

## CHAPTER 4

### 8PM AND THE HORROR STARTED

#### 4.1 Introduction to the night of the fire

This book has so far reviewed the economic rationale (chapter 2) and design logic (chapter 3) of Summerland. It now becomes necessary to describe the evening of the fire on Thursday, August 2nd, 1973. This chapter is written using only the information that would have been available in the eight hours after the fire. It does not seek to analyse the precise sequence of events inside Summerland or the reasons for the high number of deaths. These questions are addressed in subsequent chapters (chapters 5 and 6). This chapter begins by recalling the eyewitness accounts given to reporters on the evening of the fire (section 4.2) before describing the scenes outside the building on Douglas Promenade (section 4.3). The initial theories that circulated about fire's cause are then described (section 4.4). This chapter also considers the Summerland fire disaster from the perspective of the emergency services (section 4.5) and the press (section 4.6). It concludes by discussing the factors that determined the number of persons inside Summerland when the fire broke out (section 4.7). This is important because the attendance level was recognised by the *Summerland Fire Commission* as being an important factor in determining the number of deaths.

## 4.2 Eyewitness accounts

### *Survivors*

Six recurring themes run through survivors' accounts of the Summerland disaster: the rapid fire spread; the melting 'glass'; the panic and mad rush to the exits; the pandemonium around the main entrance; the locked emergency exits; and the separation of parents from their children.

"The fire seemed to spread in seconds, it was terrible," said one survivor. Mr Greig (26) from Lanarkshire in Scotland, an entertainer in Summerland, said the blaze spread like 'wildfire' and was a 'horrifying experience'. Mr Greig was injured helping other people escape from the building. "I smashed a window and handed a number of children out to safety. It was mass panic," he recalled. Fellow Scotsman Mr John Farr from Dundonald was in Summerland with his wife and children. He said: "The flames seemed to be following us, and it appeared to be just a matter of time before they reached us. It was a nightmare." The family escaped by climbing through broken windows, which they had smashed with their feet. Liverpool holidaymaker Mr George Croft said: "We decided to get out quickly...The place was packed. We were lucky to escape. The building went up like paper and was wrecked in no time at all." A man who was inside Summerland with his family said:

"The place seemed to shoot up in flames as if it had been sprayed with petrol. I was in the blitz in London, but I have never seen a fire like this, which spread so quickly. It was like an inferno."

Mandy McLaren (19) of Saltcoats in Ayrshire said: “There were people running everywhere in panic. I saw a little girl with her legs all cut. Her parents were trying to bandage her with paper bags. I heard a lot of Scots accents among the people who came out.” Newspapers reported that some of the dead had been in the sauna baths on the sixth floor. Mrs Wyn Price, Manageress of the Sundome, said:

“Black smoke filled the building and then the flames came rushing up towards us. I dashed into the sauna and told everybody to get out. But then suddenly a sheet of flame shot across our floor level...I staggered to the emergency side entrance and down the [NE Service] stairs. I don’t know if the people in the sauna managed to get out. They were all in their underclothes”.

One report claimed all the dead were in the Sundome, which had been “sealed off” by the flames. No bodies were in fact found in the Sundome, although some of the bodies found elsewhere may have been in the Sundome when the fire started. Whilst the perception amongst survivors is of rapid fire spread, most would have been unaware that the fire had in fact been going for around 20 minutes outside the building before it visibly broke through into the building’s interior (section 6.4).

Many survivors referred to the melting ‘glass’ in Summerland’s promenade wall and roof. Whilst the lowest 10 feet of the sea-facing wall was glass, the remainder of this wall was built out of combustible transparent plastic panels. Mr Sam Farr, a holidaymaker from Belfast, said: “Glass was melting in the heat. I saw one man with his hair on fire and his

coat melted off his back and running with a youngster in his arms.” This man might have been Sammy McQuillan carrying his two-year old daughter Lynda (Ruth McQuillan, Personal Communication, see chapter 8). Mr James Barton from Glasgow was going into Summerland with his family when he noticed flames coming from the crazy-golf course. He said: “It looked like burning oil to me. People were trying to put the fire out but it was getting worse and then somebody shouted to call the fire brigade. The next thing it seemed to go up the front of the building in a great sheet of flame.” Shirley McFarlane (8) said: “We were on the ground [Solarium] floor and whilst having our drinks a wall of fire appeared to come from nowhere.” One female survivor told an ITN reporter how the fire spread along the walls “as though [they] were paper” before “it lit up the roof”. Another eyewitness said transparent plastic panels burned “like a film from the First World War of a Zeppelin blazing”. Others referred to ‘burning material’ falling from Summerland’s roof. “Molten plastic falls on children,” said a headline in *The Times*. The paper (Friday, August 3rd, 1973, final edition) continued:

“They [the firemen] were helpless because the highly inflammable material had turned the building into an enormous bonfire almost instantaneously. Plastic was melting in the intense heat and dripping on to people still unable to escape.”

Miss Susan Appleton (19) from Blackpool, who was selling tee shirts in a kiosk on the Solarium floor, said: “That place took five years to build up and five minutes to destroy. It didn’t so much burn down as melt.” Many

eyewitness accounts emphasise the Oroglas catching fire. However, the Oroglas was not ignited until there was a major fire in the Amusement Arcade (section 6.5.3). It is likely that many survivors would not have appreciated this fact because of the build-up of dense smoke on the terraces at the eastern end of Summerland.

Several survivors spoke of mass panic. Mr Sam Farr said: “It was a terrible scene, people were rushing for the doors and kicking them open. A lot of people had to kick their way out through the glass panels in the side of the building.” A visitor from Edinburgh said: “We felt a draught and then saw men with fire extinguishers. We were told to get out and there was a bit of a panic. I saw a number of men and women cut and bleeding.” Mr Patrick Mungey (60) from Dublin was on the main Solarium floor waiting for the night’s cabaret show to begin when the fire “seemed to start in an amusement arcade and bingo area”. He told a reporter: “First there was black smoke and then flames started creeping round the building...There was panic, and people were screaming and trying to get out through the main doors.” The owner of a shop on the Solarium floor said: “Everybody was dashing for the exits. I was knocked down in the rush. I was flat on my stomach and people were trampling over me. There was a kiddy underneath me. I managed to get her to safety.” Mr James Storer, a sheet metal worker from Kitts Green in Birmingham, was in Summerland with his wife and 11-year-old daughter. “I have never been so terrified in my life. It was everyone for himself in there. I do not know how so many got out alive,” he said. Mr George Low (47) from Dundee told reporters:

“There was no warning. There was just a load whoosh as a sheet of flame shot across the dance floor. People who had been dancing were badly burned. They were running all over the floor with their hair on fire – screaming in agony...One thing I want to know is why there was no fire alarm bell sounding”.

Mr Barry Hutchinson (61) and his wife Mary (59) from Leeds were in the Marquee Showbar on the fifth floor when the fire started. Mr Hutchinson said that people were initially calm, but panic immediately set in when they came out of the Showbar and saw the Solarium floor “was a mass of flame”. The couple escaped “quite easily” through the doors into the Aquadrome swimming baths.

The panic turned into pandemonium around Summerland’s main entrance, as piles of living bodies built up with other people walking over them. “It was like a rugby scrum,” said Mr Storer, who found his escape impeded by turnstiles that had been locked into position. *Manx Radio* reported at least one woman had been badly trampled. “Some of the casualties were caused as holidaymakers were trampled in the crush at the exits of the building,” said *The Daily Telegraph*. The Reverend Percy Matthews, Rural Dean of Douglas, who went to Noble’s Hospital to comfort the injured, said: “One or two people were injured by being trodden on during the general exodus.” Belfast holidaymaker Mr Peter Arthurs told reporters:

“People were smashing chairs and anything they could get their hands on to break windows. About 100 people were lying on the ground where they had fallen, shouting and screaming. It was pandemonium. People were crawling over others lying near the doors. You could hear people’s limbs cracking, and all the plastic was burning”.

Mrs McKechnie from Liverpool said: “Inside there was complete panic. Many people fell at the exits and were crushed. When I fell there were children underneath me. In 10 minutes the fire had spread everywhere.”

The pandemonium around the main entrance was exacerbated by a locked emergency exit. Mr Mungey said: “People were unable to get the emergency doors open. I put my foot through a large pane of glass and got out that way with other people. Mrs Hutchinson said: “Along with dozens of other people I was kicking at glass doors and banging with my fists in an effort to break them.” After failing to smash the doors open with a chair, one survivor went back to the stage area to get a mike stand which they used to ram the doors open (ITN News at Ten, August 3rd, 1973). Some people said their escape had been impeded by exit doors that opened inwards.

Other survivors found several emergency exits chained or locked. Mr Alan Sandham (17) from Salford near Manchester said:

“I tried three emergency doors that were chained or locked. I was told later it was to keep gatecrashers out. Lots of people panicked when they found doors chained. I saw people standing there tearing at the doors instead of rushing to find others that weren’t locked. I can’t help thinking the time that was wasted may have cost them their lives.”

Mr Terence Springer from Leamington Spa in Warwickshire tried to escape with his wife only to find a fire exit “somewhere at the back” of the building (this was the NE Service Staircase: section 6.5.2) chained and locked. He said: “People started kicking at it but it was no good...People were getting pretty desperate and a girl employed in Summerland came up and told us of another way out.” It is possible that in the darkness Mr Springer and others were trying to open the door to a locked cupboard rather than a fire exit door (John Webb, FRS, Personal Communication).

One of the worst horrors of the Summerland disaster was the separation of parents from their children when the fire broke out. *The Isle of Man Examiner* reported: “When the alarm sounded mothers ran screaming for their children.” A man who was inside Summerland with his family said:

“Many children seemed to be on the lower floor, where there is a fairground and roundabouts. Parents, who must have been on the upper floor where the bars and refreshment rooms are, were rushing around searching frantically for their children.”



Survivor Mrs Dorcas Heppenstall (58) said: “There were little children crying for their mummies and daddies, and there were daddies and mummies crying in anguish for their little ones with no idea where they were. It was more than the mind could bear.” Mrs Heppenstall broke her wrist in the fire; she had only recently recovered from breaking her wrist on an earlier occasion. John Foster (13) from Walton, Liverpool said: “Women were screaming and men were shouting out ‘calm down’.”

The experience of Mr and Mrs Arthurs, who were inside Summerland with their five children, was typical of many (**figure 4.1**). The couple were enjoying a drink in the Marquee Showbar, whilst their children were playing in different parts of the centre downstairs. Mr Peter Arthurs said:

“All of a sudden there was a cloud of smoke. At first, nobody seemed to take much notice. Then someone pulled a curtain back and small flames started. People started to move out and within ten seconds the whole place was on fire.”



**Figure 4.1:**  
**Mrs Arthurs with four of her five children**

Mrs Elizabeth Arthurs said: “When we saw the flames we ran out of the Marquee Showbar just before the floor collapsed in on top of other people...I finished up on the [terrace] and had to jump about eight feet... We saw some children with roller skates on unable to run out...The emergency doors were locked and people started smashing glass”. Outside the building, it took Mr Arthurs about ten minutes to find his wife and children. They had all escaped injury; however, the youngest children Allison (7) and Gary (3) were badly shaken, and had probably only survived after being pulled clear by other people.

In some cases, parents waiting outside Summerland thought they would never see their children again. Mr and Mrs Smith’s daughter Sharon (14) and her friend Sharon Walton (14), all from Belfast, had been rollerskating in Summerland since about 7pm. Mr Smith said: “It was a terrible time. We waited for three hours before we knew the girls were all right. My wife flaked out two or three times. I thought I was never going to see them alive again.” Miss Smith said: “We went on skating until we realised how big the fire was.” Luckily, the girls managed to escape through a ‘side door’, but like many other survivors encountered blocked emergency exits: “We tried to get out through a back door but we could not get it open. Burning plastic was dripping from the ceiling and firemen put covers over our heads to keep it off us...We saw one person break a window to escape and a young man, who was still wearing his roller skates, jump through another window.” The girls saw one man running around with his hair on fire trying to get out of the burning building.

Amid the terror and confusion, there were numerous acts of heroism. Noel Quigley, a 6ft 5in Irishman, plucked youngsters off the floor and hurled them to safety through a doorway. A colleague of Mr Quigley said: “He must have picked up 50 or 60 like that. They were being trampled underfoot around him, and even at his size he was knocked over several times.” Disc jockey Johnny Silver (30) guided 200 youngsters to safety and then went back into Summerland to rescue more people (**figure 4.2**). He saw someone holding a baby shouting from the floor above. Mr Silver said: “I held out my arms and they threw the child. I didn’t manage to catch it properly, but I stuck out my leg and that broke its fall. The baby was alright.” As a result, Mr Silver’s leg was badly injured and he had to walk with a stick following the fire.



**Figure 4.2:**

**DJ Johnny Silver stands at bottom of the escalator after the fire**

Entertainments manager Mr Ted Oldham said: “I smashed a big window and was handing children out...There were a lot of children around. We were trying to calm them down, but it was impossible.”

The first newspaper reports show there was some uncertainty as to the precise time when the fire started, with reports varying from just before 8pm, at 8pm, just after 8pm or about 8pm. Mr Alan Jackson, a reporter for *Manx Radio*, said: “It started about 7.55pm. But initially, it was thought there was no immediate danger to the people in Summerland.” When Mr Jackson arrived at the scene “about five minutes later”, he saw smoke but no flames. He continued: “Suddenly, it burst into flames and people began to realise the danger.” Police estimated there were at least 2,000 people inside Summerland, including 250 members of staff. A ‘beat dance’ – which was usually well attended by youngsters – was believed to have boosted the attendance level. Mr Peter Kneale, the manager of *Manx Radio*, said there could have been 1,000 children inside the building. He said: “It is one of the busiest weeks of the year and the weather was very bad...A lot of people seemed to calm each other down and although there were many people looking for their children, most of them got out without being harmed.”

### *Bystanders*

Accounts of the rapid spread of the fire came from three sources: eyewitnesses on Douglas Promenade; people who were about to enter Summerland when the fire broke out; and residents of Strathallen Road who lived on the cliff behind Summerland.

Mary Stewart, a holidaymaker, said: “At first there were just a few flames coming out from the side but within minutes of us being here the whole lot just went up and the whole building was on fire.” Taxi driver Mr George Pyatt was driving towards Summerland when the blaze started. He said: “I saw a small flame from the top corner of the building. It didn’t look

anything at all...but before I had gone 200 yards the place suddenly went up like a match box.” Another taxi driver, Mr Paul Stevens, was picking up a fare nearby when the fire started. He commented: “I saw a puff of white smoke from the front of Summerland, then a puff of black. I didn’t think very much about it. Then I turned the car round, and in my mirror I saw the sudden flare. What happened in so few minutes is too much to grasp”. Mr and Mrs Robbins from New Mills in Derbyshire were on a bus near Summerland. She said: “The heat from the fire penetrated the windows of the bus and the conductor shouted: ‘Good God, look at that’.” A boy aged about nine, who had escaped from the building, jumped on the bus looking shocked and dazed, before the bus drove away. Mr Bernard Donnelly from Belfast was staying at a boarding house about 150 yards away from Summerland:

“I have never seen anything like this since the war. They were coming out of that building screaming with their clothes half-burned off their backs – and in some cases, their flesh burned to the bone.”

Mr Harry Thuiller of Dublin had just installed an indoor golf course at Summerland and was at his hotel when the fire started. “I looked out of the hotel window and I saw this ball of fire. I just could not believe it,” he said. The fire was accompanied by an explosion that sounded like an “atrocious air crash”, he added. The Manager of the Palace Hotel and Casino told reporters: “The whole scene is one of chaos. The whole place has gone up. It went up very quickly. Now there is virtually nothing left – just a shell... I

haven't seen any of the casualties myself, but I know a number of young people are involved."

Mr Robert Bore (46) from Skelmersdale in Lancashire was just about to enter the building with his wife when the blaze started. He said: "An inferno seemed to engulf the whole building. I removed one lady with face injuries from the main entrance...I was within a few feet of the main entrance but it was impossible to get in to rescue anyone because of a solid sheet of flame. No one could have got out through there." Miss Doreen Green, a student from Moseley in Birmingham, said: "People started to run past me saying there was a fire. I did not believe it at first and then I heard screaming...It went up like a bomb in seconds...Another few minutes and I would have been right in the middle of it."

Mr David Sansom, a resident of Strathallen Road, saw the fire sweep across Summerland's acrylic barrel roof: "A small streak of smoke rose from the roof about five minutes to eight. We thought nothing of it. Then flames burst through the roof, it was ablaze in seconds. Thousands of people fled from the building and the whole Summerland dome seemed ablaze. Black smoke climbed into the sky and then I saw the roof cave in. The flames were 40ft into the air." Another eyewitness quoted in *The Birmingham Post* said: "Viewed from nearby cliffs, the building appears completely gutted and the fire is still raging."

Several of the bystanders to the fire reported hearing several explosions. Mr Sansom said: "There was a flash and loud explosion. It could have been gas. I don't think it was anything else. Several small explosions followed. They were all loud." Mr Bore told reporters that an

explosion “nearly blew us off our feet”, as he tried to rescue people from the building. The explosions were also heard further along the Promenade by Mr Ross Jones, the manager of the Castle Mona Hotel. He said: “After the fire had been going on for some time there was an explosion. It was one hell of a bang...The building now is just a smouldering shell. There was only the framework left. All the transparent material [Oroglass] had gone.” Mr Gillinson, the architect, said it was unlikely that the Aquadrome’s oil-fired boiler was the cause of the explosions. These explosions do not even merit a one-line mention in the *Summerland Fire Commission* report nor were they conveyed to the Fire Research Station (FRS) team that arrived in Douglas three days after the fire. FRS investigator John Webb said gas cylinders were the most likely cause of these explosions, an opinion shared by Summerland fireman Godfrey Cain. These cylinders were used for cooking and similar catering needs because Summerland had no mains gas supply. Any gas cylinders in the basement beer cellars can be dismissed as the cause because these cylinders would have been carbon dioxide and non-flammable. It was highly unlikely that electrical short-circuits, for instance in the gaming machines, would have caused explosions of the size and nature described by the bystanders, although the collapse of furniture or fittings cannot be ruled out completely as the cause (John Webb, FRS, Personal Communication).





**Figure 4.3:**

**The burnt out remains of Summerland on the day after the fire**

#### 4.3 The scenes outside the building

There was initially a relatively relaxed and almost jokey atmosphere amongst the first people leaving Summerland, according to eyewitness Rob Farrow (personal communication); it was almost as if the fire had got novelty value and was something different. Within minutes the mood had turned sombre, as the front of the building quickly turned to flames and bodies started to appear on the flying staircase. Mr Farrow said: “There was absolute silence amongst the crowd outside the building for three or maybe four minutes.” *The Isle of Man Examiner* reported how “the scenes around



the building were the worst Douglas has ever seen.” An eyewitness said: “The scene outside was terrible. There were sobbing people everywhere, trying to find relatives who had been in the building.” *The Manchester Evening News* (August 3rd, 1973) reported that the “police had to hold back hysterical crowds as muffled explosions rocked the centre”. Holidaymakers’ cars were stopped in the street and commandeered as makeshift ambulances. George Pyatt (57) of Douglas said: “I made about eight or 10 runs to the hospital with the injured. A lot of them were teenagers, just kids of 12 or 13. They all had terrible burns...They were babbling with fear and pain. It was heartbreaking.” Keith Jamieson (7) recalled: “I have never seen so many injured people before...it is something that I will never forget”. Ambulances ran a shuttle service of casualties to Noble’s Hospital for more than two hours.

Police at the scene appealed over loudhailers for blood donors, with an all-Island call being issued over *Manx Radio*, who re-opened their transmitter to broadcast the appeal. Around 400 answered the appeal. Additional blood plasma was collected from hospitals in Liverpool. The plasma was rushed under police escort to Speke Airport and flown to the Isle of Man in 45 minutes, whose airport by that time was only accepting emergency flights. The five-seater twin-engine plane was packed with medical supplies, with all the space occupied apart from the pilot’s seat. A second plane was on stand-by at Liverpool Airport to fly out medical teams if required. The RAF flew in medical supplies from Lancashire and North Wales. The Northern Ireland Hospitals Authority was also willing to offer further assistance. The Manager of the Palace Hotel and Casino said: “We appealed through the hotel for volunteer blood donors. About 20 people -

all holidaymakers in their holiday clothes - came forward straight away. We took them to the St John Ambulance Centre in our van. Food and holidays were forgotten. Everybody just wanted to help.” In the north of the Island, Ramsey Cottage Hospital was put on ‘red alert’ and sent blood supplies to Douglas by ambulance.

#### 4.4 The cause of the fire

There were initially two *main* theories as to the cause of the fire: an electrical fault in a fruit machine in the Amusement Arcade *inside* Summerland or a fire started by children in a kiosk/hut on the crazy-golf terrace *outside* Summerland. A variation of the second theory was that the fire started in a plastic waste bin outside the building as opposed to in the kiosk.

One eyewitness said he thought the fire started in a slot machine: “There seemed to be an electrical fault [sparking like a short circuit]. There was a big bang then flashes. The fire quickly spread to other machines.” Warrington fireman Harold Brown also said the fire “smelled like an electrical fault”. The electrical smell was most likely caused by the wiring insulation being heated and burnt by the fire in the concealed gap (section 6.4.2) before the fire entered the Amusement Arcade (John Webb, Personal Communication). The electrical fault theory was given added credence when ‘two girls’ who worked in the Marquee Showbar told reporters that an electrician was working on a slot machine in the Amusement Arcade when there was a flash and flames shot out. Summerland survivor Mrs McKechnie also said she was convinced the fire started near the slot machines.

However, Mr Laurie Shaffer, Summerland's floor manager, said the fire might have started *outside* the building on the crazy-golf terrace. He said: "We think it must have been started by a child playing with matches on the Crazy Golf Course on the balcony or near some electrical equipment." Colyn Peers was in a pub near Summerland when the fire started. He recalled (personal communication): "I noticed through the window a small fire in what appeared to be in a hut next to Summerland and I remarked to my friends what a stupid place to have a fire. By the time other people in the pub had got up to have a look at this small fire alongside Summerland it had changed into a major fire [inside] the complex itself. The quickness of the spread of fire was astounding". As in most rapidly unfolding disasters, some eyewitnesses claim to have seen things that cannot be corroborated by other people or do not fit with the facts of the case. For instance, Mr George Croft, who was inside Summerland with his wife and two children, claimed he saw a fire in a plastic bin outside the complex. In fact, what Mr Croft had probably seen were the remains of the kiosk which may have looked like a bin, albeit a large one (John Webb, Personal Communication). Mr Croft then went on to claim the fire seemed to spread along a 'pipe inlet' into the building. However, there was no 'pipe inlet' anywhere near the kiosk, thus disproving his apparent observation.

There were at least three other unconfirmed theories circulating in the immediate aftermath of the fire: a gas leak; a fire in a fishpan in the kitchen; or a child playing with matches in the Amusement Arcade as opposed to on the terrace outside the building. There was no suggestion or suspicion at any stage that the fire was an act of sabotage or an IRA terrorist attack.

By the early hours of Friday morning, the cause of the fire had not been officially disclosed. The Island's Chief Constable Mr Frank Weedon was not in a position either to confirm or refute one theory at a Press Conference held at 12.45am on that Friday morning. He said the police were "pursing inquiries into several possible causes", which they hoped "to be able to clarify...during the day".

#### 4.5 The emergency services

##### *The Fire Brigade*

The first 999 call that Summerland was on fire came at 8.01pm from a driver of Duggans Radio Cabs who had radioed his base after passing the burning complex in his taxi (Basnett, 1991). This call was followed rapidly by several others, including one from the harbourmaster who had been alerted to the fire by a radio message from a ship anchored in Douglas Bay. Between 7.40-8pm, another boat in the harbour was seen blowing its whistle to try to get the attention of the emergency services (Jonathan Corkill, Personal Communication).

Three appliances left Douglas Fire Station at 8.02pm. The distance between the fire station and Summerland was approximately two and half miles. Sub-Officer Les Quayle was the senior officer on the first appliance. He told the BBC: "When we rounded the corner onto the promenade we couldn't really see a great deal at all. It was not until we were about a quarter of a mile from the building itself we realised the fire was inside." The first fire appliances arrived at Summerland at either 8.06pm or 8.07pm (SFC Report, Paragraph 114, Page 42). Mr Quayle realised the fire was

serious and at 8.08pm radioed for the turntable ladder and to “make pumps five”. As Chief Fire Officer Cyril Pearson progressed towards the fire, he realised the Douglas Brigade would not be able to defeat the flames by themselves and instructed control “To send everything we’ve got”. Consequently, all fire stations in the Isle of Man were alerted at 8.10pm and instructed to attend. A total of 14 appliances and 93 firemen were eventually on the scene tackling the fire. Mr Jonathan Corkill (12), who was standing near the ferry terminal on the night of the fire, was far from impressed with the response of the emergency services. He recalled (personal communication):

“What followed the first [fire engine] was (from my vantage and memory) a pathetically sparse trickle of emergency vehicles. I believe I saw two more fire vehicles head along the Promenade. Another pumper about 15 minutes after the first and then another fire vehicle 30 minutes after that - a Land Rover with little more than a water tank with a ladder and a three-man crew with a pathetic ding-a-ling electric bell on the front bumper. Yes, this was the Isle of Man’s fire department’s 14 vehicle fleet of the time. About 1 hour after Summerland had gone up, an old auxiliary ambulance from Port Erin proceeded along the Promenade. It was the only ambulance I saw from my vantage point...no wonder many private vehicles were commandeered to act as ambulances.”

Mr Corkill’s harsh assessment partly reflects the fact that he was nearly one-and-half miles away from Summerland at the time of the fire. Many fire

appliances would have arrived from the west and the north of the Island along roads not being watched by Mr Corkill. In addition, Mr Corkill's comments about "the type of appliance shows little knowledge of the needs of a mainly rural Island where off-road capabilities, such as a Land Rover has, are essential" (John Webb, Personal Communication).

When the first engine arrived at the scene, hundreds of people (including some on fire) were evacuating the building across the footbridge, and spilling out into King Edward Road. Mr Quayle said: "The fire literally grew before our very eyes...We thought, what the hell are we going to do with this?" There was the realisation there was nothing the fire brigade could do to prevent the complete destruction of Summerland; the fire had nearly a 30-minute head start over the firemen. "No brigade in the country could have coped with it," said *Manx Radio* reporter Alan Jackson. Eyewitness Rob Farrow saw one fireman go up a ladder with a hose, but his efforts were like "peeing in the wind". Indeed, the only realistic firefighting aim was to stop the fire spreading into the adjoining Aquadrome. Most firemen were sent into the building to rescue people. Godfrey Cain, who was on the second engine to reach the scene, told *The Isle of Man Examiner*: "I went over the bridge and there were people trying to get out as I was trying to get in and their hair was already smouldering. One woman grabbed hold of me and said: "my child's in there, do what you can." He continued:

“What we tried to do was to get the fire stopped. But as we were walking across there was an enormous bang and we were just thrown sideways, that was because of gas cylinders which had exploded. We didn’t put the fire out, it burned itself out in about an hour...There was just no fuel left...The noise of the fire was horrendous, it was like an old steam express train rushing through a station and the updraught was tremendous.”

Sub-Officer Quayle entered the building through the Lower Downstairs level. As no fire alarm had sounded, people on Summerland’s lower three floors were unaware of the fire above and some were reluctant to leave the building when instructed to do so. Mr Quayle said: “Some people were confused and lost and we literally dragged them out – a scruff of the neck job sometimes! Once they saw what was going on above them, of course, they soon scarpered.” He continued: “I found a guy on a mezzanine [Upper Downstairs] floor, half-way between the basement and the fire floor, drunk as a coot. He didn’t know what the hell was going on and I literally had to pick him up and drag him.” Sub-Officer Quayle climbed a staircase from the Upper Downstairs level to the Solarium at 8.11pm. However, he was unable to enter the Solarium because of intense heat and burning plastic panels falling from the roof. Meanwhile, a fireman stood outside Summerland with a clipboard noting down how long his colleagues had been inside the building and whether they needed relieving.



**Figure 4.4: The firefighting operation at Summerland, with the  
fire brigade turntable extended  
(Copyright: Noel Howarth)**

Chief Fire Officer Cyril Pearson heard an explosion, which he said was “essentially a complete flashover through the whole building above the base level of the acrylic material, burning everything combustible including people”.

Despite six hydrants near the building, firefighting operations were hindered by poor water pressure (Basnett, 1991) and water had to be pumped from the sea. Some people even jumped into the sea to get away from the flames. Fortunately, engineers from the water authority were able to increase the pressure. An *Isle of Man Courier* reporter at the scene said: “The firemen used thousands of gallons of water in the [Aquadrome] baths



with high pressure pumps on the blaze.” Firemen also tried pumping water from the sea; it was rather unfortunate the tide was out at the time. Between 250,000 and 300,000 gallons of water were used to fight the fire. The fire was under control by 9.10pm; firemen began to bring out the dead shortly before 11pm.



**Figure 4.5: The fire starts to burn itself out**  
**Only Summerland’s V shaped steel skeleton remains**  
**(Source: *New Civil Engineer*, August 9th, 1973, page 12)**

The work of the fire brigade was, however, far from over and firemen stayed at Summerland for three more days retrieving bodies and damping down. “One of the firemen told me how he picked up the body of a child and it literally disintegrated in his hands,” said journalist Terry Cringle. A fireman said: “It was obvious that those on the top floors were desperately trying to get down, to get away. Many of them were obviously overcome by smoke

or the heat and collapsed”. Men from the Douglas Brigade worked throughout the night of 2/3 August, being relieved the following day by out-of-town brigades. The firemen returning to Douglas fire station on the Friday morning after 12 hours of firefighting “were white-faced with fatigue and too tired and sickened to talk” (*The Liverpool Echo*, 3rd August, 1973). There were fears that the fire had broken out again on the night of 3-4 August; however, when the Douglas Brigade arrived, they found nothing more than smouldering debris. The smell of the fire lingered in the air for several weeks. Stale food in the debris added to both the smell and the hazard, which prompted the authorities to clear the debris as quickly as possible. For example, the Fire Research Station team found a freezer with six inches of melted ice cream sloshing about on the NE Service Staircase (John Webb, Personal Communication). Scottish holidaymaker Alan Morgan commented (personal communication): “Ironically enough the digs we were holidaying in were just a couple of hundred metres [222 yards] from Summerland and of course the constant after fire smell was ever so apparent during our stay.” Out-of-town brigades then returned to Summerland on August 5th to finish damping down and clearing up.

Apart from Sub-Officer Quayle, who was admitted to hospital suffering from heat exhaustion, no fireman died or was seriously injured. However, the firemen from the small rural communities on the Island, such as Kirk Michael, were left severely traumatised by the fire, especially after they saw multiple dead bodies fused together (Edward Austin, Personal Communication). The firemen’s efforts were widely praised. Indeed, the firemen speaking at the public inquiry did not require legal representation because no criticism had been voiced of their actions.

The emergency services – desperate for all the help they could muster - were assisted by members of the public. On the night of the fire, Peter Nolan (21) and his girlfriend (17) were working at the White City Fairground just up the hill from Summerland. Mr Nolan (personal communication) had seen a small fire when collecting the evening staff from the Promenade. When he arrived back at White City, “there was an almighty explosion and the sky lit up”. Mr Nolan and his girlfriend had originally intended to drive to Noble’s Hospital to donate blood. However, they were stopped by the police outside Summerland, who asked them to use their transit van as a makeshift ambulance. Mr Nolan, along with other volunteers, went into the building after the fire had subsided to try to find any survivors. The volunteers “dug with their hands in the pitch black to try to recover the bodies”. Mr Nolan found many bodies, including that of a small child. In the meantime, his girlfriend accompanied the drivers of vehicles taking the disintegrated bodies to St George’s Church Hall. She said: “I will never forget the images of those charred bodies, but luckily it has had no detrimental affect [on my life]. It is a bit like a bad film I once watched.” These volunteers remained at Summerland throughout the night and many continued to work for the next couple of days. GP Dr Richard Ham stationed himself outside one of the building’s exits and resuscitated several people.

## *The Police*

The police first heard about the fire just after 8pm. The police's first action was to block the approach roads to Summerland to allow easier access for the emergency services. Douglas Promenade was closed to vehicles for two hours. Traffic was diverted away from Summerland on the day after the fire because it was thought the structure might be dangerous to passing traffic. Manx Electric Railway services were also suspended because the line runs directly in front of the building. As news of the fire spread, Douglas Police Station was inundated with telephone calls from concerned members of the public. Banks of calls waiting to be answered soon developed. Fortunately, two telephone lines for major incidents had recently been installed at the police station. The numbers of these lines were given to the public, so allowing the normal work of the police station to continue relatively unhampered. Mr Frank Weedon, the Island's Chief Constable at the time of the fire, said: "During the first night of Summerland it was estimated that 28,000 telephone calls were made in respect of the fire and we were overwhelmed by the numbers, manned by police and civilian volunteers.". As television and radio programmes were interrupted by news flashes, telephone lines between Britain and the Isle of Man rapidly became swamped, with many people finding it impossible to make a long-distance call. Callers from Northern Ireland faced a three-hour delay, as people tried to obtain news about the thousands of Ulster people on holiday. Delays continued into the following day. With only one line open to the Island, Belfast telephone exchange had more than 450 calls waiting to be connected at one point. Extra Post Office staff were sent to the Isle of Man from Liverpool to help man the Island's overloaded telephone exchanges. The

Post Office in Belfast opened a special line to Douglas Police Station to deal with the backlog of calls. Even the police in Northern Ireland had to wait to have their priority calls dealt with. On the Island, hundreds of people had to queue to use public telephone boxes, so they could inform their relatives that they were safe. *The Liverpool Echo* (August 3rd, 1973) reported: “For some girls the ordeal proved to be too much, and many were seen sobbing in the streets.” One Belfast man said: “I only wanted to tell them that I’m all right but I had to give up in the end. It was impossible to get through.”

At 8.09pm, police at the scene were calling for more ambulances; by 8.15pm, the first casualties were being taken to hospital. Despite the fire entering the building at 8pm, it is possible that some people were still alive at 8.15pm. For example, Joseph Boyd claimed that he last saw his wife Mary alive at 8.15pm. Police officers from all over the Island were called to Douglas, including those who were off-duty at the time. Among them was Richard Davis. As the fire was heading in the direction of the Aquadrome, he decided to enter Summerland from the eastern end by the Manx Electric Railway (MER) yard. He climbed the NE Service Staircase without breathing apparatus. By this stage, it was a recovery rather than a rescue operation, with Mr Davis seeing firemen dragging dead bodies down the concrete steps. Most police officers worked 23 hours out of the first 24 hours after the fire. On the second day, a 12-hour shift system operated to allow normal policing to continue. Mr Weedon said: “It was a hard effort from all of us, not just me. I didn’t go to bed for three days.” Police officers assisted doctors and firemen in removing casualties from Summerland. For example, off-duty Constable Chris Quirk helped to bring four bodies out of the building. He said: “We were in short-sleeved order and I had to run

through the water [from the fire hoses] and I expected it to be cold but it wasn't, it was hot. It was an uncanny feeling" (quoted in *The Isle of Man Examiner*, 4th August, 1998). Mr Davis told *Manx Net* in 2014: "The water was cascading down the concrete steps and was turning to steam around our feet."

At 11.20pm, Mr Weedon took the decision to move the dead to the ground floor of St George's Hall. During the early hours of Friday morning, officers had to deal with hundreds of people who were waiting outside Douglas Police Station desperate for news of relatives and friends. The identification of bodies and the taking of witness statements were big jobs for a small police force. After a day, Mr Weedon requested additional police resources from mainland Britain; and by Sunday, August 5th there were 25 officers from the Lancashire Constabulary on the Island assisting 111 Manx police officers.

After the fire had subsided, police officers went into Summerland to retrieve items dropped by members of the public. These items were stored in an empty cell at the police station, with a pyramid of shoes and handbags amongst other items forming a 'poignant' reminder of the fire. A lesson learnt from the Summerland fire is that all police officers need to be familiar with the layout of new public buildings. For instance, policeman Richard Davis had never visited the complex before and so "did not have a clue what the place was like inside". He told *Manx Net* in 2014 that he believes the emergency services need to be shown around new buildings to increase their preparedness for disasters. Chief Constable Frank Weedon recalled (quoted in *The Isle of Man Examiner*, August 4th, 1998):

“The Summerland fire was a disaster and terrible for the families that lost children and other relatives and all those who were involved in dealing with that fire will never forget the sadness of that occasion. You never forget things like that. Anybody who was involved will remember it always.”

### *The Hospital*

The first problem faced by Noble's Hospital in Douglas was to mobilise the necessary staff and equipment. Luckily, the hospital's major incident plan had recently been revised, and within minutes there was more help available than could be used as all the medical and nursing staff offered their services together with many volunteers (Hart *et al.*, 1975). Forty-four pints of blood were collected from donors in a neighbouring hall. Most of the patients and their relatives had arrived at the hospital within 20 minutes of the alarm being given to members of staff. One hundred and four beds were made available for the incident, including five in the intensive care unit, by moving the hospital's existing patients to day rooms. A nurse was allocated to each patient to ensure continuity of treatment and to deal with paperwork. The patients' injuries and length of hospitalisation are described in chapter 1.

Many of the patients showed the classic symptoms of being involved in a major disaster. These included persistent vomiting, incontinence of urine and mental withdrawal (Hart *et al.*, 1975). Some of the patients were worrying about friends and relatives, and two had lost their entire family. Some visitors to the hospital were reluctant to tell the patients about dead relatives and friends; however, despite these well-meaning attempts, nurses

and doctors believed the best approach was to tell them the truth when their condition permitted.

Hart *et al.* (1975) summarised the lessons the hospital learnt from the Summerland fire. Firstly, the tragedy highlighted the need for at least one ex-directory telephone line. As there were no such lines, the hospital switchboard rapidly jammed with incoming calls, which resulted in important outgoing calls for staff and extra supplies being delayed. In the 36 hours after the fire, there were 27,000 incoming calls to the hospital (Cringle, 2000). Secondly, in future major incidents, it would be desirable for each casualty to be assessed by a senior doctor on their arrival in order to prioritise the admissions. Separate teams could then deal with each type of case.

#### 4.6 The Press

The Summerland fire disaster was a difficult story for national newspapers in Britain to cover in its early stages because the story broke after first deadline (usually around 8pm) with most newspapers unable to get a staff reporter on the scene before the final deadline in the early hours. Consequently, most reports in the following morning's national UK newspapers relied almost exclusively on Press Association (PA) copy supplied by local reporters. These reports are thus similar in terms of their factual content, with the same eyewitnesses being quoted in most newspapers. Reportage of the fire diverges on the following day (Saturday, August 4th), with staff correspondents supplementing the PA copy that would have been available to all newspapers. The same core of basic facts is reported by all newspapers, which is then elaborated on and/or tailored to the



newspaper's readership: for instance, *The Irish Times* gave particular emphasis to the eyewitness account of a Dubliner; the Scottish tabloid the *Daily Record* failed to quote from a single English survivor of the fire! At the time of the fire, the *Isle of Man Examiner* was published on a Friday and an entirely new front page was laid out in the early hours of Friday morning carrying the latest news at 2am.

Thursday, August 2nd, 1973 had been a slow news day: British Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath was attending a Commonwealth Summit in Canada; a rescue mission was being planned for America's three Skylab astronauts stranded in orbit; a survey from the Confederation of British Industry revealed growing inflationary pressures. In short, there was no obvious front-page lead story for the first editions. First editions of national newspapers usually have small print runs.

With the first editions sent to press or just about to do so, the Press Association sent out the first flash about the fire around 8.30pm. Information at this stage was sketchy (including a report that there had been an explosion and not a fire) and it was not known whether there had been any fatalities. London newsdesks telephoned their Manchester reporters immediately, whilst keeping a close eye on the Telex machine for further updates over the PA wire. As programmes on BBC 1 and ITV were interrupted by news flashes, it was readily becoming apparent that the fire was a major incident that would require the existing front-page leads to be thrown out. Night editors were crying out for copy; there needed to be sufficient copy and certainty about the importance of a story before front pages could be radically re-shaped.

## **The Local Reporters**

Most of the information that appeared in the UK nationals on the following day originated from local Manx journalists Terry Cringle (42) and Alan Bell (38). Mr Cringle realised a big story of international importance had broken when he saw a huge plume of smoke reaching 1,000 feet into the sky. He said (quoted in *The Isle of Man Examiner*, 4th August, 1998):

“Even as I was driving there the ambulances were heading back down and, of course, you could see the flames coming out of this strange structure and black smoke coming from the cladding, which was clear Oroglass...I can remember it was a gift to the headline writers the next day, who called it Horrorglass.”\*

\*I have not come across the headline *Horrorglass* in the extensive range of national and regional newspapers that I have read about the fire. To my knowledge, the term was invented by the satirical magazine *Private Eye* and has stuck ever since.

Mr Bell had just finished his evening meal when he received a telephone call about the fire from Mr Cringle. He left his house immediately for the office at Manx Radio. Mr Bell recalled (quoted in the *Isle of Man Examiner*, 29th July 2003, page 6):

“At that stage it was just a fire...As soon as [Summerland] came into view I could see this large plume of smoke rising over the fire. The office at Manx Radio looked straight over the Bay. I could see that Summerland was ablaze from end to end. It made a really indelible impression.”

Mr Bell manned the newsroom telephone, whilst Mr Cringle interviewed survivors and bystanders outside Summerland. Mr Bell said “all hell broke loose” when the BBC reported that several bodybags had been carried away from the scene. The reporters set up an open line to the PA and sent several updates of the story throughout the night. It was to be a long night for Mr Cringle and Mr Bell. When the manager of Manx Radio Peter Kneale arrived at the office, he gave the men a bottle of whisky to keep them going. The PA copy reached newspaper offices over the Telex machine. Mr Bell and Mr Cringle were conscious of the fact that the entire press of the British Isles was dependent on their efforts. He recalled:

“You run on adrenaline, you run on reserves of energy you didn’t know you had. All Alan and I knew at the time was that we had to do it until the papers had got their staff men here. In fact we were very glad to see them!”

Summerland was a global story; and the reporters telephoned news copy around the World to radio and television stations, including America, Canada and Australia. Recalling his experiences, Mr Cringle referred to a trait that all reporters must possess in order to work effectively: the ability to detach oneself emotionally from the story being covered, no matter how horrific it is. Mr Cringle said:

“Going back to the scene, in the early hours of the morning they were still bringing the bodies out, lining them up on the pavement. That was a terribly saddening sight because then you came face to face with the realities of it. But when you’re a journalist you become detached, all you’re doing is getting the story down, writing it and getting it away...Eventually I became hardened to the realities of it. It just went on for so long.”

### **The National Reporter**

In the 1970s, all national newspapers ran two major offices (London and Manchester) and various sub-offices in different cities and districts around Britain. Whilst the London offices housed specialist sections (e.g. politics, city, fashion) and general features departments, the Manchester news operations were almost as large. This can be explained by location: it was often quicker to respond to major crises near edition time from Manchester than from London. News reporters from Manchester could be airborne, whereas their London counterparts might still have been stuck in a traffic jam trying to reach Heathrow Airport. Howard Reynolds of the *Daily Mail* was one such Manchester-based journalist who enjoyed the deadline chasing cut-and-thrust of hard news reporting. He was the first national newspaper reporter to reach Summerland. Mr Reynolds (personal communication) now describes what happened that evening:

“On Thursday, August 2nd, 1973, I had driven home to Bramhall [Cheshire] from Chesterfield [Derbyshire], where I had been reporting on the Markham Colliery disaster. My wife and I lived ten minutes from Manchester Airport, so it was not unusual for me to be rung at home and asked to go to the airport immediately. It happened that evening even though, strictly speaking, I had finished work and was looking to unwind. But, 'strictly speaking' has no place in news coverage: if the story is worth covering and the newsdesk urgently needs a reporter, well, that is it. Conventional employment practices do not apply.

The *Mail's* Night Newsdesk rang me around 8.45pm, after being alerted to the Summerland fire by the PA. As was standard practice, the *Mail* had telephoned David at Northern Executive Aviation (NEA) to charter a plane from Manchester Airport. I grabbed a bag, shoved some clothes in it, and raced out to the airport's southern perimeter from where all the cargo and executive charters operated. Everything went smoothly and routinely, and we were preparing to take off not long after the BBC's Nine O' Clock News began carrying the first Summerland reports. The NEA plane would accommodate four passengers, but there was only room for two passengers because David had also packed it with emergency supplies in response to a call from the medical authorities on the Isle of Man. The *Daily Mail* had not been able to charter the aircraft exclusively; at the same time as it was chasing NEA so too was the *Daily Mirror*, based in the huge Mirror/Telegraph print centre at Mark Lane off Shude Hill. The two newsdesks must have reached a compromise because shortly after my arrival the *Daily Mirror's* Ian Ramsey turned up. Ian was easy to work with: a tall, soft-spoken Scot, he was a superb reporter and an opponent to be respected.

Ever the gentleman, Ian ushered me into the plane first, then clambered in after me, but then abruptly turned back as a third passenger unexpectedly appeared: the *Daily Express*. There was no room for the *Express* man: Ian and I had the only two available seats on the only available charter to the Isle of Man that evening.

The door was slammed shut and David took off. We chased the taillights of westbound road traffic until reaching the coast at Blackpool and heading out over the Irish Sea. I have no idea of our speed but I am guessing it was flat out, what with the engine noise and the brief time it took to get clear of Manchester Airport and land at the then gloriously olde-world Ronaldsway Airport.

After landing, it was a case of grabbing the nearest available cab and heading at high speed to Douglas, or it should have been. Unfortunately, owing to the different operational procedures of the two newspapers (*Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror*), Ian and I parted company. The *Mail's* breaking-news reputation derived from how it handled emergency coverage. Simply put, you released the news hounds (as it were) and got out of their way and trusted them to do the job they were being expensively paid for. By contrast, the *Daily Mirror* seemed to entertain bureaucratic notions of newsgathering, which in this instance required Ian to ring in from Ronaldsway Airport to say he had arrived and await instructions from the paper's Night Newsdesk. There may be some rationale for this, but when you are within an hour of deadline and some distance from where you are supposed to be it makes no sense at all. I had no choice but to abandon Ian Ramsey at the airport. I was under no instruction to ring Manchester, nor

would the *Mail's* Night Newsdesk have even thought of asking. By that stage, and from what I could gather from third-hand accounts from airport staff, it seemed clear a major disaster was still unfolding, one that must almost certainly be playing havoc with telephone communications. It did not surprise me to learn that whilst my taxi driver was taking me to Douglas, poor Ian was still desperately trying to get a line out to Manchester.

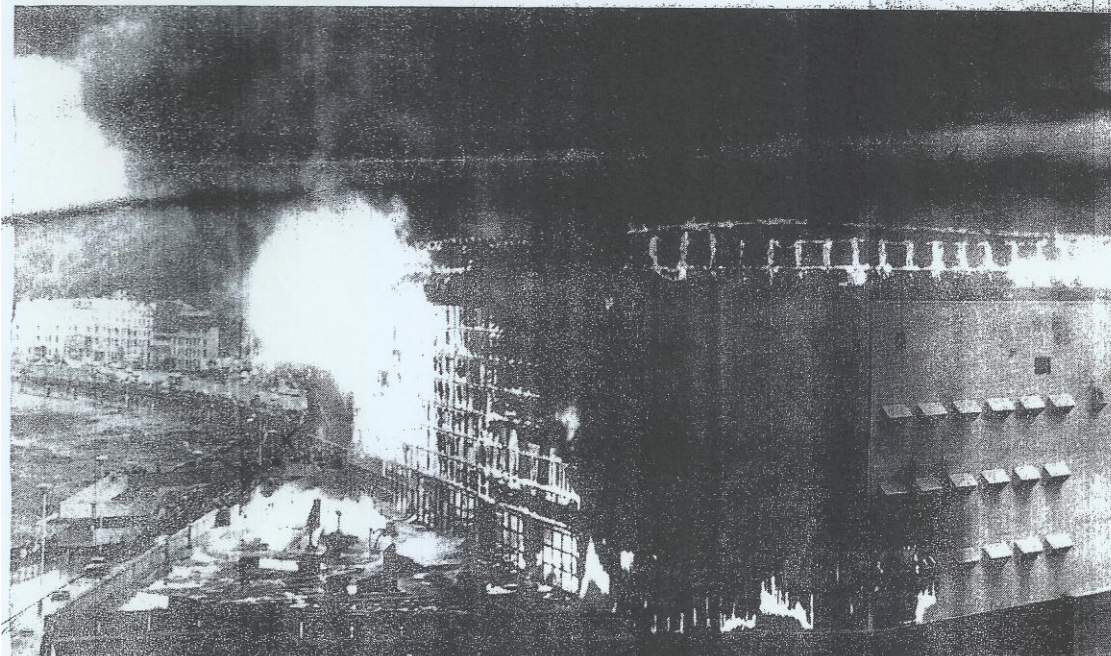
By the time we reached Douglas, it was abundantly plain that the place was in chaos. There were people milling around everywhere, traffic backed up everywhere and roads shut. There was no time to get my bearings. I just quit the cab, shoved whatever notes came to hand at the driver, then grabbed my suitcase and ran with it down the Promenade in the direction of the mesmeric red glow of Summerland.

With the clock now within minutes of deadline, a journalist either gets lucky or not. There is no time to waste on interviewing people about what they may think they might have seen. You need to find a reliable source. In this instance, the source turned out to be someone I came to know as a pretty wonderful human being: Cyril Pearson, the Isle of Man's Chief Fire Officer. He was leaning, exhausted, against some Promenade railings, in the lee of the smoking hulk of Summerland, talking quietly to some of the similarly exhausted Manx firemen. The last thing Cyril needed right then was to have to deal with a news reporter. I had zeroed in on him, though without knowing who he was because of the uniformed firemen around him. He provided as good a run-down of the situation as he could manage. I can still remember how the tears shone; how his voice was so cracked, so tired.



Dozens trapped in Isle of Man... 'I saw a man with his hair on fire and his coat melting on his back'

## 30 KILLED IN HOLIDAY FIRE



FLAMES roar through the walls of Summerland, turning the seaside fun complex into a cage of death

AT LEAST 30 people died and 40 were injured when fire swept through Europe's biggest indoor holiday entertainment centre in the Isle of Man last night.

About 2,000 visitors were in the Summerland complex on Douglas seafront and many were trapped.

Thousands of people gathered outside, many sobbing

By HOWARD REYNOLDS in Douglas, Isle of Man

and searching for friends and relatives. A lot of the people inside were families with young children.

Holidaymakers from the North of England on Wakes Week vacations were believed to be among them. Witnesses said the blaze seemed to begin at the top of the building and engulfed the massive concrete and glass structure within seconds.

Police officers, including several recalled to duty in

civilian clothes, forced back the crowds as a series of muffled explosions came from inside the building which was then a blackened shell of steel girders.

People were still rushing out as the roof was collapsing above their heads. Children were among the dead.

Every fire service in the island and every available ambulance concentrated on the building. Firemen tried to pump water from the sea.

A fleet of ambulances, vans, and private coaches ran injured and dying for more than two hours to Noble's Hospital, Douglas. Police also stopped cars in the streets

Turn to Centre Pages

INSIDE: Weather 2, Email 10, Prize Crossword 12, Premium Bonds 13, Diary 15, TV and Radio Guide 18, 19, Stars and Strips 20, Letters 21, City 22, 23, Classified 24-28, Sport 28-32



At times like this, it is not even possible to put anything to paper, still less compose some fancy words ready to dictate over the phone to the copytaker at the other end of the line. You just have to commit everything to memory and trust yourself not to get it wrong.

By now the time was - I think - approaching 11pm. I found a phone box nearby and, by some small miracle, managed to hook up to an over-worked operator who put me through to the *Mail* on a reverse charge call. We were now beyond the stage when normal procedure applied; i.e., write the copy, dictate to the copytaker, re-check the copy, wait for it to be messengered to the Newsdesk, wait for the Newsdesk to read it and then come back on the line with queries. Instead, my connection was switched through to the production department, where the Linotype operators worked. Standing beside the senior typesetter was the *Mail's* Night Editor, Charles Wilson (who went on to edit *The Times*), with the phone in one hand and notebook and pen in the other. I simply dictated my report off the top of my head, Charley scribbled it down, tidied it as he went along, and more or less simultaneously began reading it to the Linotype operator who started setting it. Between the three of us, we managed to get all of it down and all of it printed. The *Mail's* last edition was the only national newspaper report of the Summerland tragedy to be filed from Summerland. All other reports, regardless of bylines, were re-writes of copy supplied via the PA wire and sourced from Terry Cringle and his agency. My reports differed from Terry's because I interviewed different people and was positioned in a slightly different location.

After filing, I struggled back with my suitcase to the seafront Villiers Hotel and freshened up. I then went out again to see what eyewitness testimony I could get. I think I finally gave up at around 4am, and went to bed until around 7am.

I then got ready to meet the incoming team of firemen [a term used to describe a journalist who is usually based in the London or Manchester office but always has a bag packed ready to be dispatched to a major news story at short notice] from the *Daily Mail's* Manchester office. Amongst them were Andrew Rosthorne, Ian Smith, Mervyn Edgecombe, Joe Mullins and half a dozen others plus photographers and wire team.

I did not go to the morning press conference by Summerland's operators Trust House Forte. I have little faith in corporate speak. Having been born and brought up in a seaside resort, I knew how holidaymakers behaved. They came down to breakfast and then they were turfed out for the day. However, they would not be going anywhere today and certainly not to any press conference. They would be sitting or standing around the B&Bs and small private hotels of Douglas, unable yet to leave the comfort of the group, many of them still trying to grapple with the enormity of what had just happened. So I set off pounding the pavements again, picking up stories, gossip, tales both credible as well as downright unbelievable, and finally: names and holiday accommodation addresses. The result was my report in the *Daily Mail* of Saturday, August 4th, based on interviews with a couple who were amongst the first to witness the fire inside Summerland, and a couple who were amongst the last to leave. The story - of locked doors, non-existent fire alarms, heroism as well as panic and, in at least one

instance, of a staff member carrying a cash register to safety - was amongst the evidence later considered by the public inquiry.”

Reporters from Britain’s national newspapers remained on the Island for several days, supplying their London newsrooms with new angles on the fire. August 1973 was the busiest month ever for the Manx press, and journalists were kept busy later in the month by the Island’s first murder for 43 years. Thirteen days after the Summerland disaster, a murder hunt was launched after a cleaner found the body of Nigel Neal at the Golden Egg Restaurant in Strand Street, Douglas. Mr Cringle (personal communication) said the Summerland fire had a deep effect on the Manx consciousness for many years because of the criticisms of the lax building and fire safety standards that had contributed to the disaster. “They [the Manx people] hated the subject being mentioned for years and did not like it when the TV re-ran footage of the fire,” he said. Manxman Dr Matthew Partington, who now works at the University of the West of England in Bristol, said (personal communication):

“The Island was and is a proud place of sometimes small-minded opinions but the people are honest and true and the Summerland disaster was a mortal blow commercially to an economy built on tourism (that even then was losing out to foreign holidays). The emotional blow is harder to quantify but even now I suspect it is something many would rather not remember.”

Fire survivor Elma Magowan had to visit the Isle of Man for work in 2011. She said (personal communication): “My attempts to discuss the event still

touched a raw nerve and conversations were quickly changed. It made me rather sad that they do not wish to remember it.”

The presentation of the Summerland fire disaster in Britain’s broadsheets shows how the layout of newspapers has changed tremendously since the 1970s. Consider the final editions of *The Guardian* and *The Times* for August 3rd 1973: the headline and the story are confined to three columns of newsprint; and there are no photographs of the fire, although *The Times* does include a drawing of Summerland’s Oroglas promenade wall. There were up to 20 news stories on one page of a broadsheet newspaper in 1973. Whilst *The Daily Telegraph*’s final edition does include a poorly reproduced photograph of the fire, the paper’s presentation of the story is even more cluttered than *The Guardian* and *The Times*. For instance, immediately below *The Daily Telegraph*’s main headline “OVER 30 DIE IN HOLIDAY FIRE” is another story with the headline “CHEAP BEEF GONE FOR EVER”. Front-page banner headlines were rare in broadsheet newspapers 30-40 years ago and were not even used for stories of international importance, such as the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963. The papers’ presentation of the Summerland disaster was dictated by the fact that it took place in the hot metal era of manual typesetting. When news broke after first deadline, the only realistic option was simply to *accommodate* the news rather than radically re-shaping the

## 30 killed, 80 injured as fire destroys £2m holiday centre on the Isle of Man

Thirty people died and 80 were injured when fire swept through the new £2m Summerland entertainment complex at Douglas, Isle of Man, last night. Police said the toll could go higher. Holiday-makers' cars were commandeered

to take the injured to hospital, and Manx Radio appealed for blood. Eye-witnesses said plastic melting in the intense heat dripped on to people trying to escape. There was panic as parents dashed about trying to find their children

## Molten plastic falls on children

By Staff Reporters

Thirty people died and 80 were injured in a fire which destroyed the £2m Summerland entertainment complex at Douglas, Isle of Man, last night.

At a press conference early today the island's chief constable, Mr Frank Weir, said the death toll might go higher.

Summerland, the island's tourist showpiece at the north end of Douglas promenade, was crowded with holiday-makers when the fire broke out just before 8 pm.

Eye-witnesses said that within minutes the four-storey building was ablaze from end to end. At the height of the fire a huge pall of black smoke rose several hundred feet above Douglas Bay and the flames shot higher than the cliff face into which the Summerland complex was "grafted".

Manx Radio said that firemen arrived within four minutes of the blaze starting.

They were helpless because the highly inflammable material had turned the building into an enormous bonfire almost instantaneously. Plastic was melting in the intense heat and dripping on to people still unable to escape. In 30 minutes, the complex was gutted.

Panic was reported among the thousands of holidaymakers inside the complex. Fathers and mothers dashed about seeking their children. At least one woman was badly trampled, the radio reported.

There were conflicting accounts of how the fire started, but reports said it was an electrical fault.

Eye-witnesses also spoke of a series of muffled explosions at the height of the fire. It was not known how many of Summerland's staff of 250 had been on duty. A toll call will be held at 11 am today.

The official police estimate was that 2,000 people were in the complex at the time of the fire.

Police at the scene appealed over loudhailers for blood donors. Manx Radio went back on the air 10 minutes after closing down at 9 pm to broadcast the appeal but it was cancelled because of the overwhelming public response.

Police commandeered private cars and vans to take people suffering from shock and burns to Douglas hospital, and ambulances ran a shuttle service. The promenade was closed for two hours.

The hospital said last night: "About 30 people are detained with injuries. Some are critically ill in the intensive care unit. At this stage we do not know how many are dead or how many are critically ill. We have treated about 50 people

but shock and burns have allowed them to go home."

The badly burned bodies were taken to a makeshift mortuary in a church hall.

Plasma and blood were flown from Liverpool. A second plane stood by to fly out medical teams if required.

Isle of Man fire officials said 15 appliances and more than a hundred firemen, all available personnel, fought the blaze. Water was pumped from the sea.

Mr James Bartoo from Glasgow, was going into Summerland with his family when he noticed flames.

He said: "There was a fire just outside the perspex like front of the building. People were trying to put it out with water. The next thing it seemed to go up the front of the building in a great sheet of flame."

Mr Patrick Muncey, aged 60, of Dublin, said: "I was on the main entertainment floor when the fire started in what looked like an amusement arcade. There was smoke and then flames. There was panic and people were screaming and trying to get out through the main doors."

"People were unable to get the emergency doors open. I put my foot through a large pane of glass and got out that way with other people."

Mr Sam Farr of Belfast, said: "There was a terrible rush for the doors and we had to kick them open. I saw a man with his hair on fire and the coat melted off his back and a youngster in his arms."

"Outside there were people sobbing as they searched for relatives. No one knew if there was anyone still inside."

The Isle of Man was almost cut off for ordinary telephone callers for several hours last night as the lines were jammed

with anxious callers. In Northern Ireland there was a delay of three hours for relatives and friends inquiring about the thousands of holidaymakers from Ulster who were spending their summer break in the island. Even the police in Northern Ireland had to wait to have their priority calls dealt with.

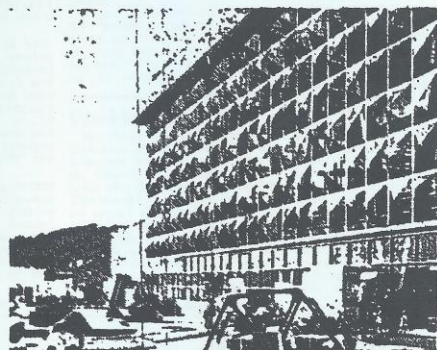
Summerland stands on three and a half acres at the north end of Douglas seafront, and had its first full season in 1972, providing 13 per cent of the island's tourist revenue.

It was built as a joint venture by Douglas Corporation and the Manx government, with the corporation providing the major portion of the cost.

As many as 9,000 people can occupy the complex at once. Summerland includes a basement funfair, a discotheque and a solarium with batteries of artificial sunshine lamps.

The following were detained in hospital: Jacqueline MacDonaid Norton, aged 14, Marsh, Huddersfield; Mrs Eileen Wilson, Gordons town, Belfast; Mrs Elizabeth Treasure, Southampton; Mrs Jean Machen, Waterloo, Huddersfield; Doreen Foster, Lisburn, co Antrim; Mrs Jean Marks, Belfast; Ann and Joyce Quirk, St Helens; Mrs Pauline Saville, Douglas; Mrs Eileen W Ritchie, Camber, Sussex; Mrs M Wharton, East Rossendale, Lancs; Catherine Bain, Edinburgh; Marion McQuilliam, of Hart Terrace, Colvaive, Hillborough; Ellen Paulfrey, St Helens; Mrs Hippin stall, Huddersfield; Allan Williams, Upton, Wirral; Mr Moulds, Rayleigh, Essex; Joseph Boyd, Lisburn, co Antrim; Mrs Lilly McIntyre, Glasgow; Mrs Isabel Straut, Cheshire; Ruth and Linda McQuilliam, of Hillborough, co Down; Roy Foster, Lisburn, co Antrim.

Detained in the intensive care unit were Mrs M. Thompson, Scotstoun, Glasgow; Alison Little, Mrs Allan, and Mr Taylor (no addresses available).



Part of the £2m Summerland complex.

## Mr Thorpe rivals Prime

The latest Times ITN poll carried out by Opinion Research Centre, shows that Mr Jeremy Thorpe, the Liberal leader, today commands almost as much support in Britain as the Prime Minister. The poll shows that the Liberals now have the backing of 26 per cent of the electorate, the highest level of Liberal support ever recorded by the centre.

Not only is Liberal support shown to be treading on the heels of Conservative support (30 per cent of voters are at present for the Government) but the effect of the Liberal surge

has been to give Labour an 11 per cent lead. The present picture reflected in the poll result is as follows:

### Voting intention

	Lab	Con	Lib	Other
Men	30	30	26	14
Women	28	32	24	16
Under 25	24	34	28	14
25-34	26	32	26	16
35-44	28	30	26	16
45-54	28	30	26	16
55-64	28	30	26	16
65+	28	30	26	16

The poll shows that the huge defection to the Liberals is from Conservative ranks and that it



Mr Heath with Sir Kamise Mara, Prime Minister of Fiji, and Mr

## Mr Heath out lines new

From Louis 'eten  
Ottawa, Aug 2

Mr Heath met his Common wealth colleagues more than halfway this afternoon when, in a remarkable non-speech, he suggested that indeed their association might have a useful role to play.

The growing reluctance of the superpowers to become involved in a direct confrontation or lesser conflicts which could make confrontation possible re-

quired lesser powers to accept new responsibilities. They could not do this alone, but the Commonwealth offered a starting point.

The Prime Minister spoke in the afternoon when the conference met after the opening plenary session. There were to be no more set speeches, but it was decided that the conference, like an American Democratic or Republican national convention, needed some keynote speeches.

## Financial institutions a

By John Grover

Political Staff

Whatever may be the fate of Britain's top private companies under a future Labour government, banks, building societies and insurance companies could be taken into public ownership.

The Labour Party Green Paper on Banking and Insurance, published yesterday, makes it clear that effect is to be given to Labour's commitment that there should be an extension of the public sector into financial institutions.

The Green Paper was produced by the banking and insurance study group and it was presented by Mr Ian Mikardo, chairman of the group and MP for Poplar. He made it clear that the paper was a discussion

document. The views it expressed were not the settled views of the Parliamentary Labour Party, nor were they the firm views of the national executive committee.

Mr Mikardo was emphatic that the mass nationalization of all Britain's private financial institutions would not cost a penny. What the next Labour government had to pay out by way of compensation Mr Mikardo seemed to be suggesting, would be offset by the assets that the public would then possess.

The financial journalists who were present at this point looked almost as puzzled as the political reporters.

Mr Mikardo's message was that the study group had examined the whole question of

## 100,000 Triumphs recalled for suspension check







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paper. Night editors would strenuously avoid clearing the entire front page because this would necessitate more page changes inside. Clearing two or three columns only on the left-hand side of the front page was the preferred option because this would not lead to an excessive number of changes being required on inside pages. At the time, night editors would have also favoured a straightforward ‘substitution’ format, where the text of the new story (in this case Summerland) occupies exactly the same space as the original front-page lead.

Whilst news breaking after first deadline remains a nuisance to night editors today, the advent of computer technology means it is possible to reshape a paper far more rapidly. If a news story on the scale of Summerland happened today, the Back Bench [This is where the Night Editor sits and directs the work of the sub-editors.] would throw out everything in the early pages of the earlier editions to make room for it. Full width banner headlines and large photographs (two features of modern newspaper layout) would be used and stories of lesser importance, such as the price of beef, would be shunted inside the paper. The reporting of late news is also made much easier today because new means of communication (e.g. mobile telephones with cameras, e-mail, social media) would result in more information and photographs becoming available in less time.

Fewer stories appear on the front page of a tabloid. As a result, the presentation of the disaster achieved better impact in the tabloids than in the broadsheets with *The Sun*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the Scottish *Daily Record* clearing the whole of their front page by the time of their final edition. In fact, *The Daily Express* was published



in broadsheet format at the time and news of the disaster initially filled the left-hand columns of the front page (20 dead, the paper reported) before the entire front page was cleared for the final edition. *The Sun's* headline read: "FUNLAND DISASTER", whilst the *Daily Mail* said: "30 DIE IN FUN CENTRE BLAZE". Considering all the London-based UK national newspapers (broadsheet and tabloid), the final edition of the following day's *Daily Mail* had by far the most extensive range of photographs of the fire.

### *The Photographers*

With only limited cine film footage available, it was the still photographer that got the definitive record of the Summerland fire. The first photographer at the scene was Noel Howarth, who ironically had bought a new camera earlier that day. Mr Howarth's sequence of 22 photographs captured the fire from its early stages (with flames rising from the burning kiosk) to the complete destruction of Summerland's four upper floors (**figure 4.6abcd**). His photographs appeared on the front page of the later editions of some of the following day's national newspapers.











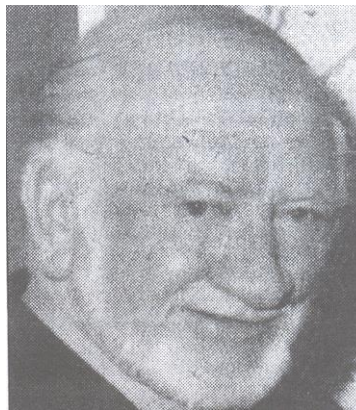
**Figure 4.6: The Summerland Fire (These photographs are copyright and appear with the kind permission of Noel Howarth)**

Mr Howarth developed his photographs at 9pm. Independent Television News (ITN) flew a plane into the Isle of Man at 4am on the Friday morning to collect his negatives. Policemen from the Lancashire Constabulary demanded Mr Howarth hand over his negatives but he refused to do so. However, he did give copies to the Isle of Man Police. Appearing on the

Isle of Man's television service *Manx Net* in 2013, he said that after the disaster the Island's tourist board destroyed film reels showing Summerland before the fire.

Appearing at the scene much later and when Summerland was engulfed in flames was Terry Swanton (**figure 4.7**), who worked at the time for the *Ramsey Courier*. He originally thought his own flat was on fire when a neighbour rushed downstairs to speak him. Mr Swanton said (quoted in *The Isle of Man Examiner*, August 4th, 1998):

“I could see Summerland from the top of the flats so I went up there and I could just see this small plume of smoke coming up. I just grabbed my camera and went, and I was out until 6am the following morning. I just took everything that was happening, people rushing out of the building, the fire.”

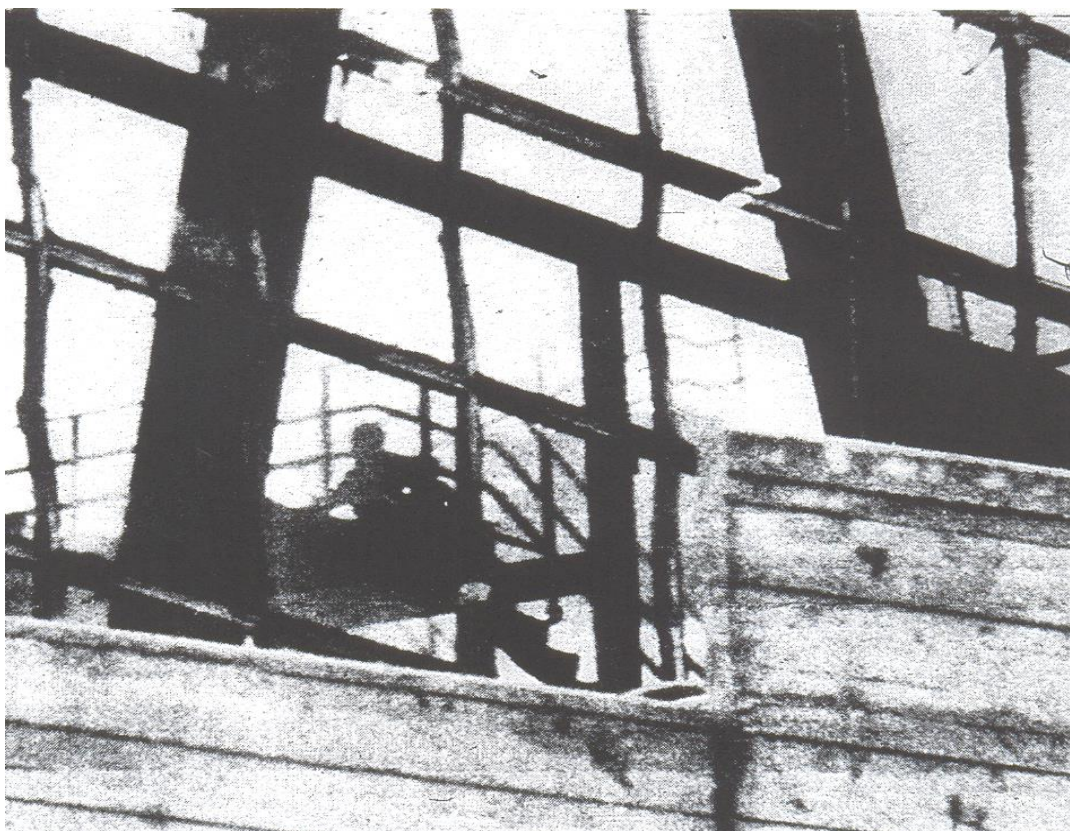


**Figure 4.7: Photographer Terry Swanton**  
(Source: *Isle of Man Examiner*, August 4th, 1998)

A lifetime newspaperman, Mr Swanton had covered the murders on Saddleworth Moor to the east of Manchester in the 1960s and the Summerland disaster was just another case of him “doing his job” (Leverson, 1998, page 11). Mr Swanton recalled: “I only saw things in a news sense. I have been in newspapers since I left school and I am programmed to do this sort of thing.” Mr Swanton also visited Noble’s Hospital looking for survivors before processing his film and contacting the nationals. He said: “I was pleased with the results [the photographs]. They came out all right and this was backed up by the fact they were wanted by people from all over the world.”

One of Mr Swanton’s photographs caused considerable controversy and disgust when it was published in several national newspapers. One of these photographs, which appeared in amongst other papers *The Sun*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Express* and *The Isle of Man Examiner*, showed a silhouette of a dead body perched on a staircase inside the building (**figure 4.8**). The only London-based broadsheet newspaper to publish this picture was *The Sunday Times*. Whilst it is not possible to identify the person on the photograph, many people complained that the photograph was in bad taste and unsuitable for publications that might have been seen by children. Mr Swanton said:





**Figure 4.8:**

**A body silhouetted in the shell of the Summerland holiday complex**

“It was an horrific picture. I didn’t even realise it was a body at the time. I can just remember taking it with a telephoto lens, because I was quite far away. I had to be, all my clothes got burned. I was covered in burns afterwards. I didn’t realise what it was until I processed the film later on that evening. A lot of people complained about it, but it is part of my job to take photographs.”

Another photographer was John Gags from the now defunct Manx newspaper *Mona’s Herald*.



#### 4.7 Factors determining the attendance level

It was estimated that there were 3,000 people inside Summerland when the fire broke out (SFC Report, Paragraph 2, Page 1). This was an increase on the initial police estimate of 2,000. Three main factors determined the attendance level: the time of year, the time of day and the weather conditions.

The fire occurred during the peak holiday season in Douglas in late July and early August: the so-called ‘factory or fair fortnight’ at the start of the six-week school summer holiday. In North West England, mill towns were on the annual Wakes Week holiday. Summerland was thus crowded with holidaymakers, many of whom were from Northern England, Scotland and Ireland. A spokesman for Willames Travel, the most popular Ulster travel agent for package holidays to the Isle of Man, said (quoted in the *Belfast Telegraph*, August 3rd, 1973):

“Ulster holidaymakers practically take over the Isle of Man in July and August. There are so many local people there that walking down the Promenade in Douglas is just like strolling along Queen’s Parade in Bangor. Five thousand leave here by boat [4,000] and plane [1,000] each week for the island.”

More than 50,000 people from Northern Ireland were thought to have visited the Isle of Man in 1973 before the fire. “It has been our busiest year ever,” said the spokesman for Willames Travel. In the early 1970s, the Island was also a popular destination for Northern Irish youth groups, such as the Boy

Scouts and the Girl Guides. At the end of the main holiday period, the “Twelfth fortnight”, around 12,000 people returned to Northern Ireland by boat in the space of two days. It is therefore logical that the *Belfast Telegraph* described the Summerland fire as being “a local tragedy”.

Whilst the time of year increased the number of people inside Summerland, the time of day fortunately acted to reduce the numbers. At 8pm, many holidaymakers were still eating their evening meals in Douglas' seafront hotels and boarding houses, or putting their children to bed. Campbell Malone from Troon in Scotland went to the Isle of Man every year from 1968 to 1973 for the Fair Fortnight. Mr Malone's mother recalled (personal communication):

“Most families left Summerland at 4.30pm each afternoon to get back to their guest house for high tea at 5.30pm. After high tea most young families went for a walk along the prom, weather permitting, before putting their kids to bed at around 8pm. This could explain why few very young children were involved in the fire.”

The Manager of the Palace Hotel and Casino said: “Everyone has been helping to get the injured to hospital. Almost everyone in the hotel left their meals on the tables to go and help. So did taxi drivers, hotel people, coach-hire firms, and people with private cars. They have all been assisting.” If the fire had occurred later in the evening after dark, there would probably have been around 5,000 people inside Summerland and the death toll would almost certainly have been higher. “It was tragedy enough,

but the [Summerland Fire] Commission believes it could have been even worse,” concludes the official report into the disaster (SFC Report, page 82).

Previous research has shown how attendance levels for leisure and recreation activities are sensitive to changes in weather conditions. Thornes (1984) described how weather variables have been used in some studies to predict attendance levels for indoor and outdoor leisure activities. For example, Shaw (1983) found that 52% of the daily variation in the number of persons using the sauna at Sale Leisure Centre near Manchester could be explained by an equation that used predicted values of weather variables such as temperature. Thornes (1984) found that 80% of daily variations in attendance levels at an open-air swimming pool at Finchley in North London could be explained by whether the day fell in the school holidays, the maximum temperature, the number of hours of sunshine, the relative humidity and the wind speed. It is therefore unsurprising that the weather conditions played an indirect role in determining the number of deaths at Summerland.

*The Times* reported how the complex was "particularly crowded when the fire broke out....because of the cold and drizzly weather". "The damp soaking drizzle had changed their plans for a quiet stroll on the seafront," said the Norwich-based *Eastern Daily Press*. Survivor Mr Harold Brown said the fire started "shortly after it had stopped raining". Mr Brown, a fireman from Warrington, said it was fortunate that conditions were calm at the time of the fire. "I feel certain that had it been windy nobody would have got out of that building, as the flames would have travelled even faster," he said. A westerly wind blew over the British Isles on the day of

the Summerland disaster, bringing moist air from the Atlantic. Eight hours before the fire at 12 noon, an occluded front (a front usually brings rain) passed through Douglas: rain was recorded and the sky was completely overcast. By 3pm, drizzle was recorded and the sky had started to clear as the occluded front moved away eastwards. Despite the front's clearance, the afternoon of August 2nd, 1973 remained cool, with the day's maximum temperature in Douglas being 65°F. There were only two hours of sunshine (mostly in the late afternoon) on the day of the fire (*The Scotsman*, August 3rd, 1973). Sixteen hours after the fire at 12 noon on August 3rd, 1973, a further set of fronts were approaching the Isle of Man from the west. However, there were no fronts in the Douglas area in the two hours before the fire broke out at 8pm. It appears that the rainy conditions on the evening of the fire were the result of a moist westerly airflow from the Atlantic rather than being produced by a weather front. In summary, the inclement weather conditions on that Thursday evening did increase the number of persons inside Summerland and indirectly led to a higher death toll. Note, however, that the weather conditions would have been largely irrelevant in determining the number of deaths had the fire started after dark.

#### 4.8 Summary

The fire first became visible inside Summerland at around 8pm on Thursday, August 2nd, 1973. The fire brigade was alerted at 8.01pm, with the first fire engine arriving at the scene by 8.06pm or 8.07pm. At 8.10pm, an all-Island alert was issued and, within minutes, 93 firemen and 14 appliances were in attendance. Firefighting operations were hindered by poor water pressure. The fire spread rapidly to engulf the Solarium and the

terraces by 8.11pm. Four minutes later the first casualties were taken to Noble's Hospital, where 104 beds had been made available and 44 pints of blood had been collected from volunteer donors. The fire was brought under control by 9.10pm, with the first bodies being recovered shortly before 11pm. Survivors attest to a plastic holocaust, as molten Oroglas panels fell from the roof and sea-facing wall. Eyewitness accounts often mention the mass panic and mad rush to the exits; the locked exits; the pandemonium around Summerland's main entrance; and the agony of parents being separated from their children. In the first few hours, it was believed the fire had been caused either by an electrical fault in a fruit machine or by a child playing with matches outside the complex. With the fire occurring on a cool and drizzly evening in August, the building was packed with holidaymakers (Police estimate = at least 2,000 people); however, given that the disaster happened shortly after dinnertime, some people whom may have gone to Summerland later that evening were still at their hotels. Press reports of the fire were initially similar, relying almost exclusively on Press Association copy supplied by local reporters, before diverging as staff reporters arrived at the scene. A photograph showing a silhouette of a dead body inside the building attracted several complaints when it appeared in some newspapers.