**Major Fires**

The National Standards of Fire Cover were developed in response to a perceived threat or risk to the country. In a similar manner the development of fire safety legislation and the enforcement of such legislation by fire and rescue authorities in the UK has also developed in response to risk.

Unfortunately, the development of fire safety legislation has been almost exclusively as a result of high profile fire tragedies, rather than an early appreciation of potential risk. With one notable exception this has resulted in the introduction of premises-related fire safety legislation which has aimed to prevent similar fire to the disaster that had already occurred.

Successive Governments have reacted to fairly predictable fire disasters which have resulted in multiple fatalities and demands for action by the public. This reactive approach has occurred so frequently that the subsequent legislative changes are commonly referred to as ‘stable-door’ legislation in the fire and rescue service community. The stable-door approach is best appreciated if we consider the main fires that have shaped fire safety legislation in the UK.

**The Keighley Mill fire in Yorkshire 1956 killed 8 people and led to the 1961 Factories Act.**

Keighley Mill was a multi-storey woollen mill dating back to the 19th century. A fire occurred in the building and the smoke and fumes spread rapidly trapping and overcoming workers on upper floors before they could make their escape. The fire led to the introduction of the Factories Act 1961 which was a consolidation of three previous Factory Acts.

The 1961 Act required owners of specific factories to apply for the issue of a ‘means-of-escape’ certificate from the fire authority, and placed fire authorities under a duty to issue such certificates, but only if they were satisfied that they should. Duties to ensure that other fire safety measures were provided under the 1961 Act were vested in Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Factories. It was also acknowledged by the Government of the day that fire authorities were better qualified than district councils to certify means of escape and report on other safety provisions relating to fire.

**A fire at the William Henderson and Sons Department Store in Liverpool in June 1960 killed 11 people and led to the introduction of the Offices, Shops and Railway Premises Act 1963.**

Ten people became trapped in the fourth storey of the building due to the rapid spread of smoke and fumes through suspended ceilings and via unenclosed escalators which cut off the means-of-escape from the premises. One man fell to his death from a ledge which assisting others to safety.

The Government reacted by introducing the fire sections contained in the 1963 Offices, Shops and Railway Premises Act – the clauses being modelled closely on the 1961 Factories Act. Once again the 1963 Act was a consolidation of previous Acts and required specific premises falling within its scope to hold a fire certificate.

Smaller premises caught by the 1963 Act were placed under a direct duty to ensure both adequate means-of-escape in case of fire and provision of firefighting equipment. The fire sections of this Act were predominantly enforced by fire authorities, however the Act did not place a duty upon them to do so in the manner that the Factories Act legislation had done. This situation changed in 1977 when the fire sections of the 1963 Act were transferred into the control of the Fire Precautions Act 1971.

**A fire at The Top Storey Night Club in Bolton in May 1961 killed 19 people. As a result an amendment was put forward giving fire authorities greater powers over club premises under the Licensing Act 1964.**

The premises consisted of a multi-storey industrial building, the top floor of which had been converted into a night club. The lower floors housed other occupants and were used for a variety of purposes.

A fire occurred in one of the lower floor occupancies whilst the night club was in operation. The fire cut off the means-of-escape routes from the club and to escape the fire some guests jumped or fell to their deaths in a shallow river which ran at the rear of the building. Fourteen bodies were found in the club room and five in the adjacent river below.

During the proceedings on the Licensing Act, opportunity was taken to table an amendment with the intention of giving fire authorities greater powers over club premises. The amendment required fire authorities to be consulted before a license under the Act could be granted. The fire authority could also object to the use of a license. This Act effectively gave fire authorities the power to object to the issue of a license on any fire related issue.

**A Fire at the Rose and Crown Hotel in Saffron Waldon on Boxing Day 1969 killed 11 people and led to hotels and boarding houses being designated under the Fire Precautions Act in 1972.**

The fire started in a ground floor TV room after guests had retired for the night, and rapidly filled the escape routes with dense smoke and fumes. A number of people were injured whilst escaping and 17 people escaped or were rescued through windows by Firefighters using ladders. 7 people died on the second floor of the hotel and 4 more on the third floor.

The Rose and Crown fire was one of a series of hotel and boarding house fires that had occurred throughout the UK which effectively forced the Government to introduce the Fire Precautions Act 1971 and in 1972 to designate specified hotels and boarding houses under the 1971 Act as requiring a fire certificate.

**A fire at the Woolworths Store in Manchester in 1979 killed 10 people and led finally to the introduction of the Upholstered Furniture Safety Regulations 1980.**

The fire started in some foam filled furniture that has been temporarily stored on a sales floor and as a result the fire spread rapidly trapping people on upper floors. Some people were overcome in the restaurant where they were taking a meal.

The subsequent inquiry into the tragedy identified the part that the flammability of the furniture had played in the disaster. This disaster and other fires involving inflammable foam filled furnishings, mainly in dwellings, led in 1988 to the introduction of The Furniture and Furnishings (Fire) (Safety) Regulations 1988. These regulations have produced a significant decrease in both domestic fires and fire deaths attributable to foam filled furnishings.

**A fire at the Bradford Football Stadium in May 1985 killed 58 people and led to the Fire Safety and Safety of Places of Sport Act 1987.**

The football match was televised and the fire took place in the full view of TV cameras. The fire was believed to have been caused by a cigarette end which ignited accumulated rubbish and debris under the wooden floor of a predominantly timber stand. Although initially it was a very small fire, it grew and spread rapidly.

The majority of deaths occurred when spectators at the back of the stand tried to exit through the turnstiles area by which they had entered the ground. The turnstiles area however had been locked. Trapped and with nowhere to go the fire overcame them.

A full public inquiry not the tragedy was held. Coupled with a separate inquiry into another football related tragedy at Birmingham City football ground, it led to the introduction of the Fire Safety and Safety of Places of Sport Act 1987. This Act required sports grounds and football stadia to hold safety certificates. It also amended the Fire Precautions Act 1971 significantly to, *inter alia*, allow fire authorities to issue notices prohibiting use without the need to apply to a Magistrates Court.