

## CHAPTER 8

### SUMMERLAND SURVIVORS TELL THEIR STORIES

#### 8.1 Questionnaire Surveys

Solomon and Thompson (1995) conducted a psychological survey of Summerland survivors in 1991. Their study also looked at survivors of the Zeebrugge ferry (1987) and Hillsborough (1989) football ground disasters. Questionnaires were sent to 67 survivors of the Summerland fire disaster following advertisements on radio and in newspapers. Twenty-four questionnaires were returned, which is a response rate of 36%. In addition, questionnaires were sent to 16 people (seven responded) named by the *Summerland Fire Commission* as being responsible in varying degrees for the disaster. This enabled a comparison to be drawn between the disaster's effects on the named individuals and the members of the public present at Summerland on the evening of the fire. As the questionnaire sought to gauge the survivors' current feelings, respondents were specifically instructed to disregard all previous feelings about the disaster and answer all the questions in the context of their feelings over the seven days before the arrival of the questionnaire. Each survivor was asked to answer not at all, rarely, sometimes or often to the following questions.

1. I thought about it when I did not mean to.
2. I had waves of strong feelings about it.
3. I had dreams about it.
4. I tried not to think about it.
5. Any reminder brought back feelings about it.
6. My feelings about it were numb.

Each survivor was then asked questions about their general health, including whether they had lost sleep over worry or had been feeling nervous and anxious all the time. The questionnaire concluded by probing for suicidal thoughts.

**Table 8.1**

**Results of questionnaire surveys of Summerland survivors conducted in 1991. The figures for Zeebrugge and Hillsborough are shown for comparison purposes**

**(Source: adapted from Solomon and Thompson, 1995, page 202)**

	Summerland (1973)	Zeebrugge (1987)	Hillsborough (1989)
Self-blame (%)	7	3	13
Blame chance (%)	48	39	51
Blame a specific named individual or organisation (%)	45	58	36
Felt anger to specific named individual or organisation (%)	81	77	58
Felt anger to third parties (e.g. the press, conduct of inquests, legal profession) (%)	19	23	42
% feeling that justice was not done	17	84	70
Number of people responding to the survey	31	65	59

From their answers to the general health questionnaire, 33% of the Summerland sample might be considered a ‘case’ at clinical interview: that is, they are experiencing psychological and/or mental health problems. This clearly demonstrates that a sizeable proportion of the persons affected by the Summerland disaster were still experiencing disturbing memories 18 years after

the fire. These flashbacks can affect a person's present-day behaviour, with some Summerland survivors still having severe phobias of busy places. For instance, Dr Sam Webb (personal communication), a Lecturer in Architecture, was travelling on the train from London to Canterbury in the early 1980s when a young woman asked him whether it was the train for Margate. The woman told Dr Webb that she was a trainee nurse from Liverpool, who had survived the Summerland fire. She told him how she would not go to the cinema, the theatre or a nightclub because of what happened that night. She had constant nightmares, and decided to become a nurse because of the fire.

Like the Zeebrugge and Hillsborough survivors, few of the Summerland survivors (7%) blamed themselves for the disaster. Nearly one-half of the Summerland sample (48%) blamed chance, that is, being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is a higher percentage than the Zeebrugge respondents, with the Zeebrugge victims apportioning blame largely to the operators of the ferry. Nonetheless, there are high levels of blame (45%) and anger (81%) amongst the Summerland survivors towards specific individuals and organisations 18 years after the disaster. The most popular third party target of anger was the media, although this was much less apparent for Summerland and Zeebrugge than Hillsborough. Respondents also expressed anger towards the legal procedures following the three disasters, in particular body identification procedures, the conduct and findings of inquests and the conclusions of public inquiries. Considering the three disasters together, women experienced much higher levels of psychological distress than men.

Clear differences are evident in the responses of the named individuals and the holidaymakers in terms of how they allocate blame for the Summerland disaster. Ultimately, the Summerland fire disaster was caused by three teenage boys smoking in the disused kiosk outside the building. Yet, most of the holidaymakers do *not* blame the boys for their traumatic experiences, believing that they merely triggered a chain of events that exposed other people's mistakes. "They were only children", said Mrs Elaine Anderson (personal communication), whose mother and father died in the fire. However, the named individuals were more likely to apportion blame in the direction of the three boys than the holidaymakers were. This is hardly surprising, given that it is human nature to try to divert the blame on to other people. Given that some of the named individuals were not even inside Summerland at the time of the fire, it is logical that their 'emotional reactions' were far less intense than the holidaymakers' reactions. They were also less worried about being affected by another disaster.

## 8.2 Survivors' stories

### *The Bar Manageress*

Mrs Pauline Wynne-Smythe (30) was the Manageress of the Marquee Showbar on the night of the fire. Mrs Wynne-Smythe had received fire safety training, and her quick actions in directing customers to the NE Service Staircase were praised by the Commission. She estimated that there were around 200-250 people in the Showbar at the time of the fire (*Isle of Man Courier*, 10th August 1973). Mrs Wynne-Smythe knew something was wrong when Mr Harding, Summerland's Fire Officer, came into the Bar with a fire extinguisher shouting 'evacuate'. She opened the glass fire doors and "eventually with a lot of pushing

and shoving” got people down the staircase. Mrs Wynne-Smythe was selfless in her actions because she ensured that the Bar had been evacuated before making good her own escape: “I suppose you could liken it to a captain not wanting to leave a sinking ship. He is always the last one off”, she commented. Mrs Wynne-Smythe recalled (quoted in Leverton, 1998, page 10).

“People wanted to go back to their table because they had left their change. Somebody else wanted to go back for their coat...I tried to go out the back way and couldn’t because the flames were all down the back, so I went back into the main room and went to another corridor, but I couldn’t get past. I think I must have passed out at this stage.”

She eventually managed to find the staircase and lifted her dress over her face to protect herself from the fumes that “were so thick it was hard to breathe”. The stairwell was in complete darkness; one person literally followed the person in front of them. Like many other survivors, Mrs Wynne-Smythe remembers seeing dead bodies on the stairs.

She drove to the hospital with another man. “I couldn’t see anything. I thought it was the [car] windscreen, but it wasn’t, it was my eyes”, she said (quoted in Leverton, 1998, page 10). Mrs Wynne-Smythe was detained in hospital for five days having sustained damaged retinas; she was blind for four days. The enormity of the tragedy did not hit her until about two weeks after the fire:

“We were walking along the front and my legs started shaking and I just couldn’t keep still and I said ‘I am going to find the doctors’...Five minutes later we were there, and it was delayed shock.”

The doctor prescribed tranquillisers, which Mrs Wynne-Smythe took for three years after the fire. Speaking to the *Isle of Man Examiner* in 1998, she said:

“I have never forgotten it. People have lived with this for 25 years...I couldn’t have got through it without my family [Mr and Mrs Wynne Smythe have four sons], particularly waking up in the night. The nightmares were terrible. We got no help. You had to get on with it. You got there eventually...I was always a fatalist to a certain extent, but I am more so after that night because when I thought of the people who had gone before me, it just wasn’t my turn to go that night. You can do certain things to map out your life but at the end of the day I believe what is for you, you will get.”

#### *The nine-year-old girl*

As a nine-year-old girl, Elaine Anderson (née Stevenson) went on holiday to the Isle of Man with her father Alexander (35) – who was always known to family members as Alex, mother Jean (33) (who was always known as Sheena) and brother Douglas (11). Mr Stevenson was an engineering worker at a ball-bearing plant at Drybridge in Ayrshire, whilst Sheena worked part-time at a newsagent’s shop near their home in Cameron Drive on the New Farm Loch district of Kilmarnock. The family arrived in Douglas on the Saturday before the

fire and booked into Mrs Joyce's boarding house on Stanley View in Douglas for one week. As the family had enjoyed their holiday so much, they had planned to stay for an extra five days in a flat. It was Elaine's second visit to the Isle of Man. The family's first visit was in the late 1960s when Elaine was three-years-old. The events of that week were to change Elaine's life forever because both her mother and father were killed in the Summerland fire.



**Alex and Sheena Stevenson's wedding day in Kilmarnock on  
17th October 1959**

The whole family went to the pictures on the day of the fire. Thursday, August 2nd, 1973 was a drizzly evening and the family decided to go to Summerland in order to escape the inclement weather. The Stevensons left their boarding house between 6.30-6.45pm. They caught a horse tram along the promenade and arrived at Summerland at around 7pm. Elaine's story demonstrates graphically how the Stevensons were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The family had been in Douglas for six days, but they entered Summerland for the first time just one hour before the fire entered the building from the void in the wall. After entering Summerland, Elaine's brother Douglas was allowed to go downstairs to play on the Astroglide by himself. This was understandable because Douglas was two years older than his sister. Elaine and her parents initially went up to the Marquee Showbar level looking without success for a cloakroom for the children's anoraks. By this time, Elaine said she also wanted to go rollerskating. Elaine's parents were reluctant at first to let her go down to the funfair area by herself. At the boarding house, the Stevensons shared a dining table with Mr and Mrs Lynch and their two children Michael (15) and Caroline (12) from East Kilbride near Glasgow. When the Stevensons met Caroline in Summerland, they were reassured that Caroline would look after Elaine and so allowed the two girls to go rollerskating. Elaine and Douglas were never to see their parents again. Elaine believes that her parents went for a drink after they parted.





**Elaine and Douglas enjoy themselves on their first holiday to the Isle of Man in the late 1960s**

Caroline was alerted to the fire on the upper floors by her brother and was told to leave the building. She was just about to leave Summerland when she remembered Elaine and returned for her. This action proved crucial in ensuring Elaine's safety. Elaine said that she was initially reluctant to leave the building because she feared that her parents might tell her off for wandering off without

their permission. Douglas was still playing on the Astroglide at 8pm. He was pulled off the ride by a man and managed to get out of the building safely. Elaine told *The Kilmarnock Standard* (10th August, 1973) that “big fiery balls” of plastic were dropping everywhere as people tried to escape from the building.

Unfortunately, Elaine’s parents were still on one of the upper floors when the fire burst through into the Amusement Arcade. They both died as a result of asphyxia due to carbon monoxide poisoning and severe burning. The police surgeon said there was insufficient evidence to determine who died first. To this day, Elaine does not know where her parents’ bodies were found in Summerland. More frustratingly, Elaine will never know what happened to her parents in their dying moments because there were no other members of the family or friends with them at the time that survived the fire.



**Elaine and Douglas with their father  
on the Isle of Man in the late 1960s**

With the awful realisation that both her parents had perished in the fire, Elaine and her brother were looked after by the Lynch family and Mrs Joyce. They contacted Elaine's family in Scotland to inform them of the situation. David Lane, Elaine's uncle (his wife Betty was the sister of Elaine's father), told the Coroner's Office:

“Mrs Lynch and her husband were a source of great comfort to the children and cannot be thanked enough for all their efforts, although Mrs Joyce, the owner of the boarding house, rendered every possible aid and comfort to the children.”

To assist with the identification process, the Manx authorities requested details of the dead couple's medical history, as well as the jewellery that Mrs Stevenson was likely to have been wearing at the time of the fire. As Elaine's parents were among two of the later bodies to be identified, it is much more likely that identification was by dental records than by visual inspection by relatives. Elaine believes that she was told by a woman who worked at the Coroner's Officer that her parents had indeed been identified by dental records. However, there is no mention of dental records in the post-mortem report of her parents' deaths. Elaine strongly believes that her uncle (David Lane) did not identify the bodies. The deaths of Mr and Mrs Stevenson were not confirmed until the evening of Sunday, August 5th because the police originally thought that a couple from Greenock with the same surname had perished in the fire (chapter 1). Positive identification was required before the Manx authorities would allow the bodies to be flown home to Scotland for burial; at one stage, it was even feared that the Manx Government would insist on a mass burial of all of the victims of the fire on the Island. By this time, Elaine's grandfather (Mr John

Nichol, aged 70), also from Kilmarnock, had arrived in Douglas and the children returned with him to Scotland on Saturday, August 4th. Elaine and Douglas never went to the funerals of their mother and father on 13th August 1973. The children were never asked whether they would like to attend and Elaine remembers spending the day in Girvan, a town on the Ayrshire coast. Elaine's parents were buried in Kilmarnock cemetery. After the fire, Elaine and her brother went to live with David Lane and his wife Betty. Whilst Elaine got along reasonably well with David, she did not like Betty and how she prevented Elaine's grandparents from visiting her. Elaine left the Lane's house when she was 18 and has had no contact with Betty since 1989 until her death. Elaine said she was unsure whether she could have left home at the age of 16. The fire had no adverse effect on Elaine's mental health and she was never prescribed anti-depressants. During her teenage years, Elaine said she wanted to know more about the Summerland disaster, but felt that a veil of secrecy always descended when she mentioned the subject to her family.



**The family in Scotland in 1973 shortly before their second holiday to the  
Island**

**This photograph was taken at the home of the brother of Elaine's mother**

Moreover, she felt that her uncle and auntie misled her about how her parents' bodies were identified. It was only as an adult that Elaine discovered the truth about Summerland.

Elaine has never forgotten that awful evening in August 1973. In the seven days before I interviewed Elaine in October 2006, she said that she had "thought about the Summerland disaster when she did not mean to" and that she had "had

waves of strong feelings” about it. When I spoke to Elaine again in April 2009, she told me that she alternates between periods when she thinks about the disaster and periods when she tries to put it to the back of her mind. It is obvious from speaking to Elaine that she does not feel an excessive level of bitterness towards the parties whose actions contributed towards the disaster. Elaine said that it “depends very much on the mood she is in at the time”; any anger that she does have “does not last long”, she added. Elaine said she has never ever blamed the three teenage boys for the deaths of her parents. She said: “They were only children...How could they have possibly known that the fire would have spread into Summerland?” However, she said that she still wonders to this day whether their actions were accidental or deliberate.

After the fire, Elaine thought she would never return to the Isle of Man. It was only when she heard news of the 25th anniversary memorial service in 1998 that she decided that the time had finally come to make what was a difficult journey. Elaine said that she was unimpressed with the amount of information that the Isle of Man authorities provided her about the memorial service. When she telephoned for information, they failed to return her calls on several occasions. She said that one employee created the impression that he did not want her to be there. Ironically, the fire alarm sounded during Elaine’s first visit to Summerland in 25 years. A dancing display was being held at the time; staff dealt with the false alarm quickly and Elaine was not worried about the situation. However, Elaine was concerned when she saw a padlock on a door inside Summerland and took a photograph of it. Elaine will be visiting the Isle of Man again in July 2010 for a reunion with Mrs Joyce, the seaside landlady who looked after her and Douglas so well after the fire.

Elaine, who works as an auxiliary nurse, is married to Kenny. They have two children and two grandchildren, who were born in 2008 and 2010. Douglas is married with four children. Elaine and her brother still live in the Kilmarnock area. Their lives will forever remain blighted by the worst day in Manx history.

*The seriously injured young girl*

Ruth McQuillan (5) from Hillsborough in Northern Ireland suffered serious burns to both her hands and legs. She went on holiday to the Isle of Man with her father Sammy (who worked for Motorway Tyres at the time), her mother Muriel (35) (a housewife and previously an insurance industry worker) and her younger sister Linda (2). After Ruth's father died, she found a letter that showed how the family had to change the date of their holiday because there were no vacancies at their chosen guesthouse. That led the family to be on the Island in the week of the disaster. "We were in the wrong place at the wrong time", said Ruth.

Ruth claims that she had a feeling of foreboding when entering Summerland on the night of the fire. She said: "I am very sensitive to atmospheres and won't go to places or talk to people if I sense something. My family and friends think it's a lot of 'mumbo-jumbo', but I do think there's something in it". When the fire entered the building, Ruth believes she was either on the flying staircase or on the escalator going up to the first terrace from the Solarium floor. She believes the escalator is the more likely location because she subsequently developed a phobia about escalators and refused to set foot on one. Ruth said: "Then there was pandemonium. My mother jumped from a window with me on her back onto the top of possibly an ice cream van [this seems to be a reference to one of the small shop units on the Solarium floor].

This is as much as I know about our escape”. Ruth’s younger sister Linda was dropped by her father Sammy into the arms of a rescuer on the Solarium floor. The nature of Ruth’s injuries and hospitalisation are dealt with in chapter 1.

The family brought legal action against Trust House Forte and its Manx subsidiary Summerland Ltd in January 1978. Mr Neil Hanson QC, representing the family, said that Ruth had suffered injury and nervous shock, which would probably cause her serious emotional upset and distress in future years. This was certainly the case and she still remains both physically and psychologically scarred nearly 40 years after the disaster. Ruth believes she was awarded £10,000 in compensation. She recalled: “My father was in charge of my compensation and gave it me in small amounts even when I was in my twenties and thirties until I was told it had run out”. Ruth’s sister Linda – whose injuries were much less severe than Ruth’s - was awarded £ 2,000 for scarring to her forehead and superficial burns on her legs.

“The compensation was a joke given the severity of my injuries, both physically and emotionally. Money, however, would never compensate me for the fact that my life is not what it should have been due to the fire.”

Like many child victims of disasters, Ruth felt that adults were often reticent to talk openly about what had happened. She said: “Summerland was barely talked about in our family, and when I tried to bring up the subject over the years, the door was very quickly and very firmly shut on it”. She described her relationship with her father as always being “difficult and somewhat distant”, a relationship perhaps shaped by the night of the fire:



“I know that my dad saved my sister by throwing her down into the arms of another person. I asked him afterwards why he had left me behind”.

Her father’s actions could be explained by three factors. Firstly, the family might have got separated in the panic. Secondly, he perhaps thought that his wife had already taken care of Ruth. Thirdly, he felt that it was imperative to help his youngest child first, given that a two-year-old girl would find it almost impossible to fend for herself in such an emergency situation. Whatever the truth, Ruth believes that her father felt a sense of guilt for allegedly abandoning her that shaped his subsequent actions. Ruth particularly remembers one incident on a seaside holiday that occurred some years after the disaster:

“A little boy was wandering out to sea. He was crying and did not realise he was going in the wrong direction. My dad waded into the sea after him (no one else moved to help) and brought the child back. My dad couldn’t swim and the child was quite far out. I always wonder whether he rescued the boy because he felt guilty that he had left me behind in Summerland”.

The fire has left Ruth psychologically scarred. She still receives medication to help her deal with the effects of the fire. In 2009, she started to suffer from severe panic attacks. She often wakes up in the middle of the night thinking that she can smell smoke and that the roof is falling down on her. Her sleep has also been disturbed by jerking and bad headaches. Problems that she encountered with sleepwalking as a child have also recently resurfaced. Although she passed her test at 17, she does not drive because she is frightened of having an accident and being trapped inside a burning a car. When Ruth goes

to an event, such as a church service, she always sits at the back of the room and at the end of a row of seats so that she can make a quick exit should that be necessary. Ruth said:

“Everyone else seems to have forgotten about what happened – unfortunately I am unable to...People are very unsympathetic and I have been told to pull myself together. I feel very angry now about what happened to me, and the years I suffered pain and humiliation. Children often did not want to play with me and said hurtful things. I am angry also at the tragic loss of life and the fact that other people suffered worse injuries than I did.”

### *The Teenage Girl*

Carol Burns recalled the night of the fire in a moving account on the BBC's Isle of Man website:

“I survived that terrible disaster. I was 17 and with my boyfriend at the time. We went to see the Black and White Minstrels [in the Marquee Showbar], that's when I smelt smoke. My legs went like jelly and the next thing I knew flames shot up the sides of the windows. The panic started and we all headed for the fire exit down the steps [the NE Service Staircase], only to find the doors were locked...When we finally reached the bottom, the firemen were there to guide us out and just as we got outside the whole place was engulfed by fire. I was told that the drummer [Mr Bernard Ogden] from the show we had been watching did not make it. I still remember the screams and panic. They haunt me to this day. It had been a last minute holiday booking and to this day I will not go on a last

minute booking holiday. It took me a long time to go on holiday again. I still remember those who died and those who lost loved ones”.

### *The Cruise Deck survivor*

Allison Cowell was only six years old when she visited the Isle of Man with her mother, father, brother and sister in 1973. Allison had the misfortune to be playing table tennis on the top floor of Summerland (the Cruise Deck) when the fire broke out. Her recollections of that evening are hazy. She told me:

“Someone [shouted] that they could see smoke. I remember being high up on some sort of balcony area [the third terrace] and looking over to see a carpet of smoke beneath us. I then remember all of us walking quickly down some concrete stairs around the outside of the building – I think [It seems that Allison and her family escaped by the NE Service Staircase and not the flying staircase, although it is difficult to be completely sure on this point].

Allison added: “My [13 year old] sister was crying and my mother gave her a sip of brandy to calm her [down]. That is all I can remember.”

### *The Compere*

Mr Laurie Adams was an accordion-playing stand-up comedian, who was performing at Summerland on the night of the fire. His experiences featured on a documentary programme made by *Granada Television*, which is acknowledged as the source of this account. He was just about to go on stage when another musician smelt smoke. Mr Adams tried to reassure the audience about the

situation by joking that a chef had probably set fire to a chip pan. He said: “Everyone laughed and it seemed to calm them down. I said I would play the Blue Danube because that would put the fire out and everyone returned to their seats”. Mr Adams was not to know what would happen next.

“All of a sudden, within seconds, there was a massive explosion that burst from the [Orogas] wall. Flames started shooting up the walls. It was like a waterfall, only with fire which produced a roaring sound. It happened so quickly and fire raced towards you like an inferno.’

The Orogas “fell out onto the carpet like balls of fire”. He said: “It was literally raining molten and burning plastic”. As he knew the Solarium floor was built out of concrete, he directed people down a stairwell towards the fire exit. “You were allowed one decision in that building and you made either the right or the wrong one”, he commented. The image of the disaster that still haunts him today is a body trapped on the staircase. He said: “I will never forget that, everyone was so upset. The person had collapsed due to smoke inhalation but we were helpless and just had to get out.” Having ducked the “flying bits of burning plastic” as he exited the building, Mr Adams was standing on the pavement outside the building within eight minutes. Summerland was just a smoking shell after another five minutes. Mr Adams likened the situation outside the building to Vietnam. It took him one hour to find his wife and daughter.

Mr Adams returned to the Isle of Man for the first time since the fire in 1976, as a support act for Ken Dodd at the Villa Marina on Douglas seafront. The visit was to prove a ‘pivotal moment’ that would radically change his life.

Looking for something to read in his hotel, he found *Good News for Modern Man*. He said:

“I opened it up and can only describe what followed as a conversion experience. One minute I was in tears the next in joy. I kept thinking back to the fire and what I read seemed to leap out at me and was linked to me. I read a fair old chunk but couldn’t put it down. In the end I just fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion. It was a wonderful experience and as if a flick had been switched. I feel emotional even talking about it now, I knew I had been chosen to work with God in some way.”

After asking the hotel manager, Mr Adams took the book home with him. He recalled:

“A friend who picked me up and took me to the airport noticed a difference in me and even asked had I been drinking. He said I seemed sparkly and shiny. I didn’t realise it then, but I suppose I would be after spending time in the company of Christ. I was greatly uplifted and privileged and the rest is history.”

Mr Adams started to attend his local church in Blackpool before beginning training at a Manchester ordination college in 1979. He was appointed a deacon in 1982 at Thornton Cleveleys near Blackpool and subsequently had postings at Burnley and Blackburn before moving to St James’ Church in Ashton-under-Lyne. He said: “It is quite amazing...That the night of the fire ultimately led to my spiritual awakening.”

*The pop group*

*The Dave Lee Set* and *Just Good Friends* were Summerland's two resident bands for the 1973 summer season. The bands shared the same stage on the Solarium floor. Laurie Adams, the compere (see above), was about to introduce *The Dave Lee Set* for their first performance of the evening when they noticed that the kiosk fire had entered the building. Linda Fletcher of *Just Good Friends* told me:

“From the stage, a red glow was visible at the back of the amusement arcade. Suddenly, a huge fireball shot down the length of the amusement arcade and straight up to the roof. The main staircase up to the [three terraces] was also at this point [i.e. the flying staircase], making it hard for people to get down.”

Mr Mike Kent of *The Dave Lee Set* said he and his fellow band members grabbed towels left by the entrance to the swimming pool and used them to beat out the flames on holidaymakers' clothes. They went back into the building to try and rescue more people, but decided to make a quick exit after the band's grand piano ignited on its own. Another Summerland survivor Catherine Woodhouse (9) remembered seeing “musicians from the group who had been on the stage swimming across the learner pool, one of them with his guitar”. Miss Woodhouse added: “The horror of [that] evening is still with me such that even lighting a candle is something I struggle to do and I always check out fire exits when I'm somewhere new”. After the fire, the entire stage and the two bands' equipment could be swept into a small pile. Mr Kent and Miss Fletcher married in 1975, and formed a new band. They are still together 35 years later.

### *The Married Couple*

Mr Roger Carson (62) and Mrs Mary Carson (57) from Hitchin in Hertfordshire went to the Isle of Man for their first holiday in 19 years in July 1973. They arrived in Douglas on Saturday, July 21st. Mr Carson was a sheet metal worker; Mrs Carson worked as a ledger, wages and purchasing clerk for a Hitchin company called Plasmoulds and earned £25 per week. As part of her responsibilities, Mrs Carson paid out £12,000 a month for her employers. Mr Carson died in the fire and Mrs Carson was seriously injured. When the fire broke out, the couple was on the top floor of Summerland. They were told to leave by the NE Service Staircase, but were overcome about half way down the stairwell by thick black fumes that Mrs Carson said billowed from an air vent. Mrs Carson held her husband's hand as they tried to escape from the fire. However, as she progressed down the stairwell, she realised Mr Carson was no longer with her. Mrs Carson tried to turn back to find her husband. In doing so, she stumbled over a semi-conscious man; but she was unsure whether this was her husband because the stairwell was in complete darkness. The force of the crowd pushed her down the rest of the stairwell and she was one of the last persons to leave the building alive by the NE staircase. "No devoted wife could have lost a husband in more tragic circumstances", said Mr Peter Kneale QC, who represented Mrs Carson in legal action brought against Trust Houses Forte and Summerland Ltd in the Manx High Court in January 1978 for physical and mental injury and loss of earnings. THF and Summerland Ltd admitted liability, but did not admit to the eight detailed allegations made by Mrs Carson.

Mrs Carson became very ill with respiratory trouble on the day after the fire and was in hospital for two weeks (section 1.5). She received £3,000

compensation for the death of her husband. After the disaster Mrs Carson was “plagued by horrific memories” and feelings of guilt that she had not done enough to save her husband. She regularly suffered nightmares, in which she saw her dead husband lying on a staircase alongside the burning building. She sometimes saw his face at the window of a bus, which she tried unsuccessfully to run after and board. Mrs Carson’s medical reports stated she was experiencing from “severe psychological disturbance”, which involved nervous shock, depression, loss of memory and concentration. By 1978, she was only “a shell” of the woman she had been before the fire; her daughter commented that she was a changed person. Mrs Carson had been unable to work since the disaster, resulting in a net loss of £2,359 in earnings. Plasmoulds ended her employment without pension rights three weeks after saying she felt unable to resume her job. She told the High Court:

“I cannot remember things and I know I would go to pieces if I got into trouble because of my memory. I don’t even like shopping by myself now...I have been gradually learning to live alone. But I don’t seem able to cope with any worry at all. I used to be very much a career person, but I could not take a job now.”

### *The Teenage Boy*

Mark Mitchell was on a family holiday to the Isle of Man in 1973. Mark now describes in his own words how he survived the Summerland fire.

“I was 13, a difficult age for a family holiday. The Isle of Man was, frankly, boring, chilly, rain-soaked and misty. I don’t think I saw the entire height of the Manx Radio mast all week.



I think it was the enveloping dampness drove us to Summerland that night. We weren't classic Summerland material. I was a rather bookish only child; mum and dad, then in their forties, couldn't see the point of the sheer cheesy Blackpoolness of Douglas. We caught the horse-drawn tram along the sea front, probably more curious about the building that rose from the cliff than hopeful of an interesting time.

I don't recall much about our arrival; up some concrete stairs and across a walkway, I think. There was a foyer with ticket-offices and turnstiles giving way to the vast interior. To the left, water ran down the cliff-face. The far wall rose up into what looked like – or was meant to look like – the decks of a cruise liner.

We found three deckchairs on one of the decks that ran the length of the building, backing onto the sea wall. An organ played; show tunes, I think. The organist would utter words, a little later, which still stay with me today.

Up close, the 'glass' clearly wasn't glass. It was scratched and degraded in a way that real glass seldom is. It struck me that plastic was a pretty odd thing to use to cover what was, after all, supposed to be a giant greenhouse.

Dad and I decided to leave Mum where she was and explore the rear of the complex. My memory here is patchy. I remember people playing slot machines, the noise; the feeling that this was all a bit too wheeltappers-and-shunters for us. I also remember seeing a crazy-golf course.

We went back to Mum and reclaimed our deckchairs. More organ music: boring. I looked around and wondered again about the acres of plastic surrounding us (I was that sort of child). It seemed – and I'm sure I thought this

then, rather than imposed it in retrospect – to be begging disaster. What would the lattice in front of me look like if it burned? I looked over my right shoulder and I saw a column of smoke rising outside the building. A furnace, maybe for the pool heating?

I'm not sure how much time passed. Organ: boring. Shall we leave soon? That was dad, I think.

I don't know what drew my attention to the rear wall, to see the first wisps of smoke enter at the top, near where I'd spotted the smoke from the furnace. I think there was some sort of commotion; people stopping in front of us looking upwards, maybe. Someone, according to the organist, has left a chip-pan on. No need to panic; he'll play the Blue Danube to put it out. Actually, he was knocking out Lara's Theme when...

Come on, let's go. Definitely dad, that time. By now, very quickly, the smoke is pouring in through the back. There are shouts, but not many, and this surprises me. We climb down a set of stairs, quickly but not in panic. We're now at the top of a ramp leading to a set of double-doors, a fire exit which leads through to the swimming pool. The doors are locked. At some point there are screams. Smoke billows, now there are flames. The entrance foyer is nearby, the entrance booths empty, the turnstiles locked in the wrong direction. Dad lifts a foot and kicks one, hard, and the ratchet breaks. One last look behind and the roof's alight. Burning meteors drop the full height of the building, but with a slow drifting quality. There's screaming now, all right.

I don't remember much about getting out. The concrete walkway and stairs reminded me of sections of my comprehensive school, overcrowded with

running and stumbling. There was a woman with us who was almost hysterical; she'd lost someone. Mum and Dad urged her to keep up, to get out. Suddenly we were on the promenade, looking back at the building, which was immolated in orange fire. Just, I think in later years, like the Hindenburg. At some point, a solitary fireman appeared atop a ladder, playing a jet of water onto the fire. It would have been vapour within moments of leaving the hose.

There are other things that I think I remember. Mum recalls dad lifting a small girl onto his shoulders on the way out to stop her being trampled. On the promenade, he held her high in the air until her distraught parents saw her. They were from Belfast. This episode is hazy to me.

In hindsight, it seems to have been an eminently avoidable tragedy...Who in their right minds would build in plastic? Why was there no evacuation plan? Why was there no effective fire-alarm? How was the fire allowed to develop as it did, from the crazy-golf course? I'm now a journalist and I've spent much of my professional life close to disasters and it strikes me that they are often just as eminently avoidable. The chain of events that brought Summerland about is essentially no different to that which made the Ladbroke Grove train crash (1999) a racing certainty, or the coincidences and failures that sealed Concorde's fate. So it goes...

The rest of the week was a down-in-the-dumps affair. Mum and dad bought me an air pistol, which I still have. Nothing else happened. We avoided the east end of the promenade. Then, one evening, walking on the cliffs above Douglas, we came upon the carcass from above; now just a skeleton of bulging metal. Through the remains of the roof, I could make out the lattice structure. Counting down the decks as best I could I located – I thought – the place where

we'd sat and been bored, and where I'd watched unknowing the beginning of a tragedy.”

### *The Ulster Teenager*

Stephen Hill from Castleterragh in Northern Ireland describes in his own words how he survived the fire.

“I was 16 when the fire occurred. I was in the main area [Solarium Floor] with my mother and 11-year-old brother. I remember seeing smoke or flames in the games arcade area. A man tried to put the fire out with a fire extinguisher. He seemed to have some success but the extinguisher ran out and the flames grew worse again. We went outside through a door marked 'fire exit' to the mini-golf terrace. I don't know if there was an easy escape from there, but for some reason we definitely went back into the main building and headed towards the main entrance. It was only as we passed through the turnstiles and reached the door that we felt the heat behind us and looked back to see that the fire had really taken hold. I can't say I was deeply affected by being in the fire.”

### *The Ulster couple*

Mr Joseph Boyd (54) and Mrs Mary Boyd (45) from Upper Lisburn in Northern Ireland arrived in Douglas at about 11am on the day of the fire. Mrs Boyd died in the fire. With the evening being cool and damp, the Boyds and two friends (Mr and Mrs Kennedy) staying with them at the Eidelweiss Hotel decided to visit Summerland after their evening meal. The following account is taken from Mr Boyd's statement given to the police on the day after the fire.

“We were sitting on the first floor balcony [Marquee Showbar level] looking down on to the ground [Solarium] floor. We had been in the building from about 7pm, when at about 7.45pm the organist mentioned over the loudspeaker system that a chip pan had gone on fire but everything was under control. We could see people milling about down below us but were unable to see the cause of the fire or indeed the fire itself.

About 10 minutes later there was a sudden eruption of black smoke and people began running for the exits. Someone shouted to us to go down the corridor nearest to the Garden Bar. My wife and I walked down this corridor and had gone some distance down it when the doors at the end of the corridor [leading to the NE service staircase] were opened. A considerable amount of dense black smoke met us and just as we reached this doorway the lights in this part of the building went out. A number of persons behind us who were also making for the exit panicked and ran towards the open doorway from which the smoke appeared knocking my wife down. [This is probably a reference to the opening that had been cut by the staff of Summerland to shorten the distance they would have to carry beer crates to the stores]. I lifted her but we were both knocked down again. I dragged her as best I could but she was unconscious. I then found myself being carried by the onrush of people towards the exit stairs and into the yard at the rear of the building [by the Manx Electric Railway sheds]. I ran back into the building and with assistance from a fireman who had arrived on the scene. I brought out my wife. She was alive when I got her out but on arrival at the hospital the doctor pronounced her dead. Mr Boyd said: “My wife Mary and I had been married 27 years and she had always enjoyed good health. We have no family.”

*The Wallace Arnold coach party*

Mr George Gibson (46) and his wife Margery were in the Marquee Showbar when the fire broke out. They were in the Showbar with the other 23 members of their Wallace Arnold coach party, who were all staying at the Rutland Hotel on Douglas Promenade. At 8pm, Mr Gibson smelled something burning. "It smelled as though somebody had dropped a cigarette onto a piece of plastic", he told the police. Mr Gibson then noticed smoke outside the bar. He said: "A man went...to investigate the fire and he moved a curtain up which immediately shot a sheet of flame, from the bottom to the top." The party was told to leave the building by the NE Service Staircase, which was on the opposite side of the bar to where the smoke and flames were first seen. The fire raced across the Marquee Showbar and at one point the flames were only about five feet behind Mr Gibson and the other holidaymakers. Mr Gibson was reassured by the draught of air coming up the steps. He said: "I realised that we would be alright because the flames could not reach us." Reassurance soon turned to absolute horror when his wife shouted to him that the door at the bottom of the stairwell was locked. Mr Gibson told the police:

"...I could see that the crash bars on this door were in the open position around which was a thick steel chain held together with a large brass Yale padlock. It was only possible to push the door open a couple of inches, enough only to see the gap of daylight. At this time there was a large number of people around the door. I tried to force it open but with no result."

Mr Gibson then noticed a young man carrying a till. He was followed by another man carrying a guitar, a base drum and a pair of cymbals. "They did not

speak to anybody [and they] just pushed their way through the crowd”, he said. However, much to Mr Gilbert’s relief, these two men knew of another way out of Summerland via a door in the wall just before the locked exit. Mr Gibson escaped through the rollerskating rink and on to the yard by the Manx Electric Railway depot. He then saw the man carrying the till getting into a red sports car that had been parked right outside the locked fire exit. He said: “I looked up and saw that the whole building was just one sheet of flames. We...walked towards the Promenade as balls of fire were dropping from the building”. Two other members of the Wallace Arnold party were not so lucky. Mrs Ann Barber (69) and Mrs Elsie Stevens (68) both died in the fire. Mr Gibson went to St George’s Hall and positively identified their bodies. Mr Gibson had known Mrs Barber for a number of years because they had both worked for the police. Mrs Barber had manned the switchboard at Leeds Police Station.

### *The Liverpool Teenagers*

Kevin Rimmer (16) was working on the Isle of Man Steam Packet boat *Ben-My-Chree* in the summer of 1973. Mr Rimmer had visited Summerland on several occasions before the fire and had made use of the complex’s numerous bars as well as the Marquee Showbar and the TV Lounge. As a teenager, Kevin “was just out to have a good time and never really considered safety aspects” of the design of Summerland. However, he saw chained and padlocked fire exits “on numerous occasions” in the months before the fire. Mr Rimmer was also aware that Summerland’s sea-facing wall was built out of plastic. “I did know that they were not glass as I had tapped on them once to see if they were glass”, he told me.

Thursday, August 2nd, 1973 was an easy day for Mr Rimmer because he only had one morning sailing to do (the 10.30 from Liverpool to Douglas) and then the rest of the day was his own. After having tea on the boat at around 5pm, he and two friends went to Summerland for the evening. They initially had a couple of drinks before going up to the TV lounge on the sixth floor of Summerland (the second terrace) to watch *Top of the Pops*. He told me: “Three lads behind us began shouting ‘fire’, but nobody took any notice...and just laughed”. Smoke then swept “up the side of the building” and “people began running down the stairs” [the flying staircase]. He continued:

“A man on the loudspeaker kept calling not to panic, but no one took any notice and people were....jumping over the banisters. At this time flames shot up against all the windows. My pal and other lads jumped over the balcony and got away, but I could not make any headway through all the fellows coming down the stairs.”

Luckily, a man in his late twenties helped Kevin over the balcony and dropped him about 15 feet to the floor below:

“There were flames below me and I think that is how I got the burns on my face. When I dropped I hit a rail and fell outwards and a boy helped me. If I had fallen the other way I think I would have been in the fire.”

Kevin managed to stumble down to Douglas Promenade and found that his two friends were unhurt. Mr Rimmer was initially treated in Noble’s Hospital in Douglas. With his head wrapped in bandages and limping badly, Kevin



managed to return to Liverpool on the ferry on the day after the fire. He was admitted to hospital in Liverpool, where he stayed for the next ten days. He said:

“I still wonder to this day, what would have happened if I had not been helped over that rail, also whether the guy who helped me escaped or perished on that dreadful night.”

### 8.3 Saved by fate and good fortune

This section tells the stories of some of the people who were inside Summerland on the day of the fire, but through twists of fate and good fortune had left Summerland before the fire started. It also recalls the experiences of some of the holidaymakers who had visited Summerland before the fire.

#### *Michael Slater*

“In 1973, I was married with a two-year-old baby and it was our first real holiday together as a family. We decided to fly to the Isle of Man from Liverpool. As we approached the Isle of Man, fog descended onto the runway and the pilot had to return to Liverpool because he could not land the plane. The next time we were lucky and he did land on a misty runway. We booked into our hotel and were thinking of where to go the following day, when someone suggested we should go to Summerland as there was plenty to do there for children of all ages. As we walked into Summerland on the following day, it looked great. Everything was made of plastic and it even had plastic windows in the ceiling where you could look up to the sky. It was fantastic and looked futuristic. Our two-year-old loved it. I said to my wife that we’ll come here

tonight, as there is a disco on. It would be a chance to let our hair down and they have a baby-minding service at the hotel. My wife said: 'I don't think so. There is something funny about that place. If there were a fire, how would you get out?' I said to her: 'Don't be daft. It looks alright to me as it's brand new'. But she kept on saying it all the way back to the hotel: 'I've got a feeling about that place and I don't like it. I am not going there this evening'. [I wrote back to Michael and asked him to clarify his wife's concerns more specifically. He told me that his wife had two concerns: the building was built into a cliff and so had no exits at the back and all the plastic.]

About 7pm, our baby was playing up and crying, so it was about 7.30pm when we left the hotel. I was trying to persuade my wife to go to the disco at Summerland. I was not having much luck, as she wasn't having any of it. On the promenade, we heard the bell of a police car. We didn't think much of it at the time, but then there were sounds of fire engines, not one but three. We saw people looking and pointing at Summerland. There were smoke and flames billowing out in the evening sky hundreds of feet into the air. I noticed that people around me were crying and screaming because they knew that people were going to die in there. I have never seen my wife cry before, as she knew what would have happened if we had been in there. I am so glad that she took no notice of me.

There are questions in my head as to why we were not in that fire. Why did the plane turn back when it did due to fog? Why did my wife have a gut feeling something was going to happen? Why did our son start crying when were going out as he is normally as good as gold? All I know is that only for my wife we would not all be here now."

*Ian Paterson*

“I was at Summerland on the day of the disaster. My two friends and I set off to Douglas for a boys' holiday when we were still in our teens, and set up our tent at the Glen Rosa campsite with a list of things to do for the following two weeks, including various pubs, discos and boozy nights out, plus some touristy activities.

We paid a visit to the Summerland Disco the day before the disaster. Johnny Silver was the DJ. Johnny's catchphrase was to introduce records with an excruciating 'Pocket-a pocket-a pocket-a' sound which was possibly down to his tight silver loon pants! I distinctly remember afterwards that my gaze that evening was often directed to the Fire Exit sign behind him. I stared at it curiously, not knowing why at the time, but was of course to find out the next evening.

After yet another night of dancing to David Bowie's 'Life on Mars' and Nazareth's 'My White Bicycle' and such like, and unsuccessfully (yet again) trying to pick up some Irish (or any!) girls, we headed off and decided to go to the Villa Marina for the wrestling the next night. At least we would not have the embarrassment of yet another night without a "lumber"!

The next night [Thursday, August 2nd, 1973] was my first live wrestling experience and we soon got into the action. During one bout, the three of us were cheering on the German who had been pitched against the English "Mr Perfect". Unfortunately, we attracted a bit of attention from a dear old lady in the row behind us, and she took to hitting us over the heads with her brolly. More women

trouble! This must have been around 7.00pm [in fact it would have been just after 8pm].

Then we heard the first of the sirens outside. We did not think much of it at first, but began to look at each other nervously as the amount and frequency of the sirens increased. What was going on outside? We found out soon enough. As we headed out from the Villa Marina we were drawn towards the end of the bay where Summerland was, and we started getting snippets of what had happened from stunned-looking people who were walking in the opposite direction. The reported body count increased as we walked (I remember six was the first report), the smell of smoke hanging in the air, and the zombie-like, faceless crowd just shuffling past us, showing no emotion. Ordinary vans had been commandeered as ambulances to transport the victims. We decided to head back to the tent as the gravity of the disaster took hold. It was not a good night.

Over the next few days, with the holiday spirit having been wrenched out of the town, I remember all sorts of images and memories. I remember the flags being at half mast; the lingering smell of the fire; a newspaper photo of a charred body silhouetted against a locked fire escape [the author is referring to the flying staircase]; the heroism of Johnny Silver who saved a child who had been thrown to him from the pool above, despite Johnny breaking his leg; desperately trying to get a phone call to our parents in Troon in Scotland; but most of all, the sick empty feeling in the pit of our stomachs and the shell of the building looming in the distance at the north end of town.

Initially the police were looking for a group of three lads and, of course, we were interviewed by the police in our tent. One tent immediately behind ours had to be

taken away, as its occupant had not returned. Thank God it had not been ours.

Later, the official report I recall, made much of the flammable Oroglass [*sic.*] transparent cladding around the building having contributed to the speed of the blaze. "Horror-glass", more like."

*Stephen Haskayne*

"I can remember the 2nd August 1973 vividly. I was a 15-year-old teenager at the time and on holiday with my Mum and Dad. We would have been starting the second week of our holiday, and I can remember being a regular visitor to the Summerland resort every day during our first week. I had been seeing a young girl of the same age as me. Her name was Sadie. As I recall, she was from Kilmarnock in Scotland and we had first started talking to each other inside the Summerland resort.

A few things happened during that eventful day. I remember saying goodbye some time during the morning and had arranged to meet up with Mum and Dad later on during the day. I was not actually inside the Summerland complex as it caught fire but was close by, and can distinctively remember the panic as people tried to evacuate the building as the scale of the disaster became more apparent. My thoughts turned towards my Mum and Dad (they had previously informed me they were going to watch a show together). I knew Mum and Dad would be worried, as they would have fully expected me to be inside the Summerland complex.

Pandemonium and complete confusion set in with people screaming and looking for loved ones. The fire service barricaded the area, and I remember ambulances

and police cars trying to get to the burning inferno. The next three or four hours just seemed like a lifetime as I searched for my Mum and Dad to let them know I was OK. My Dad was never a man to show his emotions and up until that day I had never seen him cry, but when we eventually found each other, I can remember to this day the utter relief on my Mum and Dad's faces. There were tears rolling down my Dad's face, and my Dad saying to me "I thought I had lost you Son" as we embraced, with a backdrop of a burning Summerland in the background.

The ambulances, police cars and make shift ambulances (cars hooting their horns) seemed to go on all night long. They went up and down the sea front carrying the injured and dying to hospital. On the next morning, I can remember the solemn mood in the guesthouse we had been staying, and then trying to make contact with home by telephone (No mobile phones in those days). The queues for the public phone boxes stretched for some considerable distance. I now live in Australia, but this is a day in my life I will never forget.

As time has gone by, I have mentioned this disaster to a number of people, but for some unknown reason nobody seems to remember it and with a huge loss of life, I find that hard to believe. I have always promised myself a visit back to Douglas and at the very least I would hope for some sort of memorial for that sad day and tragic loss of life.

May they rest in peace and never walk alone."

### *Norman Campbell*

Irishman Norman Campbell (9) went on holiday to the Isle of Man with his parents in July 1973. The family visited Summerland on the Thursday before the fire, but decided to leave after only one hour because they were unhappy about the use of a chain on a fire exit door. Mr Campbell's father had remonstrated about the use of the chain, but managers insisted that the chain remain in order to prevent children from entering the building without paying (chapter 6). Whilst Mr Campbell was not at Summerland on the evening of the fire, his experience haunted him in the weeks following the fire. He recalled:

“My last memory of this time was awakening from a nightmare in a pool of sweat [three weeks after the Summerland disaster]. Mum was sitting on the side of my bed. She said ‘Norman, it has been three weeks now; you are going to have to let it go. If you don't put this out of your head, it will destroy you’”.

During his visit to Summerland, Norman was befriended by a young English girl (aged about ten) and her friends. Mr Campbell said “[To this very day] I will never look at the list of those who perished [because he feared that the list might contain that ten-year-old girl]”.

### *Ian Queen*

Ian Queen was 14 when he went camping to the Isle of Man with the Boys' Brigade. Mr Queen's story is different from most people because the rain *prevented him* from going to Summerland that evening and may have saved his life:

“Thursday, August 2nd was our last day. We were leaving early on the Friday morning on the ferry to Ardrossan in Ayrshire. The plan was to strike camp on Thursday morning with everyone intending to sleep in the marquee on the Thursday night. We were then going to spend the late afternoon in Summerland and stay for a meal. Because of the rain, we could not take the canvas down wet, so we stayed at the campsite. However, it brightened up enough later to allow the tents to come down. We ate at camp and were allowed to spend the last night in Douglas. My group of friends decided to head for Summerland. We were camping on the outskirts of the town just to the west of Douglas. As we walked up the hill towards the town we could see smoke billowing up. One of our group who had left earlier was on the way back to report that Summerland was on fire. We made our way down to the promenade and watched in horror at the scene. I still remember the shock that came over me. I do not know if it was because we should have been in the place or whether it was the sight of the fire. The emergency vehicles shooting passed at speed with lights and sirens going was what overwhelmed me, but I have never forgotten the sight and I have never experienced shock like it.

There is, however, one light-hearted story. That same evening about midnight, another camper on the same site came back to his tent and lit his gas lamp. There had been a leak and the gas exploded burning his arms. Knowing we were a Boys Brigade’ Company he came over in the hope that we could offer some first aid. One of our officers did and then took him to hospital. The following week the BBC news magazine programme *Nationwide* was doing a piece on Summerland. The individual we had helped was on the programme explaining how he had helped people out while the Oroglas was dripping on to his arms.”



*Gerry Moore*

DUBLINER Gerry Moore (8) was on holiday in the Isle of Man with his parents and younger sister in July 1973. The family visited Summerland practically “every day” in the week before the fire because they “loved it so much”. He reflected:

“Even though we were back in Ireland, the fire was very upsetting for all of us...We also realised [that had the fire been a week earlier] we [would] almost certainly [have been] in there...It was such a horrific thing to happen.”

On Valentine’s Day 1981, 48 people died in a fire at the Stardust nightclub in Dublin (section 1.6). Mr Moore said that he often wondered why the Irish “authorities did not learn any lessons from Summerland.” Mr Moore continued: “I find it astonishing that [the Stardust fire could have occurred given the outcry that followed the Summerland fire disaster]. He added: “[Summerland] was hugely publicised [in the Irish Republic] and struck a chord with a lot of people. A great many Irish tourists visited the Isle of Man, so [they] would have been familiar with Douglas.”

*Brian Naismith*

HOLIDAYMAKER Brian Naismith witnessed the Summerland fire as a 14-year-old boy. He had been at the pictures with his friends on the night of the fire only to come “out to a scene of disbelief”. He was taken to the police station and questioned about the fire because he and his friends were of a similar age to the boys who actually started the fire. “Thankfully [the police] let us go”, he said.

Mr Naismith strongly believes that he would have been in Summerland on the night of the fire had he and his friends not been refused entry to the building on the previous night. He said:

“We had tried to gain access to the complex the night before. Fortunately for us, they would not allow a group of young boys in and told us to come back some other night. We were intimidated by the presence of the doormen, so went to the pictures instead. I always wonder what might have been if they had let us in that night [because] I am one hundred percent sure we would have gone back the next night.”

Mr Naismith believes that he was refused entry to the complex because “a group of fourteen and fifteen year old boys always look like trouble”. Brian’s parents were “frantic with worry” after the fire. Brian recalled, “We tried to phone home after the disaster but we could not get near a phone [box] because of the queues”.

*Saved by higher admission charges and a late friend*

Mrs Joan Woodward, originally from Sale near Manchester, ran a guesthouse on Douglas Promenade. Mrs Woodward’s eight-year-old son Sean had taken his cousin Debbie Dykes (10) to have a look at Summerland for the first time. Mrs Woodward thus thought that both children were inside the complex when the fire started. Fortunately, Sean and Debbie did not have enough money to go into Summerland because the admission charge had gone up. They ended up watching the blaze from the safety of Douglas Promenade. Mrs Woodward, who was not reunited with the children for around 30 minutes,

said: “I have never felt so desolate as I watched the whole building turn into a mass of flames – it was an inferno within minutes.”

Meanwhile, John Miller (17) and Peter Childs (17), both of Great Crosby, Liverpool, had been planning to go to the disco at Summerland with a friend. They had visited the complex on two occasions in the week leading up to the fire. Luckily, the teenagers’ friend was late and the two boys were still outside Summerland waiting for him when the fire started.

#### *The Paisley Fair Holiday*

John Keown (7) went on holiday to the Isle of Man with his parents during the two week Paisley Fair holiday (13-27th July, 1973). The family went to Summerland most nights and was in the complex exactly one week before the fire.

#### *Terry Robinson*

Terry Robinson (25) visited Summerland whilst on holiday in the Isle of Man with a 25-year old male friend in 1972. They “were not overly impressed” with Summerland for two reasons. Firstly, Mr Robinson and his friend found Summerland to be “too family orientated”. He said: “[Summerland] did not particularly offer what we were looking for in terms of entertainment. This is not a criticism of the venue. It did what it intended to do and offered indoor *family* entertainment”. Secondly, Summerland was not a new experience for him because he had previously visited “bigger and better” entertainment complexes in Blackpool. Mr Robinson’s recollections of Summerland are now vague apart

from its “plastickey” nature, which “added to the scale and horror of the disaster”.

*Ruth Grainger*

Ruth Grainger (8) lived on the Isle of Man for around five years in the early 1970s. They decided to visit Summerland on the day of the fire because they had some friends over from the mainland. Ruth and six other children (cared for by her mother) went swimming, whilst her dad and some other friends had a drink inside Summerland. Fortunately, they left Summerland around 30 minutes before the fire entered the building. Ruth’s uncle, a health and safety expert, had noticed that some fire exits were locked during their visit but did not take up the issue with the building’s management. Ruth told the BBC: “My father and friends had been unable to watch us swim as doors between the different sections of the building were bolted and barred.” As the family drove home to Kirk Michael on the Island’s west coast, the locked doors emerged as a topic of conversation in the car. She said, “In the time it took my family to drive home...the building was gone”.