

A day in the life

FIRE PREVENTION OFFICER HIDDEN DANGER

Although Peter Dagger specialises in fire prevention he has learned the harsh realities of fire first-hand. But convincing others is not that simple as Stephen Ashley discovered.

To the fireman on his way to a motorway pile-up or to a factory fire the job of fire prevention may seem a soft option. To the fire prevention officer the relentless pressure and the responsibility of arbitrating between legal requirements, what is reasonable and what is practical, makes him wish for the freedom of having to cope only with emergencies.

The Fire Brigade however makes no distinction between the two jobs and since fire fighting remains the priority, the fire prevention officer must remain fit and practised enough to ride the fire engine at a moment's notice. If he doesn't he is retired from the force.

Peter Dagger has been in the Fire Brigade for 17 years, the last eight being in fire prevention. He has a rank of station officer, equivalent to inspector in the police.

His day starts at 9 o'clock sharp, in uniform and tucked away in his policy attic room office at Harbourne Fire Station in south Birmingham. The sort of pressure he works under can be seen from statistics.

His division of the West Midlands brigade covers virtually all of south Birmingham, from Smithwick to Acocks Green and from the centre to Kings Norton. Some 2000 firemen operate in the West Midlands brigade from 41 stations.

On Peter Dagger's division there are 21 fire prevention officers. These 21 men deal with certification and fire prevention work, give advice to the general public, industry, commerce, local authority departments and government departments such as the hospital, prison and police services.

By 9.10 Dagger is discussing on the phone a plan of a new old people's home that had come in the night before. He had requested details of the fire hydrants. The plan showed no hydrants, no fire engine access, no fire separation of fire doors, very large travel distances down three radial wings to staircases with no access to the open air. The building was architect-designed but Dagger didn't show any resentment over the lack of vital information.

Conscientious architects in these days, because of their awareness of the legislative and associated fire matters, seek consultation at an early stage. Dagger accepts that he has to be the one who can check the efficiency of fire prevention details in the same way that building control officers check construction details.

Before going back to the architect, he wanted to check with another officer in the area to see if he had a different plan. He had and Dagger made a note to check it out.

Act and this can mean the owner spending sometimes quite substantial amounts of money when he doesn't think it is worthwhile. A stock comment is that the building has been all right for the past 30 years. We can only reply that the owner has been lucky. It's a great advantage for us to be active firemen. We know what fire can do. Most people, however, just don't realise how dangerous fire can be.

"In this respect a good proposal being floated at the moment is that we should be informed when there is a change of use of premises. It is surprising how often steel stockholding premises will change, for example, to a plastics store without considering the change in fire load."

I wouldn't be surprised if doors are the subject of recurring nightmares for fire prevention officers. Apart from trying to make sure that fire doors are kept shut without forcing electro-magnetic catches on the owner, and sympathising with owners who have to put asbestos sheets on their beautiful panel doors (or spend a lot of money), there is the constant problem of ensuring fire safety without compromising security. The next call illustrated this well.

An old house had been converted with much care and money into an old people's home. Alterations were being made to the kitchen and Dagger was "just checking". The matron was glad he called. She had an old lady who regularly went out of the fire exit during the night and walked down the outside fire escape. How could she lock the door without incurring Dagger's wrath? He suggested locks with glass bolts that could be smashed in an emergency or an alarm rigged up in the duty nurse's office so that she would know immediately the door was open. He also fixed a meeting with the owner to discuss the problem.

While at the next stop, a fire station fire prevention officer, I expressed surprise at the lack of codes, standards, regulations in the office. There seemed to be an embarrassed silence. One officer explained: "There is a set at divisional headquarters that we can borrow." Dagger added: "I have bought codes that I badly need out of my own pocket."

In fact the individual stations are in the process of being equipped and stations do have Standing Orders and Guidance Notes on fire prevention. It was also put to me later by the Chief Fire Officer that fire prevention officers tend to obtain their own copies of certain publications. "It is a kind of professional pride, just as a carpenter has his own tools."



Peter Dagger checks out a hose reel. His inspections are thorough and at times unorthodox.

I suggested that the fpos must get a very good initial grounding when they went for the training course on transfer to fire prevention. One colleague volunteered: "It can be 18 months before we get on a course. Basically we learn on the job." Again I was later told that all firemen receive training in fire prevention initially as recruits and at the various career levels. On-the-job training is however considered vital.

Dagger doesn't usually take lunch, he works right through and eats in the evening. However I "borrowed" half an hour during an inspection of an Irish club and over a glass of beer he explained the challenge of the job. In my patch I have everything from the multi-million pound new-Mini factory to tiny boarding houses and clubs. I suppose that my job is to prevent the rest of the brigade from being called out.

"The trouble is that in this country we seem to have to have a disaster before people will act responsibly, especially in legislation. If you understand that legislation is often badly thought out anyway then you can see the problem. Legislation is all right only if it prevents tragedy, can be enforced and can be maintained." The Fire Brigade thinks, however, that the Fire Precautions Act was a step in the right direction.

As a rule the local authorities are most cooperative in implementing Fire Brigade advice but Dagger outlined two cases where problems can arise from crucial decisions being made by people far removed from the realities of fire.

First a local authority buyer purchased radiant electric fires for an old people's home and would not accept Dagger's argument that old people hug radiant fires and can get badly burned. He also quoted the example of a local authority that put a key-in-box exit lock as the only fire precaution in a deaf and blind ward. Peter would have been much more in favour of a panic bar.

After our beer we looked at the club's fire escape. I thought it did not look up to standard. Dagger put the question another way. "Would it support the occupants rushing out during a fire?" The answer was yes and that was good enough for his criteria.

An early afternoon call was to a bingo

hall. The licensing officer was horrified during his periodic inspection and had called in fire prevention. A converted building, the ground and first floors were packed with middle-aged and old ladies, most of them smoking. The fire doors were propped open for ventilation and plastic Jubilee flags hung in profusion from the ceiling. Emergency lighting consisted of an old unprotected gas point that was unfit.

Dagger's approach was nothing if not direct. He set fire to one of the flags. The result was predictable and I would be surprised if the flags stayed there for very much longer. He then walked boldly into the upstairs panic-bolted exit door. It opened and Dagger carried on down the stairs, explaining to the owner the hazards of obstructions if all the occupants were pouring out.

This was followed by a warning on the internal fire doors. "I shall be back to see that you keep them closed. If not then we shall have to start talking about fire detectors and electro-magnetic door catches."

I got the impression that the operator of the hall had seen the possibility of fire and its dangers for the first time and he was rather subdued as we left. Dagger said: "I know that place looked terrible but with a bit of tidying up and a few improvements it is quite all right. The occupants could all get out quickly and that is what it is all about."

The last job of the afternoon was potentially rather delicate. A very ambitious youth centre needed a fire certificate. Money for the centre was raised voluntarily and was in short supply. A firm of fire alarm and detector manufacturers had come in and prepared a specification and the price was high. It was, according to the company, based on what the fpo would require.

Luckily Dagger and the club's licensee saw eye to eye and there was no bad feeling. It was agreed that he would attend a meeting where he could spend some time outlining the basic requirements of the Act as opposed to the grandiose ideas of the alarm company. I asked him if this sort of thing was common. "A lot of people don't bother to ask us what the basic requirements are. It would seem however that some of the alarm companies do not always act in the best of faith."

Back in the office I asked him if there were any constantly recurring simple points that designers and owners missed when considering fire precautions. He replied off a list: people worrying about fire during new building work but not giving it a thought during alterations; putting floor numbers on high blocks; air transfer grills in fire doors without intumescent blocks; cutting holes in compartment walls; early consultation; polythene hinges on fire doors; thinking about escape from the view of the escapee. As we locked up at about 6.30 I asked about his own future. "I would like very much to keep my promotion within fire prevention," he said. He could however be posted back to fire fighting tomorrow or worse, have an accident that precluded such active duty and end his fire brigade career altogether. Who knows?

The next article in the series will appear on 25 November.