 21	Cirencester