



## THE GREAT FIRE - WINDSOR CASTLE by John R Crampton

On the morning of the 20th of November in 1992 at 11:35 the Windsor Castle Fire Brigade logged the most important call they had ever received. The Windsor Castle fire siren was sounded and a blaze of unimaginable proportions had begun. They went into action.

The alarm was triggered by a plumber who saw smoke coming from the vents on the roof of St George's Hall. No one was to know the extent of what was waiting for them

An inferno that was to burn for 15 hours destroying and damaging nearly 9000 square meters including 105 rooms and some of the finest State Apartments. From the elevated Queen Mother reservoir 5 miles away, stunned onlookers and some of the world media had positioned themselves to watch a tragedy in progress. The fire at Windsor Castle had quickly become a news story for the world and the life of a national treasure was suffocating. The historical and priceless contents of the Queen's home and our country were ablaze.

Strategy to combat the blaze was key. Wind directions, water supplies and locating the pumps hidden under gravel didn't help the Berkshire Fire Services in combating the magnitude of the inferno. Manpower with rescue teams and sufficient breathing apparatus were only part of the equation and indeed the army from the Windsor garrisons were called in

to help with salvage - the police worked tirelessly with safety issues. The Women's Royal Voluntary Service all assisted in keeping workers fed and hydrated helped by local restaurants.

At one point 44 fire engines were in and around the castle and by 2:30 the following morning when the fire had officially been 'extinguished', the BFS had pumped 7 million litres of water.

We tracked down and spoke with Michael Rowley who was there in 1992. Today he still works with the Windsor Fire Brigade and has since been awarded the Queen's Golden Jubilee Fire Service medal :

*"As an operational Firefighter the sight of Windsor Castle alight was incredible. Whilst undertaking tasks such as pumping water, setting up lighting and carrying fuel stocks, I could hardly believe that I was crossing paths with members of the Royal family amidst the backdrop of the ravaged Castle. The sheer scale of the incident involved a huge draw upon emergency service resources which became part of the iconic images reproduced subsequently by the global mass media.*

*I further recall the awesome sight of the Brunswick Tower burning like a grotesque firework in the night sky, whilst*

*spewing burning embers upon all Firefighters working at the base. At that point, I noticed a small gathering of people huddled together upon a wooden bench whilst viewing the fire and observed the Queen amongst such sullen souls."*

Windsor Castle wasn't insured. The cost was later estimated at £42 million. Four days later at London's Guildhall the Queen remembers 1992 as "*annus horribilis*" for many reasons. It was now time to assess the damage and cost. A restoration plan was needed – and who and how was it going to be paid for? Moreover sourcing the materials and skills was going to be a mammoth task. Indeed did the right highly skilled people still even exist? Replacing, restoring and making repairs to parts of an ancient castle dating back to the 12th Century 'contained' within a small area of the 13 acres of the grounds.

The fire struck at the heart of this Royal residence in the Lantern Lobby on a cold, crisp and rainless winter's morning. Prince Philip chaired the Restoration Committee whilst the Prince of Wales led the Design Committee and it was later decided that Buckingham Palace should open to the public at a charge and Windsor Castle would for the first time start charging an admission fee. The rebuilding plan took 5 years and came under budget by £5 million at no extra cost to the taxpayer.





Images courtesy of John R Crampton

The Restoration and Salvage committees and commissions consulted with many of the leading groups that in turn developed into a coalition of English Heritage, the Department of National Heritage, Royal Fine Arts Commission, The Royal Collection and the Royal Household.

They wanted to rebuild the castle to a level that surpassed its former glory with the emphasis on sourcing British materials and skills. In fact only one large order was placed outside the United Kingdom and that was to Portugal for curtain tassels. Windsor Castle is a working castle for constitutional matters, a special home and not just a museum. During the fire, The Crimson Drawing room lost 80% of its silk panelling, and its roof and ceiling collapsed in. The weight of the water added to the heat of the flames.

St George's Hall needed vast amounts of green oak for beam replacements and these came from 300 trees in Herefordshire. Statues needed remodelling, replacing and erecting, salvaged works of Art needed numbering and put into security, carpenters were employed, master craftsmen and artisans of every type got to work over a carefully planned 4 phase period.

In scale there were about 5000 workers with 19 consulting firms working with 200 contractors as co-workers and enough scaffolding to run from Windsor to Dover. Local suppliers such as Caleys a well established family department store dating back almost 200 years (opposite the Windsor Guildhall where Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles were married) supplied a quantity of green damask for the Green Drawing Room in 1868, which again was destroyed by the fire. It is now again a place resurrected and beautifully restored. Caleys were also asked for post-fire assistance and consequently provided: 'wallpaper and fabrics for the staff rooms in the Brunswick Tower and blinds for the Prince of Wales Tower – 2700 feet of wallpaper and 300 metres of fabric for bedspreads, furniture covers and curtains'. (source: Windlesora No 23, Norman Oxley, Windsor Local History Group). The State Dining Room had to be reconstructed from photographic evidence and illustrations. The Lantern Lobby and Private Chapel were rebuilt on the original site of the fire although the Chapel was partially relocated.

The Private Chapel now boasts an intricate new ceiling with a stained glass window by the design initiation of Prince Philip. The Grand Reception Room was badly hit but the worst of all was St George's Hall. Were there any hidden secrets to emerge from the ravage and decimation? Yes and it appeared in many guises.

The will, might and determination of the people, hired, commissioned and employed who spent years in dedicated hard work which should include the volunteers, residents and visitors not to mention the superlative efforts of the Emergency Services.

But something more extraordinary was to be unearthed. The Undercroft. Located under St George's Hall were three bricked Chambers subdivided during the reign of Charles II in the seventeenth century. This long vaulted ground floor Undercroft is assigned to Edward IV, built to underpin his Great Hall. English Heritage carried out photographic work with the discovery of remnants of a fresco by the Italian seventeenth century artist Antonio Verrio – found hidden behind ruined plaster. With the discovery and opening of several concealed doorways dating back 150 years or more, Windsor Castle is again alive and well.

Rather disconcertedly the past, present and future of Windsor Castle as a fire risk has been embroiled in controversy. In 1987, five years before the fire, the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service axed the retained fire appliance at Windsor, leaving only one whole-time appliance. Then in 1992 came the major conflagration which cast the eyes of the world upon this historic landmark. That should have been the catalyst for improving fire cover, but The Royal Household subsequently downgraded the operational effectiveness of their internal fire-fighting teams. In the latest dramatic twist, the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service are proposing to close the town's fire station at night. They hope that Slough - one of the busiest stations within the county - will be able to cover Windsor. However, that availability issue may be instrumental in a potential £40 million gamble - such being the renovation costs of the fire.

The proposals have however been fiercely fought by both the Windsor Firefighters and the Royal Borough Council. The former have engaged a dynamic portfolio of celebrity endorsement including Elton John, Michael Parkinson, Rolf Harris, Kris Marshall, Natalie Imbruglia, Cliff Richard and many more which can be viewed upon their main campaign website [www.windsorfirestation.co.uk](http://www.windsorfirestation.co.uk) The campaign is based upon a foundation of empirical reporting and has created media and informational networks to build a solid case for the retention of 24/7 cover in the area. Michael Rowley, the Fire Brigade's Union Secretary at Windsor adds, 'This campaign has drawn great praise and support, but it is unbelievable that it should ever be required: the town of Windsor has the largest inhabited Castle in the world attracting 7 million visitors each year, with 10% of those staying overnight in hotels and guest houses.

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