

The Sark Fire & Rescue Service

Sark is a small island that prohibits motor cars and other motorised forms of transport except tractors. So, when it wanted to create a fire service it was not a simple case of purchasing a fire appliance.

In 1958 the island purchased two old bus chassis and, thanks to the engineering expertise of Mr Malcolm Robson, they were each altered to hold galvanised tanks, of 2,700 litres capacity, and side boxes to stow equipment, along with a lightweight pump. A towing hitch welded onto the chassis enabled its use by tractors.

Two serious fires in 1957 had prompted this. The first fire of that year was on 6th June, when the Pavillion (a pub near the Vaurocque) burnt down. The second was at Stocks Hotel on 18th October when the annexe burnt down with the loss of one life.



Twelve men were recruited and trained in fire fighting techniques under Mr Freddy Hawkins, and by late 1958 the volunteer Sark Fire Service was born. Callout procedure was simple: the fire was reported to the telephone exchange (Sark had the old windup telephones that connected directly to the exchange) and the two ladies that ran it

telephoned the volunteers individually. To make sure that everyone knew there was a fire the siren was sounded. When the exchange was automated in 1979 all emergency calls were transferred to the Sark Lighthouse as it was manned 24 hours a day until it too became automated in 1994.

The first person to arrive hitched up the tender to their tractor and, with men hanging off the tender festooned with buckets, ladders and hoses, and ringing a hand bell, they would dash to the scene.

A message left on the board outside the fire tender shed would tell latecomers where the fire was. This also (unfortunately) informed the general public and it was not uncommon to have everyone else turn up.



The basic design of the appliances has not changed since 1958, although now the equipment is stowed on board in closed lockers. Each appliance has a Hale HP200 pump which gives a maximum flow of 852 l/pm, along with one hose reel, eight lengths of 45 mm hose, one length of 75 mm hose, various branches and hand tools. The first appliance carries, in addition, a Tetra radio Repeater/Gateway which links 4 handhelds with Guernsey

Fire Control, spare BA cylinders (for the six Scott ProPak Breathing Apparatus sets) and a range of First Aid equipment, including defibrillator and oxygen.

Due to the fact that there is no fire hydrant system on Sark there is a purpose built hose-layer which can access water from swimming pools and underground tanks located around the island. It carries 21 lengths of 75 mm x 23 meters of hose which is “flaked” in five compartments with pump capable of 1,575 l/pm. The hose-layer also carries lighting equipment and other equipment suitable for Sark (horses for courses!).



At present there are 18 personnel on call 24 hours a day. The fire service has monthly drills and quarterly training in advanced life support, spinal injuries and first aid.

A change from the earlier days is the callout procedure: fires and other emergencies are reported by dialing 999 (as in the UK) which immediately connects with the Guernsey Emergency Services. Personnel are alerted by “pager” (pocket alerters) and the first one to the Fire Station picks up the telephone to Guernsey Fire & Rescue Service for details of the incident.



The fire-fighters travel to and from the scene on the fire appliances in their full fire-fighting kit, one of the rare times that a tractor is legally allowed to take more than one passenger. The response time is around five minutes.

Incidents are varied - house/chimney fires, furze fires, ambulance assist, cliff rescue, boats taking in water (the powerful pumps are useful here), searches for missing persons, chemical “pick ups” and occasionally the rescuing of animals.

In October 2001 the Fire Service was called out to attend an aircraft crash - the second in Sark’s history, the first one was during the Second World War when a Lancaster mistakenly crash-landed in the field opposite the Seigneurie farm in 1942. The aircraft was a single-engined Europa twinseater Tri Gear, en route from Jersey to Exeter when it developed total engine failure and crash-landed in a field on Little Sark. Thankfully both pilots walked away with no injuries.



On an island with a resident population of approximately 600, which doubles in size during the summer months, the Sark Fire & Rescue Service has an interesting role to play on this unique island.

From a simple but effective beginning in 1958 the Service has grown and matured into a very professional and competent fire-fighting and emergency team that Sark can be proud of, and in which the visitors can be confident.

www.sarkfireservice.org.gg

In 1892 the Beauregard tenement house was gutted by fire, and later rebuilt as a hotel.

There was also another fire that year, at the Moinerie in May – the report below from the Guernsey Star gives an idea of the situation regarding fire-fighting at the time.

The Guernsey Star

May 5th, 1892

INCENDIAISM IN SARK

Between 11 and 12 o'clock on Saturday evening, a bright glare was observed on Sark, and opinions were divided as to its cause. Some imagined that the fire was caused by furze, others, and rightly too, put it down to a house on fire.

On Monday news reached Guernsey that the conflagration had occurred at the Monneries, at no great distance from the Seigneurie, and that the dwelling which was inhabited by Mr. Abraham Baker, was on Saturday destroyed by fire.

The origin of the fire is unknown. **As no fire engine has yet been introduced into the island, and the extinction of a fire such as that alluded to rests solely upon the promptness exhibited by the inmates assisted by neighbours and a plentiful supply of water, a house on fire is doomed should there be delay in obtaining requisite aid.** In lieu of explanation respecting the origin of the fire causing the destruction of Mr. Baker's residence, a conjecture has been formed that it is the act of an incendiary- so we are informed.

The property destroyed consisted of a dwelling- house, with its contents, and a barn containing a number of agricultural implements etc. Evidently the act was one of revenge. This was probably due to the fact that sometime ago 40 landowners of the island met and passed a law appointing a "close time" for rabbits, and the poorer inhabitants are up in arms about it, and not unreasonably, for though the owners can *shoot* the rabbits themselves during this season, anyone else found with one in his possession, will be prosecuted. The result of this has been that the Seneschal has had a notice posted on his gate threatening his life, but whether the conflagration alluded to above have any connection with this it is at present impossible to say.

The following accounts of two serious fires in 1957 brought home the need for an organised Fire Service on Sark, if only to prevent fatalities.

(Note: Liberation Day wasn't celebrated on the 10th May as it is now...)

Guernsey Evening Post

Thursday, June 6, 1957

OCCUPANTS JUMPED TO SAFETY

SARK PAVILION DESTROYED BY TERRIFIC FIRE

THE PAVILION IN SARK, OWNED BY MR AND MRS E. S. FALLE WAS BURNED TO THE GROUND DURING THE EARLY HOURS OF THIS MORNING.

There were four people in the building and no-one was hurt. They jumped through a window to safety after their only retreat was cut off.

With Mr and Mrs Falle at the Pavilion was their daughter, Miss Regina Falle, and an assistant, Miss Sybil Riches.

They had prepared for a large influx of visitors today for the Liberation celebrations. All was in order when they went to bed. At about 1.45 this morning Miss Falle telephoned Mr Dave Adams, the Vingtenier, to say the Pavilion was on fire.

NO FIRE BRIGADE

The fire gained a rapid hold on the wooden building which was built 65 years ago. The occupants, who were trapped, took the only means of escape - through a first floor window which was some 15 feet from the ground.

Helpers started to come from all directions. People from Stock's Hotel brought fire extinguishers which were practically useless.

As Sark has no fire brigade, islanders helped with buckets of water. This, too, had little effect.

Nothing now remains of the building except two chimney stacks.

TREATED FOR SHOCK

Only an out-house was saved from the flames, islanders having prevented the spread of the fire to this building.

All four occupants of the Pavilion were taken to the nearby Beaugard, where they were seen by Dr F. MacLagan, the island's medical officer of health. Mr and Mrs Falle were treated for severe shock and Miss Riches for bruising sustained through jumping through the window.

It is thought that some of the effects of the Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes were lost in the blaze as this was their headquarters.

This is the biggest fire since the Hotel Bel Air was burned down during the Occupation.

Guernsey Evening Post

Friday, October 18, 1957

HOTEL FIRE DRAMA IN SARK

MANAGERESS DIES AFTER RESCUE BID

THE ANNEXE OF STOCK'S HOTEL, SARK, WAS BADLY DAMAGED BY FIRE EARLY THIS MORNING AND ITS MANAGERESS, MISS ABAGAIL QUIGLEY, LOST HER LIFE AFTER SHE HAD GONE BACK INTO THE BLAZING BUILDING TO RESCUE A DOG.

SARK HAS NO FIRE BRIGADE BUT VALIANT EFFORTS ARE BEING MADE TO SAVE THIS FINE OLD GRANITE BUILDING BY A BAND OF HELPERS.

At 7.30 this morning Mrs Sheila Taylor awoke in the annexe (where all the family were sleeping) to find the floor hot and the woodwork blistered. Discovering that the place was on fire she gave the alarm.

Her mother, Mrs E. Falle, Mr Taylor and Miss Quigley escaped, but when Miss Quigley discovered that one of the dogs was still in the blazing house she went back for it. Ultimately she was rescued and carried down a ladder to the main building (separated from the annexe by a few yards) where Dr. F. MacLagan attended her.

TRAGIC END

At 10.30, after artificial respiration had been tried, Miss Quigley failed to respond. The dog she attempted to save has not been found.

Thousands of gallons of water were used in extinguishing the fire (the cause of which is unknown) by people who were quickly on the scene.

While some effects were salvaged much remains in the building.

Mr J. Rabey (engaged in Sark's new National Provincial Bank) did good work on the annexe roof. This old house was once the residence of the late Mr. Thomas Godfray.

Although hoses are being played on the roof the fire is gaining.

Mr H. P. Bell is there with a mobile pump and Mr Tony Adams (who discovered Miss Quigley in a bathroom and raised the alarm) is working hard, after collapsing from the heat.

About 40 people are fighting the fire but it is feared that the building is doomed.