

Somerset and Avon Old Comrades Association

Known by the membership as The Old Comrades, the above-named Association devolved primarily from the dissolution of the old Bristol and Somerset Fire Brigades. Its roots lay in the formation of Somerset Fire Brigades Old Comrades Association (A Division), of which the first recorded minutes are the 20th of October, 1972.

The area covered included the stations as far and wide as Radstock, Paulton, Keynsham and Chew Magna under the stewardship of Mr Bevan. Portishead, Pill, Winscombe, Cheddar and Nailsea under Mr. Harris and finally Yatton, Banwell, Wrington, Blagdon and Weston Super Mare under Mr Leach. Interestingly, although this meeting took place at Clevedon Fire Station, a Mr Breddy was co-opted on to the committee and asked to contact ex members in Clevedon. The purpose of this meeting was to find out how great the desire amongst ex members to form an Old Comrades Association was, and it was expected to report back at the next meeting in November. Sadly, this meeting did not happen as the next gathering was in April 1973 where the then Divisional Commander Roy Hayman was invited to attend, instead sending a deputy. It was at this meeting that the number of membership forms returned indicated an interest in forming the Association, and a General Meeting was called for May of that year. Once again the venue was decided to be at Clevedon, thus setting the mark that was to become the backbone of the group.

One of the most interesting features of the General Meeting at that time was the involvement and election of women to position of Officer within the Association. Clevedon had been during the war, a whole-time station with a compliment of firefighters that included women who were known as Fire Ladies. These women had maintained, post war, a connection with the Clevedon crews and one lady in particular was a



great help and supporter of the newly formed Association, Miss Vi Ward. Indeed, when I first became involved as President in 1994, Miss Ward was still attending meetings. Her first role was as Secretary, being elected at the first General Meeting, and it is interesting to note that the only member to be elected to a role outside of what can be best described as the current North Somerset political area was Mr. Bevan from Paulton. Perhaps an indicator of the way in which the Association was destined to grow. Rules were debated and the cost of annual subscription agreed, 50p per annum. Also discussed were the overall social aims of the Association, with visits and get-togethers forming the body of their aims.

During 1939-45 war, Clevedon was full time. Only one name remembered. Back row, second from left, Alec Davies. (Ladies were Fire Ladies)

A committee meeting in June 1973 was called to discuss preliminary arrangements for the first Social Evening. It was agreed to hold this at Clevedon Fire Station on the first Friday in September for members and guests. An admission fee of 30p was agreed and refreshments were to be arranged by the committee. Entertainment was to be discussed at the following meeting in August of that year. It was at this meeting that the death of committee member, Mr. Thomas Jones of Yatton was announced. He had been on a Greenslade's Coaches touring holiday, and was staying in the Esplanade Hotel in Oban, along with 41 other holidaymakers from Cornwall, Devon and Somerset. At 3:15 am, a sailor on his yacht raised the alarm when he spotted a glow in the first-floor reception area. He sent a colleague ashore and sounded his foghorn, but by then the fire had taken hold, resulting in the deaths of ten holidaymakers, with a further 20 taken to hospital, suffering from shock and smoke inhalation. Following this announcement it was further agreed that a donation of £2 be sent to Mr. Fido of Yatton on behalf of the Association.



Esplanade Hotel, Oban.

The social event was held as planned and was attended by Chief Fire Officer Leslie Johnson and his wife. As a matter of interest, Mr Johnson declined to have his portrait hung in the old dining room at Hestercombe House & Gardens, the headquarters of the Somerset Fire Brigade. He was concerned that it might bring about his early death, as two previous Chief Fire Officers had died within a year of having their portraits hung. The event had been an overall success with £12.70 taken on the door and £7.10 raised for the draw. After caterers and performers costs, a profit of 30p had been made. The beginnings of entrepreneurialism, surely!

As 1974 dawned, came the prospect of great changes to local Government reorganisation and with it, the potential for major changes to all Fire Brigades. At a committee meeting in January, 1974, the secretary announced she was holding £15.00 from Somerset Fire Brigades Old Comrades Association, which had been disbanded. It was decided at the final meeting of that organisation that the money should be passed to the present Association and divided equally between Somerset F.B.'s treasurers of A: Weston area, B: Yeovil area and C: Division area. £5.00 was to be sent to the Yeovil group, but as C Division had not yet formed an Old Comrades Association, their £5.00 would be held until such time as an Association was formed.

The committee meeting held in June 1974, after reorganisation into the County Of Avon Fire Brigade, discussed the date for the A.G.M. and a set of rules drawn up for presentation. A proposal was also put forward for a visit to the Fire Service Technical College at Morton-in-Marsh. Still referred to as Somerset Fire Brigade Old Comrades Association (Weston Super Mare Div.), the first mention of a President is made as Div. Commander Roy Hayman sent his apologies for his absence. Membership was reported as 50 paid up members with a further 20 who had signed membership forms but had not yet paid their subscriptions. It was also recognised that due to Brigade reorganisation, links with the former B & C divisions of Somerset were liable to disappear. To this end it was proposed that a social event with the B: Yeovil group be explored. Mr. Bevan was asked to make enquiries regarding a venue for this in the Paulton/Radstock area. Furthermore, as interest in group outings grew, the secretary was asked to enquire of cost and availability of using Blagdon based Lyon's coaches, a company that was used for the remainder of the Associations life.

At the A.G.M in September 1975, the president attended and broached the subject of consideration to changing name of the Association, bearing in mind that they were now a part of the Avon Brigade, and no longer in Somerset. Of course, this led to many concerns as every member were of Somerset origin and losing their origins would not be accepted by many. Indeed, when I proposed name changes in the early 2000's, there was a great deal of resistance to losing that Somerset link, inevitably, the name stayed the same. At the same A.G.M, there is the first mention of welfare. Mr. Len Dibb-Western asked if any provision for visiting sick Association members had been made. The reply, surprisingly, was that this was " ... rather out of our province, but if any information was received, a get-well card would be sent"!

In 1977, Divisional Commander Hayman revisited former comments regarding the name, stating that "as the Association has now been part of the Avon Brigade for over three years, the name should be amended to include Avon". Following further discussion, it was agreed to change the name to that which it was known for the rest of its existence. At the same meeting, it was agreed that the committee should endeavour to contact members of Radstock, Paulton and Keynsham in an effort to renew their interest in the Association, it being noted that as everything was centred on Clevedon, attendance from the far-flung stations had dropped off.

At a meeting in May 1979, the discussion centred on an Open Day with stalls to celebrate the closure of the old station prior to the move to the new and current station opposite. This was duly agreed that all members would be willing to help, albeit that the station had actually opened in the late 1800's or early 1900's, moving from the St. John Ambulance building directly opposite. Also around this time, the name of Leading Fireman Peter Till appears as station coordinator to the Association. Peter was to prove a long-time member of the Association but, on this occasion, it was noted that he was in Hospital, and so the chairman at that time, Mr Williams, said he would visit him and take a basket of fruit from the members. It was also noted that the proposed visit to the Benevolent home at Littlehampton had to be cancelled as visitors are only allowed during weekdays. Alternatively, a visit to Portsmouth and Southsea was mooted, but due to lack of support, the Annual outing for that year was cancelled.

In January 1980, following the closure of the two volunteer stations in the Avon Brigade due to financial reasons, a letter was sent inviting members to join, resulting in 8 new members.

In October, 1981, a new president attended the AGM, Div. Commander Brian Hellin. By 1983, it appears that the meetings had become full of relevant discussion and certain members were becoming prominent in taking the organisation forward, such as Ken Schroeder and Ralph Fryer. By this time, Sub Officer Peter Till had been made honorary member, and Aubrey Willcocks, the Station Officer at Clevedon was becoming more involved. Motion were made about raising the subscription to £1 but defeated by vote and the social aspect was beginning to blossom, with Ralph Fryer seemingly adopting the role of entertainments secretary.

By February 1985, Brigade changes saw presentations made to the President who was leaving Avon, to be replaced by Div Commander Ray Southard, and Stn. O. Willcocks who was retiring and about to join the organisation. Peter Till became Stn. O. and still retained his honorary appointment. At the AGM in October, mention is made of a letter from Mr. John Parnham, Secretary of the Avon Fire Brigade Pensioners Association regarding a meeting between the members of the two Associations. After discussion, it was agreed to hold the matter in abeyance pending further information from Mr. Parnham. It would appear that following a telephone call from Mr. Parnham to Div. Commander Southard, there was talk of an affiliation between the two Associations. After discussion, it was agreed that a meeting be sought with Mr. Parnham and Barry Hook in order to glean more information. A meeting was arranged in November 1985 where both Barry Hook and Mr. Parnham were introduced to the Association. It was agreed to write to all members to ascertain their feelings on such an affiliation.

January 1986 started with another change in the President's role. D.C. Southard was transferred to Brigade H.Q., his place to be taken by John Barnes. The annual membership subscription had been raised the previous year from 50 pence to £1. Subsequently, discussion ensued over those who had failed to pay their annual subs and it was agreed that those who failed to do so would be removed from membership. At the AGM in November that year, notice was given that the membership had agreed to affiliate with the Avon Fire Brigade Pensioners Association, and application had duly been made. The application was accepted and agreed at the AFB Pensioners General meeting on the 12 November and an invitation to join was awaited.

At a committee meeting in January 1987, Station Officer Till informed the Association of the impending retirement of President John Barnes in April of that year. Plans were made to mark his retirement with a dinner and purchase of two wine goblets marked J & K (after his wife Kath). At this point, an interesting swing of events occurred in that at the AGM in October, 1987, the retired John Barnes was proposed as President. Mr. Barnes declined the position, saying that historically this post was always taken by the C Div. Commander. It was agreed a letter be sent to the incoming DC, John Mapstone, inviting him to become President. A further proposal was then made, that Mr. Barnes become Vice President, something that was agreed by all parties. Furthermore, this meeting saw the first mention of an annual dinner in place of a social evening. Something that was to become an annual event over the coming years.

At the AGM in 1988, 2 of the stalwart members announced they were retiring from positions on the committee. Mrs. Vi Ward, Secretary, had decided to stand down after 17 years of service, and Mr. Aubrey Willcocks, Chairman, who had been involved, both as an officer on the station as well as during his time after retirement. Both indicated that they were prepared to stay on as committee members. As there was no nomination for the Secretary's position, a proposal was made that one of the members wives could become Secretary. This meant the incumbent would become an Honourary member, without voting rights. This was instantly agreed and Mrs Mary Willcocks, wife of the former chairman, was to be approached as soon as possible. At a meeting a month later, Mrs. Willcocks agreed to take on the position.

At the AGM in 1989, the treasurers report centred on the non-payment of subs by members, a common thread throughout the life of the Association. Due to family commitments, Mrs Willcocks had been forced to stand down as Secretary in June of that year. The absence of a Secretary meant that usual business could not continue, and therefore proceedings were suspended and held in abeyance until an Emergency Meeting could be called. Mrs Vi Ward once again stepped into the void as temporary Secretary in order that the Emergency meeting could be held. Here, a nomination of Mr. Martin was made and fortunately he was prepared to stand. The price of subs rose also at this meeting from £1 to £1:50.

At the AGM in 1992, the main debate and concern was falling membership numbers, with members looking at ways to bolster recruitment. One year later, 1993, the AGM voted for position of President. D.O. Mapstone was retiring from the brigade, to be replaced by D.O. Ernie Coghlan. It seems that the membership had forgotten the long-established acceptance that the Divisional Commander automatically became President. One of the membership was nominated for President, along with the D.C. and put to a vote. The result sought to keep the link with the uniformed members and D.O. Coghlan was named President. In 1994, the subs were raised again to £2 and would stay at that amount for the rest of the Association's days.

At the AGM in September 1995, a new President was elected. D.O. Mervyn Osborne had replaced Ernie Coghlan who had been moved to take over A Division. Due to Brigade Reorganisation in 1996, in which

he was instrumental and which removed the three operational Divisions, forming a brigade wide operational system, he was to remain as President until his retirement in 2004 and then until the closure of the Association in early 2024. However, in 1995, membership had dwindled to a mere 28 and activities were not supported, with only 6 members showing interest in attending the outing to Worcester. Time was called to put things right. Support from the Brigade Administration department was promised if members wanted to keep things going, but the ball was placed very much in their court.

1996 saw a flurry of potential activity with planned visits to Weston playhouse, Sheppey's cider at Taunton, Brigade Control amongst other ideas. Sadly, many ideas were to prove too expensive and failed, but the Association maintained its interest in the Skittle evenings, held at the Hand Stadium in Clevedon. It is clear that the driving force for the Association centred on Clevedon, with members attending from what was the old 'C' Division, namely Blagdon, Winscombe, Yatton, Weston, Nailsea, Portishead and Pill. Membership from the farther reaches of the old Somerset Brigade had dwindled away.

The committee meeting in January 2002 turns out to be the last time the minutes were written into a book. From this point, the minutes taken were transcribed onto computer but, sadly at the time of writing, the computerised minutes were not found. It is believed that following the closure of the Association, the minutes were deleted. Notwithstanding this, the organisation continued and it was around this time that efforts were made to increase membership. Active work on retained stations went ahead to advertise the fact that the Association existed and those approaching retirement were invited to join. This led to increased membership with, once again, excellent support from serving firefighters in Clevedon, many of whom joined and took part in activities offered. It was also decided, that because retained Firefighters were very much part of the community, and often due to the goodwill of employers that they were able to give 24-hour cover, membership was also expanded to include employers etc. This also led to a further increase of new members.

In 2005, the Treasurer, Ralph Fryer, stood down and the former 'C' Div. Officer and later 'B' Div. Commander, Ernie Perrot, took the role. Mary Willcocks once again stood as Secretary and did a sterling job in that role, frequently offering to have committee meetings at her own home with Aubrey, who once again stood as a committee member. It was around this time that a decision was made to alter the format of the formal Annual General Meeting. Numbers attending such meetings were dropping away, so much so that there were sometimes almost as many committee members sat on top table as there were attendees in front. It was decided to make the evening one which incorporated both the formal as well as the informal. Members were invited to bring their wives or husbands who sat through the formal stage of the evening, (they of course had no voting rights), and upon completion, the evening became a social event with skittles, catered originally by Mary Willcocks and Ernie's wife Sandra until arrangements were made to have Fish and Chip dinners brought in from a local chip shop. Later, an alternative option was salad that was prepared by Ernie and Sandra. This proved most successful over the years as attendance at the AGM grew and the raffle provided welcome funds to the Association. Membership subs never rose beyond the £2 mark.

A knock-on effect to this were the annual dinners, latterly held in February at the Masonic hall in Nailsea. Attendance was high and the spirit in the room one of fun, particularly when Ernie Perrot provided long balloons for each table, that travelled at speed when released. The president and the top table were frequently targets, particularly from the Clevedon contingent.

Coach trips also proved popular with visits ranging from Southsea, Brixham, Exmouth, the Houses of Parliament, to boat trips in Worcester or the canal at Tiverton. Overall their success grew and great fun was had by the majority. Membership numbers stayed level and it was heartening to see members bring former colleagues to join up.



A problem arose around 2015 when Mary Willcocks stated that she was standing down as Secretary at that year's AGM. At the meeting, the position was put to those attending that we would be without a Secretary if no-one came forward and unfortunately we were met with silence. Eventually, Nancy Scull, Ernie's friend and next-door neighbour, who had regularly attended AGM's and dinners as Ernie's guest, came forward and offered to fill the role. It was quickly decided that the position needed to be filled by a bona-fide member and so Nancy was voted in as an honorary member and able to take up the vacant role. This was how the

Association continued until 2020, when the devastation of Covid 19 hit. Over the next couple of years, lockdowns and the varying regulations on how often, where and how many people could come together played a major havoc with all sectors of society. This obviously meant that we were unable to come together for any reason and the Association suffered accordingly. When the society found itself trying to return to normal, we tried to meet, but the fear of contagion and illness had filtered into many people's minds and we found that lots of the membership were unsure about meeting up in social environments. After all, the membership comprised of an older generation, and health issues were foremost in many minds.

Attendance at the 2023 AGM, was markedly small and the committee voiced its first concern regarding future events. Ill health meant that Nancy could no longer provide secretarial duties and the proposed dinner for February 2024 had to be cancelled due to lack of support. Like many other areas of society, costs were rising, making the attractiveness of our small events rather expensive. 2024 proved to be the year when, due to the lack of support and loss of members, the committee decided to propose to the membership that the Association be discontinued. They were offered, by email, three alternative ways in which the Association could disband and the final result, voted for by members, was that the money held in the bank, £1326, be distributed evenly between charities. The final act of the Association was to give £226 to six charities, this being carried out by Treasurer/Chairman, Ernie Perrot. Final closure only occurred when he had received letters of thanks from all six charities.

Mervyn Osborne

1st August 2025