

## ***Summary - 'From 21st century leisure to 20th century holiday catastrophe: the Isle of Man Summerland fire disaster'***

*By Dr Ian Phillips*

The facts of the Summerland disaster are chilling: the deaths of 50 people in a new building that had been hailed as marking the dawn of a new era of British leisure architecture when it opened in 1971. The Summerland concept was new and made the Isle of Man complex unique in a British context. In the words of a promotional booklet, Summerland was “a new concept in leisure” whose innovative design would “set the architectural world alight”. Summerland was not merely a horrific fire disaster in a small island community; but a tragedy that had reverberations throughout the British Isles and beyond in the fields of architecture, building design, leisure and public safety. The Summerland fire is the worst day in Manx history and still today remains the second worst loss of life from fire on land in the British Isles since the Second World War.

Despite the large-scale loss of life in the Isle of Man fire, the Summerland disaster is one of the most forgotten and trivialised news stories in the post-war history of the British Isles. For instance, fewer than 50% of books that claim to list major news stories involving Britons mention the Summerland disaster, yet the authors of these books can all find space to mention the deaths of 31 Britons in the King's Cross Underground Station fire in London. What an outrage! Now ask yourself the following question: if the Summerland disaster had happened in Bournemouth and killed 50 middle-class southerners, would the authors of these books have failed to mention that? Would they have trivialised those deaths? Would they have insulted those victims? I very much doubt it. The treatment of the Summerland dead by history writers and the media really does speak volumes about geographical bias in the media.

Chapter 1 introduces the Summerland disaster; considers the number of deaths; the age, sex and region of origin of the Summerland dead and injured; and the family groups affected by the disaster. The chapter concludes by placing Summerland in the context of British fire disasters. In chapters 2 and 3, the economic rationale and design logic behind Summerland are analysed. These two chapters provide the necessary economic and architectural background that is essential for understanding the Summerland project. Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to the evening of the fire and its aftermath respectively. The material in chapter 5 is arranged chronologically to enable the reader to see how the story developed over the ten days after the fire. This chapter includes extensive comment on the disaster from the architects, the Isle of Man authorities, Trust House Forte (the British hotel and leisure company that ran Summerland) and the Manx Chief Fire Officer (the interested parties); and building and fire experts in Britain. In chapter 6, the main findings of the Summerland Fire Commission (SFC) report are presented in a non-technical manner and their implications for the design and management of public buildings are discussed. The tortuous road to the rebuilding of Summerland is considered in chapter 7. In this chapter, a comparative analysis of the original Summerland and the rebuilt structure is conducted to enable the reader to see how the lessons of the disaster have been learnt. Chapter 8 is devoted to telling the stories of some of the

people who survived the disaster and/or lost relatives in the fire, and the effects that it has had on their lives. The personal testimonies provided by Elaine Anderson (whose parents both died at Summerland) and Ruth McQuillan (who was only five-years-old when she was seriously injured in the fire) are particularly moving. In chapter 9, the book concludes by looking at the future redevelopment of the site that will see Summerland – the complex and the infamous name – disappear into history. Thirty-three years after the fire, the Summerland story finally closed in 2006. Summerland and the adjoining Aquadrome were demolished in January and February 2006.

The research has entailed extensive archival research in libraries in the Isle of Man, Birmingham and London. Chapter 7 is based on site visits to Summerland in 2003 and 2004 to analyse how the lessons of the disaster were learnt when Summerland was rebuilt after the fire. My aim has been to collect as much information as possible on the fire; identify any inconsistencies and contradictions; and synthesise the information into the book.

A Summerland fire disaster factual summary document is also available from the author on request. The library at the Manx Museum in Douglas also has copies of this document. This summarises the main facts of the disaster and the reasons for the appalling loss of life.

### ***A big thank you to all of my correspondents***

I would like to thank all the people who have contacted me about the Summerland fire since June 2005. These people have included survivors of the fire, people who lost relatives and friends in the blaze, people who had visited Summerland before the blaze, Isle of Man residents, firemen, health and safety officers, university students who had been set an essay on the fire, and even people from America, Australia and New Zealand.

Your encouragement and interest in my research are much appreciated. However, I would still like to hear from anyone who was directly or indirectly involved with the Summerland disaster in any way. In particular, I would like to hear from:

1. The three Liverpool schoolboys that started the fire or any person who knows the three boys. The three boys would now all be in their late forties or early fifties. I am not interested in revisiting your involvement in the fire because it is well established that your actions were not malicious. I am interested in telling the stories of your lives AFTER the fire in my book, and I will not publish any information (names, addresses) that could lead to your identification. What became of your lives? Have you ever been bullied or threatened by anyone over the Summerland fire? Did your involvement in the Summerland disaster scar you psychologically?
2. Survivors of the disaster and individuals who lost family members at Summerland: I am willing to add your stories to chapter 8 of my book.
3. The general manager and any other senior members of staff at Summerland on the night of the fire
4. Any person who can shed light on why sections of the media (e.g. The Isle of Man Newspaper Group, BBC) and other organisations (e.g. The Isle of Man Fire Brigade)

misreported the number of deaths from the Summerland fire as being either 51, 52 or 53 for many years.

I would also welcome any comments or suggestions about my book. For instance:

Are there any factual errors? In particular, I found that the spelling of people's names and their ages often varied slightly between different newspapers.

Are there any obvious omissions?

When attempting to explain something, is there another explanation that I have missed?

Although I am writing the book for my own benefit, I would still be interested to hear from interested publishers. No book currently exists that solely covers the Summerland disaster. I believe my book to be unique in the range and depth of information presented about a disaster, which directly or indirectly affected the lives of thousands of Britons.