CHAPTER 5

THE ISLAND'S AFTERMATH OF BITTERNESS

5.1 Introduction

> "This is the type of thing that stops you dead in your tracks, sick and stunned. The whole island is sick, the radio is on all the time, broadcasting news, and for some reason we all seem to carry a feeling of guilt."

(Taken from a letter written by an islander to his relatives on the mainland and reproduced in the *Manchester Evening News*, August 9th, 1973)

It was the morning of Friday, August 3rd, 1973. The Isle of Man had been devastated by the worst British fire disaster since the Second World War and the press began to descend on Douglas to report on its aftermath. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the aftermath of the Summerland disaster. This chapter will describe the police and the Fire Research Station's investigation into the fire; and the reactions of the architects, the Chief Fire Officer, Trust House Forte, Douglas Corporation and the Manx Government to the disaster with all their allegations, finger-pointing and denials of blame. This chapter will also include extensive comment on the Summerland disaster from building and fire experts in Britain. The material is arranged chronologically to enable the reader to see how events unfolded over time, and the controversies and contradictions that arose in people's comments about the fire.

5.2 Comment and reaction in the seven days after the fire

DAY 1: FRIDAY, AUGUST 3RD

Police investigation

The theory that the fire was started by an electrical fault in the Amusement Arcade (section 4.4) was dismissed by the Friday morning by eyewitness accounts of youths "acting furtively" on the crazy-golf terrace at 7.55pm and then running away "in a guilty fashion" when the fire started. Mr William Roberts (30) from Winsford in Cheshire was entering Summerland when he saw teenage boys running away from the burning kiosk on the golf terrace. He said: "I am absolutely certain they were responsible for the fire. When kids [*sic*.] have been doing something wrong I can sense it. They ran away laughing and joking." At this stage, it seemed the Summerland disaster was an act of arson. "It is probable that the fire was started deliberately," said the Island's Chief Constable Mr Frank Weedon. The disused kiosk was less than one yard from Summerland's external wall, and had previously been used as an attendant's hut and cash box for the crazy-golf course. The *Glasdon Europa Glassfibre Kiosk* had a bright yellow fibreglass moulded exterior and a flat roof (**figure 5.1**), and an internal wooden structure and lining to support and protect the external skin from the internal fittings (John Webb, Personal Communication). Whilst some newspaper reports claimed the disused kiosk contained curtain material at the time of the fire, the *Summerland Fire Commission* report (Paragraph 103, Page 38) only referred to "a roll of wire netting covered in some combustible plastic and…[possibly] some paper and

Figure 5.1: The yellow kiosk where the fire started (the kiosk was in a ruined state and had been moved to the end of the terrace) (Source: Enlarged from THF Promotional Booklet, see figure 3.37)

similar litter". The kiosk also contained some tyres (see the eyewitness testimony of Stephen McVie: day 3). Mr Weedon said the kiosk did not appear on the original plans for the complex.

Eyewitnesses told the police they saw three boys, aged about 15. One boy had very blond hair. He had a German-helmet/page-boy/coal-scuttle style of haircut, and was wearing denims and boots. He had a scar about one-and-half inches long on his jaw about halfway between his chin and right ear, which was painted with purple dye. At a Press Conference, reporters told the Chief Constable they had seen youths in Douglas earlier that day with purple dye on their faces. The other two boys were thought to be wearing tank tops and denims, and have dark hair, with one boy having long hair. It was believed one of these two boys might have been slightly younger. All three boys were wearing "donkey tops". No photofits of the boys were available at this stage. Mr Weedon did not link the boys directly with the previous evening's reports (section 4.4) of children playing with matches on the terrace, but stressed that more witnesses needed to be

interviewed. The Chief Constable said there was no evidence to link the alleged arsonists at Summerland to previous acts of arson on the Island. For example, on April 14th, 1973 a refreshment kiosk at Douglas Bowl, King George V Park was destroyed by a fire caused by two 12 year-old boys playing with matches. He thought the Summerland fire boys were probably holidaymakers, but he was unsure as to whether they were still on the Island. He said: "We have not a clue whether they are Glaswegians or where they come from." At a Press Conference, Mr Weedon appealed for information from owners of boarding houses, hotels and people on campsites for help with tracing the three boys. Descriptions of the youths were sent to Scotland Yard in London, and Manx police kept a close watch on passengers boarding ferries leaving Douglas and aeroplanes at Ronaldsway Airport. No youths had been interviewed by the end of the day.

The Island's Lieutenant Governor asked Britain's Home Secretary Robert Carr to appoint an inspector to carry out an immediate inquiry into the tragedy. Mr Philip Wilson-Dickinson (60), a Home Office fire prevention expert, was duly appointed to assist the Manx authorities. By late afternoon, it had been agreed that a team from the Fire Research Station (FRS) in Hertfordshire would visit the Island within the next few days. On the day after the fire, a four-strong team of forensic scientists and pathologists from the Home Office's Chorley Laboratory (Lancashire) led by Dr Skuse arrived in Douglas.

Reactions to the disaster

Groups directly involved with Summerland

The Architects

One of the most notable features of the architects' reaction is the almost complete absence of comment from the firm of principal architect James Lomas. Mr Lomas retired in 1971. As he was a keen sailor, he lived in the Mediterranean on a yacht for several years following his retirement. He was in Corsica when he saw pictures of the fire in French newspapers. Mr Lomas did not return to the Island until late September 1973. In an interview with the *Daily Mail* (October 4th, 1973), he said:

> "There has been far too much hysteria. Suggestions that I was hiding abroad refusing to return were a load of codswallop…I could have been back within five days at the earliest but it would have done nothing to help the situation. I'd been abroad for exactly a year before it happened. The yacht is now our permanent home."

The Isle of Man Examiner interviewed Mr Lomas on the 30th anniversary of the fire in 2003. He said of Summerland: "It was a good idea that was destroyed in an unfortunate manner." Asked whether he regularly thought about the disaster, he replied: "You can't carry something in your mind forever." Mr Lomas died in December 2007 at the age of 93. Apart from his statements to the public inquiry, I have not been able to find any further direct quotes from Mr Lomas in newspaper reports.

Mr Brian Gelling, the only other qualified architect in Lomas' firm, said on the day after the fire: "We have not tried to contact him. There are more pressing priorities and we don't know where he is." Mr Gelling was also cagey when questioned by reporters about the use of Oroglas. He said: "In view of the investigation by forensic experts, there is no statement".

The majority of the architects' comments came from Summerland's Associate Architects (Gillinson, Barnett and Partners) from Leeds, who carried out most of the design work. Speaking on the night of the fire, Mr Basil Gillinson (48) (**figure 5.2**) said: "I would rather not discuss the safety properties of the material [Oroglas]. We want to go into this with the manufacturers. I feel a bit sick about tonight" (quoted in *The Guardian*, August 3rd, 1973). He continued: "We do not know what flame spread there was on the material. There was a great deal of fireproofing put into the building. The material is supposed to only smoulder." He said the architects had to rely on technical specifications and the results of tests supplied by producers and fabricators.

Figure 5.2: Associate architect Mr Basil Gillinson, whose firm carried out most of the design work for Summerland (Source: *London Evening Standard*, August 3rd 1973)

During Friday's Press Conference, Mr Gillinson said: "We are horrified by what has happened…I am appalled. I cannot explain this terrible thing…I cannot understand how the fire spread so quickly… The fire risk was given full consideration, we spent a great deal of time on that." He said he had never doubted the use of Oroglas because his firm was using it and similar plastic materials in current construction projects in Britain. These buildings were not yet open to the public. He refused to identify these buildings, but said he was "putting the brakes" on their completion until the inquiry into the Summerland disaster had been completed. "The last thing we want to do is to put people's lives at risk," he said. He added: "There are literally thousands of buildings where Oroglas is used, but perhaps not on [the scale of Summerland]." Mr Gillinson said Oroglas was "supposed to

have medium-to-low flame spread characteristics". He said the material had been tested by the manufacturers and fabrication experts, and was subjected to "enormous investigation" before being used at Summerland. "Responsibility for buildings of any size are [*sic.*] taken extremely seriously by all our architects," he said. Mr Gillinson was taken aback at the large quantities of smoke released during the fire. He said: "Acrylics like Oroglas should not give out a lot of smoke. This has baffled us. But we don't know what other materials in the building may have burned." Mr Gillinson refused to answer questions about the technical properties of Oroglas, and referred reporters to Oroglas' manufacturers (Rohm and Haas) and the fabricators (W J Cox) of the panels. However, he added: "To our knowledge it has no greater risk than many other similar materials." He said Summerland's design had satisfied the Manx authorities, the local fire brigade, Trust House Forte and the insurance companies. "We went into great detail over the materials used...The building was very carefully designed to take into account all the requirements of the building regulations," he said. The building was designed "to ensure the strictest safeguards against fire," he added. He continued: "We had evidence from the manufacturers of all the materials. And all this evidence was called in and very carefully assessed before materials were specified."

Mr Gillinson claimed that fire exits were "more than adequate" and had been approved by Isle of Man fire officers. He said the fire exits were well signed with illuminated lighting. "We provided separate escapes…through different levels of the building," he said. Mr Gillinson was horrified by reports that survivors had been unable to find the emergency exits. "Perhaps it is because people behaved oddly returning to

the entrance they had first used," he said. He dismissed a reporter's suggestion that the building might have been overcrowded when the fire broke out: "I don't think so. It was designed to cope with a large number of people and more than adequate fire exits were available." He said: "In 22 years of work this is the first major fire we have had in any of the hundreds of buildings we have designed". Mr Gillinson said:

> "I've got a file…this thick on discussions, of material manufacturers…the fire officer, the insurance people. All different people [were] involved, and architects don't decide these things on their own. They work through such regulations, discussion, numbers of people likely to use the building, adequate escapes."

Mr Gillinson flew to the Island later that day to discover the cause of the fire.

The Chief Fire Officer

Mr Cyril Pearson told reporters that the Island's Local Government Board (LGB) had asked for his opinion on fire safety during the design of Summerland. He gave them advice on the means of escape, fire alarm systems, emergency lighting and firefighting equipment. Mr Pearson claimed Summerland had "the best fire-fighting equipment" available. However, Mr Roberts, who was one of the first persons to see the burning kiosk, commented: "I heard there was sophisticated equipment for use in the building but there was no sign of it." The Chief Fire Officer insisted that everything in the building, from carpets, curtains and lampshades, had to be

flameproofed. He said: “They lined the walls of one bar with felt. This had to be treated. I don’t know anything that went into that place which was not treated in that way. A great deal of thought had to be given to fire safety.” Mr Pearson last inspected Summerland before the start of the 1973 summer season, “probably in May”, and granted the building a certificate of fire worthiness. “I was the one who decided whether it came up to the required standards…Every aspect of fire protection was considered by me; it would not have got a licence if it had not met with my approval,” he said. Mr Pearson said he had spoken to the management of Summerland on “more than one occasion” before the fire and advised them on fire precautions and procedures. He emphasised how they should call the fire brigade immediately after the discovery of a fire. “We [the fire brigade] are satisfied we have told the staff [of Summerland] the right things,” he said. However, he acknowledged the problem of rapid staff turnover in the entertainment industry. He said: “There is no guarantee at all that every member of staff is fully conversant with the job.”

Mr Pearson said Summerland was the most rapidly developing fire he had ever seen. He said:

> “I never thought a fire like it was possible…The speed with which the fire spread was absolutely fantastic. I got the call at 8.01pm and when I got here 10 minutes later the fire was going from end to end and from top to bottom. In somewhere between three and eight minutes the whole bloody place was ablaze.”

Summerland's fire alarm did not sound in Douglas Fire Station until 8.05pm, which Mr Pearson thought was "unusually late". He said the building's open plan design, like a department store, was partly responsible for the fire's rapid spread. "This was a 100ft high, uncompartmented building, therefore there were no barriers to stop the fire spreading," he said. As the brigade was so busy on the evening of the fire, Mr Pearson said the tragedy did not hit him until the following morning. He said: "I feel heartbroken about it...I wouldn't want to put anyone in the position I am in now…I have to be careful about voicing opinions because there is going to be an inquiry, and I will be in even bigger trouble than I am now." Questioned about the cause, Mr Pearson said: "Until we have seen all the statements I am not prepared to make any comments".

The Chief Fire Officer said he had had misgivings about the use of Oroglas acrylic sheeting on the grounds that he knew little about the material. "You need to be an industrial chemist to understand sheet plastics," he said. He continued: "It was a completely new concept in building. We have no experience of it and neither did anybody else. It is no good pretending it was just a usual sort of building." However, he said that he had received assurances from 'authoritative' people that the material was fireproof: "They [the architects and suppliers] told us [the Manx fire brigade] it was incombustible and as safe a material as you can get. It now appears, on the contrary, it was in fact highly combustible… [and an] advertising brochure published by Trust House Forte [*The Summerland Story*]…said that the whole building was fireproof."

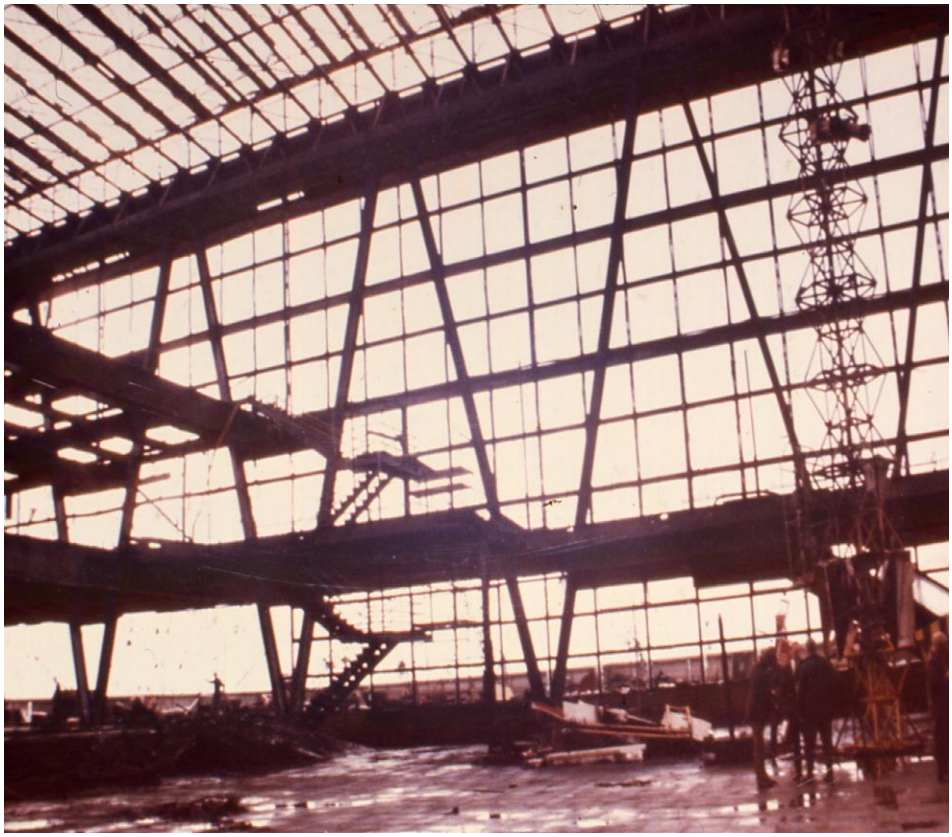

Figure 5.3: The inside of Summerland after the fire (*top*). The main entrance is on the right-hand side and the terraces are on the left-hand side of the photograph (Photograph: John Webb; Copyright: Fire Research Station / Building Research Establishment. This photograph appears with the written permission of BRE Global.) Compare with the pre-fire photograph *below* (Source: Isle of Man Tourism Brochure for 1973)

Whilst the Isle of Man fire brigade could test items such as curtains, it did not have the facilities in the early 1970s for testing materials like plastics. In the light of the assurances received from the architects and the suppliers, Mr Pearson felt that it was unnecessary to send a sample of the material for testing at the Fire Research Station in Hertfordshire. He said: "I wish now that I had had the material tested, but the assurances that it was fireproof were given to me by people who were supposed to be authoritative."

Like the architects, Mr Pearson claimed that fire exits were adequate. He said Summerland had an "awful lot of emergency exits" on each level marked by "illuminated signs". However, it was reported that some members of staff had used fire escapes that hardly any of the visitors had been able to find. One survivor told the *London Evening Standard* that one escape route was practically deserted at the height of the blaze. Whilst Mr Pearson would not comment directly on survivors' accounts of locked exits, he confirmed how "this is a line of inquiry which is being followed up". He said: "If some of them [the emergency exits] were not working then there will have to be an explanation."

Trust House Forte

On the evening of the fire, a Trust House Forte (THF) spokesman said: "We are all terribly upset about this tragedy but we have been told very little about it. We have been trying to contact the Island by telephone but have not been able to." Public comment from THF remained limited in the 24 hours after the fire and mainly involved rebutting reports about locked fire exits. The company claimed the key for one fire exit was in a

glass case by the door, a procedure that complied with "normal regulations". However, a member of staff working in the children's play area said:

> "Fire regulations were abused. There was one door in the discotheque which was held shut with a wooden wedge, the wedge was nailed down."

Chief Executive Sir Charles Forte said: "We were told it [Summerland] was safe in every way…That makes the shock of what happened all the worse to absorb, to understand. It is dreadful, quite dreadful." Sir Charles declined, however, to say who had informed him that Summerland was fireproof, but added that the building had been approved by the Island's Chief Fire Officer and his own company's fire prevention officers. He said Trust House Forte (the tenant) had nothing to do with the planning, design and construction of the building. Whilst the company was "appalled by the human suffering" at Summerland, a spokesman said it would be wrong to comment further until all the facts were known.

The manufacturers of Oroglas

It is unsurprising that Rohm and Haas, the manufacturers of the transparent plastic panels, believed their product was not responsible for the heavy loss of life. "I cannot believe that this material [Oroglas] was the cause of the fire starting to spread," said the firm's British Sales Director Mr Allan Watson. He said Oroglas is a "slow burning" plastic whose combustibility is similar to hard woods like mahogany. The *Architects' Journal* (August 15th, 1973) remarked: "This may be so, but, as no one has ever built a wall out of pyramidal mahogany sheets one quarter of an inch

thick and set light to it, the statement is not very illuminating." Rohm and Haas advised users of Oroglas to "observe fire precautions appropriate for comparable forms of wood." The manufacturer's publicity material for Oroglas never mentioned the material's tendency to drip as it burns. Mr Watson said: "We had some contact with the fire authorities in Douglas and they were aware of what they were doing when they approved it…It was [the Isle of Man authorities] to make their own judgment as to whether the material was suitable to use." Whilst the material is not fire resistant, he said Oroglas is perfectly safe as long as it is installed properly and the building is adequately fireproofed with a drencher system (a powerful type of sprinkler system). "Materials are not hazardous in themselves, only in the way they are used," he said. Mr Watson added: "We are aware that Oroglas is combustible. But it is a very sound, reasonable and good material for certain types of building applications." He admitted that no tests had been carried out during the planning of Summerland to see how large expanses of Oroglas would behave in a fire.

Despite downplaying Oroglas' role in the fire, Mr Watson was clearly stunned by the rapid burning of Summerland's external faces. "We are dreadfully shocked at the way in which this fire spread. It is a terrible disaster," he said. He conceded that the material "might possibly" have had something to do with the rapid spread of the fire and said he was now "pretty concerned" about the material's fire qualities. Mr Watson believed Summerland was the only building in the British Isles to use Oroglas in large quantities. He said that even if such buildings did exist it would be wrong to assume they were at risk:

> "We do not yet know how the fire began or why it spread so rapidly…One of the problems is that once there is a really hot blaze everything burns. Concrete, brick – the lot."

Mr Watson said Rohm and Haas had no intention of withdrawing Oroglas from sale. Another Rohm and Haas official said: "Special building permits are needed in the United States to use acrylic plastic in a structure as big as Summerland".

A Rohm and Haas spokesman claimed Oroglas had been tested by Britain's Fire Research Station (FRS) in 1968. However, a FRS spokesman immediately disputed this claim. The FRS said: "We did not test this material in 1968 or at any other time. What we did was to give Rohm and Haas an assessment based purely on written information given to us by them."

Building and fire experts in Britain

On the day after the fire, it was the perception of many people that the main cause of the Summerland disaster was the building's acrylic roof and promenade wall. A "leading British architect" was quoted in the *London Evening Standard* (August 3rd, 1973) as describing the use of Oroglas at Summerland as "absolutely scandalous". The same architect (unnamed) said: "I don't like it at all and it has no real qualities in fire protection…We cannot build in the rest of the country [i.e. Britain] unless any material has at least four hours' fire resistance." He predicted that "all hell is likely to be let loose" when the investigation into the Summerland fire is completed.

Press coverage in the immediate aftermath of the fire focused extensively on the use of Oroglas, which burned rapidly despite a claim in *The Summerland Story* brochure that it is non-combustible. For instance, in an analysis piece in *The Guardian*, Jordan (1973: 11) said the Summerland disaster served "to underline yet again the still undiscovered frontiers of technology in the fire characteristics of building materials, particularly plastics". The increasing use of plastics in construction in the early 1970s was causing concern amongst fire brigades, insurance companies and fire research authorities. In particular, fire brigades were being faced with hazardous situations about which little was known; the hazards associated with plastics vary enormously and are unpredictable. Dr Woolley of the Fire Research Station (FRS) said smoke and poisonous fumes from burning plastics were becoming a serious hazard; more than 50% of the 771 fire deaths in Britain in 1972 were caused by the combined effects of smoke and gases (Jordan, 1973). Another FRS employee warned of the dangers of using thermoplastics, such as Oroglas, for roofs (Langdon-Thomas, 1972):

> "The use of thermoplastics on roofs can provide the unpleasant feature of flaming drops…which have always been shown to contribute to rapid and extensive fire spread."

Concerns about the use of plastics in construction were expressed at a symposium held at Queen Mary College in London in February 1973, which called for research on the behaviour of plastic materials in different types of fire to be accelerated. People started to question the methods used for testing plastics, as the conditions in real fires are enormously variable, both

with respect to flame spread and toxicity, and often bear no relation to laboratory tests. Langdon-Thomas (1972) wrote:

> "It is important to emphasise that materials which may give a good account of themselves in the combustibility, surface spread of flame or fire propagation tests may not necessarily do so when forming a component part…of a structure and subjected to the fire resistance test. The important feature of any fire resistance test is that it should be made as realistic as possible."

Whereas Rohm and Haas claimed that Oroglas' rate of flame spread was 3.15 inches (80 mm) a minute maximum, Summerland's Oroglas panelling was engulfed by flames moving at several *yards* per minute (Taylor, 1973).

The Agrement Board

The Agrement Board is a non-statutory board that carries out tests on new building materials submitted voluntarily to them by manufacturers. The Agrement Board charges manufacturers for its services. When the Board receives a new material, it sends it to the Fire Research Station at Borehamwood in Hertfordshire or four contracted laboratories that set a square sheet of the material alight and take measurements to calculate flame spread. An Agrement Board spokesman said: "We are in the business of providing factual data. After that it is up to the individual builder or building control officer as to how materials are used…The certificates we issue have no legal standing."

The certificate (Number 70/69) issued by the Agrement Board for a *flat sheet of Oroglas* (the Board was not asked to look at the behaviour of the Oroglas pyramids used at Summerland) on September 1st, 1970 clearly states the material was not fire resistant. However, the certificate does not state that Oroglas is combustible nor does it mention that the material tends to drip as it burns. "Oroglas is not fire resistant; it softens and falls out of its frame before it ignites," the certificate states. Oroglas was given a Class III surface flame spread rating by the Board; Class IV materials have the most rapid flame spread, and include fibreboard and light timber. Under test conditions "the effective spread of flame" for class III materials "neither exceeds 12 inches during the first one-and-half minutes, nor exceeds 33 inches [2 feet 9 inches] after ten minutes" (British Standard 476: Part 1: 1953). The Board said Oroglas did not produce any unusual toxic fumes. The material has a "high ignition temperature" of, according to the Board, 465^{o}C, which means it could not be ignited by cigarettes or glowing coals. Given that Oroglas becomes rubbery significantly below its ignition temperature, the Board said: "In the event of fire the methods of fixing allow Oroglas sheets to fall out of their frames without igniting as they soften." This did not happen during the Summerland fire. The Agrement Board and the manufacturers Rohm and Haas pointed out these properties to potential users of the material. The Board recommended that Oroglas be used for "external *vertical* [my emphasis] glazing or infill panels when fixed in rigid frames in accordance with this certificate". However, the use of Oroglas in Summerland contravened the Board's recommendation because the material was used *horizontally* for the roof as well as vertically for the majority of the promenade wall. This is unsurprising, given that the plans for Summerland were approved in 1967 before the Agrement Board's 1970 certificate. The

Agrement Board Certificate said that Oroglas provides "undistorted clear vision and natural lighting or opaque coloured surfaces of decorative appearance".

The Fire Research Station (FRS)

By 9.05am on the Friday morning, the FRS switchboard was jammed solid with incoming calls from people, either members of the public asking if one building or another was safe to visit; more technical enquiries from those in the building industry and fire safety world; and, of course, from newspapers, BBC News and ITN. An extra switchboard operator was drafted in from the FRS Administration Section to help deal with the rush (John Webb, Personal Communication). It was confirmed late on the Friday afternoon that an FRS team would go to investigate the fire at the request of the Manx Government.

The Fire Research Station told callers that under no circumstances would it have recommended the use of Oroglas for Summerland. The FRS was not consulted by the Manx authorities about the building's design. Mr George Nice, the director of the Fire Research Station, said: "We have never been asked by the makers to test this product, yet we are the most experienced and respected body in the country for the fire testing of new building products."

The Fire Protection Association (FPA)

Mr Douglas Woodward, the head of publicity of the FPA based in London which is financed by Lloyds and other leading insurance companies, said that "the construction of such a building as the Summerland holiday complex would be unlikely to be allowed in this country" under current UK legislation. He said: "It [Oroglas] is not a suitable material for such a building. We feel if there was a proposal to put up a similar building in Great Britain [i.e. England, Wales and Scotland] building regulations would demand it was referred to the Department of the Environment," who would insist on "more stringent fire safety precautions". This view was echoed by the Fire Research Station. Mr Woodward said Oroglas would have burned just like ordinary timber. However, when commenting on the Agrement Board's classification of Oroglas (Class III surface flame spread), he said that did not automatically make the material a fire hazard. As fire resistance is only a measure of a material's strength under heat, he said that this provides no indication of the rate of fire *spread* at Summerland. Mr Woodward said he believed that poor means of escape were likely to have been one reason for the high number of deaths: "If you are going to have buildings of this type, the means of escape must be perfect. There seems to have been some failure in the Isle of Man and people were not able to get out," he added.

Summerland's multi-storey open plan design would also not have satisfied fire regulations in England and Wales, with one independent expert likening the Isle of Man complex to "an airship hangar, completely open inside and uncompartmentalised".

London Fire Brigade

Mr Ronald Miller, London Fire Brigade's senior fire prevention officer, said any fire involving plastics is difficult to control. He said that even fire resistant grades of acrylic can burn rapidly and give off toxic fumes such as hydrogen cyanide that are lethal even in small quantities. "Once you use it in large quantities, where it is involved in fire it will support combustion," he said. Like the Fire Protection Association, Mr Miller strongly suspected that inadequate means of escape contributed towards the Summerland disaster. "This is why the escape aspect and the fire regulations in such a building as the Summerland [complex] must be very good," he said. Mr Miller said the London Fire Brigade was "very concerned" about the increasing use of plastics for both the external walls and interior fittings of buildings. He said:

> "It [plastics] always causes problems. Unlike concrete or wood, most plastics give off toxic fumes. There is always very dense smoke and plastic melts, and, still alight, drips all over the place spreading more rapidly than ever. From a firefighting view it is a menace…If I had been shown a description of the centre before it was built I would have warned the planners they were creating a potential fire hazard."

The London Building Act (which applies in Inner London) restricts the use of Oroglas to *small* amounts in *single-storied* buildings only, with the material being used for unbreakable school windows in conditions of "utmost safety". "Under the London Building Acts no public buildings with

inflammable plastic walls would be allowed," said Mr Miller. In 1973, there were plans to build a large Thames river cruiser with an acrylic roof. However, plans for a plastic 'Father Thames' had to be scrapped on safety grounds.

Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Council Member

Architect and RIBA Council Member Sam Webb said (personal communication): "Summerland could not have been built in London. The District Surveyor (DS) would have seen to that". Each DS was a qualified structural engineer, who inspected the actual fabric of the building during construction to ensure that it adhered to the *London Building Acts and Constructional Byelaws*. The DS – and his team of similarly qualified assistants - had enormous powers, and could enter buildings and issue "dangerous structures notices". The first question that the DS would usually ask is: "How many hours rating [fire resistance and the building remains solid to allow people to escape] do you envisage for this building?" If Summerland had been built in London, it would have been an example of a "Section XX Building" and subject to that code. Architects of buildings with a large volume (> 250,000 cubic feet) and/or over 80 or 100 feet high firstly had to see the District Surveyor because everything about the building had to be to his satisfaction. The DS would usually allow the architect to double the volume on the proviso that a sprinkler system was installed. Mr Sam Webb said that a London version of Summerland would have had to adhere to regulations relating to places of public entertainment as well. This code requires architects to take into account the fact that many people in such buildings are casual first time visitors and some might be drunk, and so

behave unpredictably. Many will not be familiar with the building's layout, and so will have a tendency to retrace their steps to the main entrance in an emergency, often with fatal consequences.

British Plastics Federation

Unsurprisingly, the British Plastics Federation claimed that photographs of Summerland's burning *external* faces did not offer an explanation for the rapid spread of fire. A spokesman said:

> "There is more to the Isle of Man fire than meets the eye. You must remember the Crystal Palace was burnt out before the war. And that was made of glass and steel".

An unnamed fire expert agreed, saying almost any material is vulnerable: fire is capable of spreading from combustible items like curtains and furniture to less combustible materials like acrylic sheeting and even steel. The *Building Research Station* in Watford said acrylic is only a 'mild' fire risk, and would burn rapidly only when a flame is applied to the edge of a sheet or when a fierce fire attacks the acrylic sheeting face on. The British Plastic Federation's spokesman added that more plastics will be used in construction because of a shortage of trees, but stressed architects and builders must be aware of the limitations of plastic materials as well as their advantages.

UK Department of the Environment

The Department of the Environment's (DOE) reaction to the Summerland fire disaster echoed that of Britain's Fire Research Station and Fire Protection Association. A statement said:

> "It is unlikely that a building of that type would be built in England and Wales under our regulations without a number of relaxations of those regulations…Superficially it would seem that that much plastic forming the total exterior would be hazardous."

The DOE's statement said building inspectors would need much convincing by the designers and manufacturers before approving an acrylic design. In its statement, the DOE implied that the Isle of Man's building byelaws were antiquated and had not been updated with advances in construction technology. "The Isle of Man have [*sic*.] modelled their regulations on our [Britain's] 1950 laws…[at] a time when many of these materials had never been heard of," it claimed. Another DOE official said that "there is no reason to believe that [Isle of Man] fire safety regulations are less stringent than ours [Britain]". The DOE also said "the volume of the interior together with its capacity would not have passed the present [1965] building regulations". The DOE said that it would be interested in co-operating with the Manx Government's inquiry into the fire because similar buildings might be proposed in mainland Britain. "From the experience of this fire we may learn something," it added. Building regulations in England and Wales demand that a building remains 'solid' for as long as possible to give people time to escape. The plans for Summerland would not have satisfied this

legislation. This is because Oroglas melts at a temperature hot enough to give anyone who happens to be in its path serious burns. "I don't think Summerland would pass either our [Britain's] building or fire regulations," the spokesman added.

Sheffield building control officer

Mr Frank Entwisle, the chief building control officer of Sheffield City Council, argued the large loss of life was caused by the absence of fire stopping measures. He said: "It looks as if all the acrylic was treated as if it was one gigantic window, which meant that it had no lining. If the sides had been determined as walls, they would have needed a lining [of highly fire resistant material]" (quoted in *The Morning Star*, August 4th, 1973). The Department of the Environment in London agreed; and said they would have insisted on a non-combustible wire mesh reinforcement inside the acrylic sheets. Mr Entwisle added that the use of Oroglas was "most unsuitable" for such a building and said he would have refused an application for a similar building in Sheffield.

The building control officer emphasised how a well-designed entertainment complex could still be unsafe if the building's management had not rigorously trained its staff to deal with emergencies. He said: "It is often impossible for people to find their way out even with clearly marked exits unless they are grouped and shown the way by trained personnel."

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents

A spokesman for the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) said:

> "It seems a clear case of wrong structure and wrong inspection. We are surprised that the Isle of Man standards are so different from the rest of the country".

An architect from Britain who had designed two large buildings on the Isle of Man said that the Island's regulations were in many cases 'inferior' to UK regulations. The architect said: "The committee seems to have wrong priorities over fire and building hazards – they are certainly not strict enough" (quoted in the *London Evening Standard*, August 3rd, 1973).

The Press

With the exception of the *Daily Mail*, every national London-based newspaper ran an editorial comment on the disaster. There were clear differences of opinion between newspapers in Britain and on the Isle of Man, with the most outspoken criticism emanating from the *Daily Express* and *The Sun*. The *Daily Express*'s leader column entitled "The Isle of Shame" said:

> "All Britain mourns the disaster in Douglas. But the Isle of Man must bear, in addition to grief, shame…No such building would have been permitted on the mainland of Britain…Why was it allowed on the Isle of Man? Because the Island, enjoying a degree of self-government, applies its

> own internal rules…[Manx] standards of building safety are inferior to those laid down by Westminster…The restoration of confidence in public safety on the island demands a searching investigation of the calibre which only the [UK] Home Office is capable of conducting without regard to local interests or sensitivities."

The *Daily Express* also called for the Manx Government to be made answerable to the people of Britain as well as its own electorate. Angry islanders hit back at what they saw as an attempt by the mainland press to capitalise "on the Summerland disaster in order to make an irrelevant political reference to the self-government of the Isle of Man" (Mr Quirk, *Letter writer to the Isle of Man Courier*, August 17th, 1973). The same letter writer, who states he is not a member of the Isle of Man Government or a Government employee, was particularly angry with the last line of the *Daily Express's* editorial about the disaster inquiry being conducted "without regard to local interests or sensitivities". For this letter writer, this "can only be construed as a suggestion that the Manx would attempt to conceal the facts…This is an insult and slander to the Manx nation".

In the light of the Isle of Man's dependence on tourists from Britain "to pay its way", *The Sun* saw it as "scandalous" that the British Government had "no say in the Island's fire laws". Leader columns in *The Sun* and *The Daily Telegraph* both referred to the Isle of Man as "a law unto itself". Unlike *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sun* continued this theme later in its editorial:

> "The frankness with which the Isle of Man conducts [the inquiry into the Summerland fire disaster] will be a major test of its fitness to retain its historic independence from the rest of the United Kingdom."

Whilst the *Daily Mirror* called the Isle of Man's building regulations "complacently inadequate", its editorial was more circumspect than *The Sun* and the *Daily Express*, and asked how a new building like Summerland could be turned "so swiftly and so hopelessly into a blazing death trap".

Editorials in the broadsheets concentrated on the use of Oroglas, with *The Guardian* drawing the conclusion that "nobody concerned with the Summerland building knew enough about the plastic material which formed so large a part of it". The paper continued:

> "The Summerland tragedy is all the more alarming because as [the architect said] the building had passed all the statutory tests…The Manx authorities, the Manx fire brigade, the insurance company which insured the building, and the fire prevention officer for Trust House Forte had all inspected it and found it safe…What was wrong with the rules? Why did the building industry mislead itself so badly over Oroglas?"

For *The Daily Telegraph*, whose editorial drew heavily on comments made in the previous day's *London Evening Standard*, the use of acrylic sheeting for Summerland was "incomprehensible", given that it is "common knowledge" that the material "can burn quickly, soon becomes intensely hot and produces a lot of smoke". The paper continued:

> "A rigorous inquiry must deal not only with the degree of any responsibility on the part of the builders and architects concerned but also with the whole question of the use of these acrylic fibres."

The Times' editorial said the Summerland disaster highlighted wider issues about the use of new building materials:

> "Is [Oroglas] suitable for the purpose to which it was put?…If not, were the standards of fire prevention required by the Manx authorities deficient, and are the professional self-discipline and prudence of manufacturers of building materials, architects and insurance companies in general too lax towards the exploitation of new materials?"

Drawing a comparison with the collapse of the Ronan Point tower block in London in May 1968, the paper added: "Building technology changes fast. The pressures for innovation are strong. And innovation may outrun a prudent understanding of the properties of everything that is newly put to use." *The Sheffield Morning Telegraph* (August 6th, 1973) took a similar line, and argued the fire service was hindered by "a shortage of proper rules" regarding the use of new materials:

> "The Fire Service itself performs valiantly and often heroically. But its job in the field of prevention is hampered by a lack of stringency in the law and compounded by the constant development of new materials whose potential is unknown. There is, quite simply, a shortage of proper rules,

> and we want them in such a form that they can be enforced in the courts if necessary."

Whilst *The Daily Telegraph* argued that governments cannot do "everything to prevent…disasters by legislation", *The Guardian* was alarmed that inspections of public buildings required by Britain's Fire Precautions Act of 1971 were "not yet complete". The paper added: "How soon can we expect [to see] the end of [this] process?"

The leader column in the Dublin-based *Irish Times* concentrated solely on current fire safety standards in the Republic of Ireland and did not comment on whom it believed should shoulder the blame for the Summerland fire. The paper said that "the existing system was haphazard" and argued that places of public entertainment should be inspected whilst the public are on the premises. The editorial continued:

> "Must we wait until some overcrowded, airless nightspot – and there are plenty of them in the country – chars a hundred or so people into extinction before proper precautions are taken by everybody concerned?" [On Valentine's Day 1981 48 people died in a fire at the Stardust Nightclub in Dublin.]

The *Belfast Telegraph* did not attempt to allocate blame in its editorial. The paper commented:

> "It is particularly ironic that some of the people involved… came from Northern Ireland to escape for a while from the dangers and the depression of life in the Province…It is a terrible reminder of the devastation that can overtake the most innocent. It is a warning that no building is infallible and that people continually walk the narrow line between life and death."

Similarly, the *Liverpool Echo* did not try and apportion blame in its first editorial (August 3rd, 1973), preferring to concentrate on the close links between the Island and many of the city's residents.

> "The links between Merseyside and the Isle of Man have always been close. Therefore Merseyside shares the sorrow today of the holiday island stricken by tragedy. Time alone will tell how the fire that turned happiness into horror first began. In the meantime the sympathy of everyone on Merseyside will go to the bereaved and the injured."

In a second editorial (August 6th, 1973), the paper said: "there are many questions to be answered about the cause of the fire at Summerland and the reason it spread so rapidly". However, *The Liverpool Echo* continued that "the best interests of all will be served" if these questions are answered at the public inquiry rather than individuals being "subjected [now] to a kind of trial by television".

In the Manx press, a clear divide was evident between the cautious approach taken by the *Isle of Man Courier* and the *Isle of Man Examiner*, and the more outspoken line of the *Manx Star*, a Left-wing newspaper that was never popular and frowned upon by the Manx establishment. In its editorial entitled "We must not lag behind," the *Isle of Man Courier* argued that it is "fair to criticise the Island" for not proposing analogous legislation to Britain's 1971 Fire Precautions Act:

> "It is absolutely imperative that the Isle of Man should, without delay, take urgent action to make our fire precautions in line with the most modern methods of fire prevention. And having done so, we must make sure the world knows that the Isle of Man is no longer a laggard in this matter."

However, the paper tenuously claimed that before 1971 "the Isle of Man was, in fact, in advance of Britain in fire precautions" with the Manx Fire Escapes Act being passed in April 1950. The Fire Escapes Act required "all flats, tenements or public buildings exceeding two storeys to be provided with a proper means of internal or external escape" (Basnett, 1991, page 55). The *Isle of Man Courier* was particularly sympathetic to the *Sunday Telegraph's* editorial (August 5th, 1973), which pointed out that people "calling for the guilty to be chastised" for the Summerland disaster should look at their own failings before criticising the alleged negligence of others:

> "The sad truth is that the vast majority of private householders display an astonishing disregard for the danger of fire. In this respect we really are all guilty…The danger of fire will never be properly mastered until the public as a

> whole takes it seriously. So long as most parents…put their own families at risk, is it really likely that commercial interests will show that much more sense of responsibility?"

Similar sentiments were expressed in a leader in *The Irish Times*, which asserted "general awareness of fire risk is of the first importance". The paper continued: "The thoughtless ass who throws away a burning cigarette-end must try to get it into his head that he may be building his own funeral pyre."

The anti-establishment *Manx Star* used the Summerland disaster to attack the Isle of Man Government's treatment of its citizens on several issues:

> "[Fire precautions] is not the only area in which [the Manx Government falls] down…We go on year after year…without a Factory Act, without a Mental Health Act. Our people do not have the protection which the citizens of other countries take for granted, and it is a long time since members of Tynwald appeared to care about it."

The paper suggested that the Summerland tragedy "may do what years of public agitation have failed to do – shock Tynwald out of its complacency and into some responsible action". These sentiments were also expressed in a leader column in the Left-wing *Guardian* six days after the fire. The paper argued that the Isle of Man's "antiquated laws" should be reviewed:

> "Women cannot sit on juries, birching is common [*The Sun's* editorial also mentions this.], the death penalty remains (although clearly it could never be carried out), the UK's laws on homosexuality and abortion are unknown…More seriously…company laws…are 40 years behind those in Britain…The Summerland holocaust has brought to everyone's attention a less acceptable face of Man…[The Island's] best interests may now be served by a thorough review of the whole of its statute book."

On the west coast of the Island, the Peel-based newspaper *Mona's Herald* (August 14th, 1973) was scathing in its criticism of what it saw as the "voluble critics of the Manx Government and Island authorities" in the mainland press:

> "What say now those self-appointed 'experts', those wise-after-the-event know-alls…who did bleat that no authorities in the British Isles with the notable exception of those of the Isle of Man would have permitted Oroglas [to be used for the roof and walls of] Summerland. The inference was obvious."

The paper goes on to quote examples of the use of Oroglas in Lancashire and Cheshire, but conveniently fails to mention that Oroglas was only used on a *small* scale in Britain at the time of the Summerland disaster. Certainly, there was no building in Britain in 1973 that used Oroglas as the main cladding for its walls and roof.

Many Manx people were annoyed at the fact that Britain's press had failed to acknowledge the numerous acts of generosity shown by islanders after the fire. For example, the Summerland disaster fund reached £50,000 within two weeks of the fire, with the majority of the donations coming from the Manx people. Reverend Dennis Baggaley, the Vicar of Onchan, said:

> "What impressed me most was the spontaneous acts of goodwill and compassion of [the Manx people]. They opened their purses and their doors. But now I think we are bewildered by the publicity which has been positively hostile and a lot of it was grossly out of proportion. Some people have deliberately sought to put the Island in the worst possible light."

However, Reverend Baggaley acknowledged the Summerland fire disaster "has not done [the Isle of Man] any good". He added: "It leaves a nasty taste in people's mouths, but I think we will get over it." Mr Clifford Irving, the Chairman of the Island's tourist board, said: "The Isle of Man is a peaceful, quiet place where we don't expect disasters…We are naturally touchy about publicity."

Some Islanders were more sympathetic to the criticisms voiced in the mainland press and believed the Manx authorities had been insufficiently contrite about the fire. Mr Faragher, a Manxman living on the mainland at the time of the fire, commented (*Letter to the Manchester Evening News*, *August 9th, 1973*):

> "To date I have not read in any paper a statement from one member of the House of Keys expressing **their** sympathy or **their** part in the tragedy…It was their responsibility as granters of the licence [for Summerland] to ensure the regulations and safety of the public. It is no good now for the Manx Government to sit back and let recriminations fall on innocent heads."

A *Daily Express* cartoon (**figure 5.4**) published four days after the disaster caused controversy on the Isle of Man. The cartoon, which was drawn by the paper's political cartoonist Michael Cummings, showed the American White House going up in flames. The cartoon's caption read: "It's rumoured that the President has panelled the building with Oroglas".

Figure 5.4: Cummings' controversial *Daily Express* cartoon

The cartoonist was drawing a comparison between the conflagration of President Nixon's Presidency as a result of the Watergate Scandal and the Summerland fire. In a letter to the *Isle of Man Courier* (August 10th, 1973), Mrs Muriel Corrin of Douglas argued: "I was thoroughly disgusted at the Cumming's cartoon in this week's *Daily Express*…Cummings has often drawn cartoons in poor taste but this one really takes the biscuit". The *Isle of Man Courier* also took the *Daily Express* to task in a leader column in the same edition:

> "The *Daily Express* cartoon…was in bad taste and typical of the paper's attitude to the Isle of Man. It displayed no regard for the suffering of those in hospital and to those who had lost members of their family, relatives and friends. If this is how the *Express* intends to gain new readers, then we can only think that before long it will lose further circulation and just become a comic."

Mr Quirk, who had written to the *Daily Express's* editor Ian McColl about the newspaper's "Isle of Shame" editorial, made a formal complaint to the Press Council about the Cummings' cartoon, condemning it as a "ghastly parody and an obscenity". The Press Council's adjudication in December 1973 said the cartoon was "undoubtedly offensive to some readers". However, the Council said the paper had done the correct thing in publishing five letters from readers whom were critical of the cartoon as well as a comment from the cartoonist. In the light of this, the Press Council decided to take no further action against the *Daily Express*.

Social welfare

On August 3rd, 1973, families of holidaymakers reported missing started to arrive in the Isle of Man by sea and air. "Silent knots of people" visited Douglas police station seeking news and fearing they would be given some. To quote the words of the *Belfast Telegraph*, there was "a profound sense of shock and disbelief that tragedy on such a large scale could strike such a small place". Colin Maddock commented in *The Liverpool Echo* (August 17th, 1973): "Things, which these basically quiet folk had only read about as happening on the mainland, has [*sic*.] swept in to add a savage chapter to the island's history." The Manx Social Welfare Board set up an office in the Ferry Terminal building in Douglas to assist holidaymakers who faced difficulties in returning home; accommodation, financial help and advice were provided.

Many holidaymakers cut short their holidays and returned home to be reunited with their relatives. For instance, Mr Egbert Blake from Liverpool and his family decided to leave a week early. "The trouble is, we cannot think of much else while we are here. So I said, well, let's go home," said Mr Blake. Fourteen-year-old Ian Queen left Douglas by boat on the Friday. He said (personal communication): "One memory which has never left me is when the ferry pulled out of Douglas Harbour. Every passenger on the port side was in complete silence looking over at the charred remains." Meanwhile, Glasgow fireman Mr Alan Morgan was arriving in Douglas on the Stranraer ferry. He said (personal communication): "The picture of the still smouldering shell [of Summerland] we had viewed from the deck coming into the harbour will always remain with me."

More than 300 people waited nervously for the Isle of Man steamer Snaefell to dock in Belfast. The boat was carrying around 750 passengers. Among those waiting on the quayside were David and Margaret Mason from Finaghy in County Antrim, whose daughter Margaret (18) had telephoned home just a few hours before the fire and told them she was planning to visit Summerland. Margaret's parents were unable to contact her after the fire, and there was still no response when a message was relayed over the Douglas to Belfast ferry. When the ferry docked, Mr Mason caught sight of Margaret and their agony was finally over. "I left Summerland a couple of hours before the fire," she said. Another man who was waiting for his wife and family shouted: "I see them on the top deck. Thank God they are all right. I've been trying to get through to Douglas ever since I heard the news but all the lines were full. The waiting has been terrible." Meanwhile, the first boat to arrive in Scotland since the fire docked in Ardrossan. Waiting at the quayside was a Dumfries couple whose son and daughter-in-law had been planning to go to Summerland. After hearing about the blaze on the 11pm news, the couple tried frantically to call the emergency numbers without success until 3.30am. After two hours' sleep, they started re-dialling again at 6am, finally getting through at 9.50am on the Friday morning. Fortunately, the couple changed their plans at the last minute because their son was too tired to go out for the evening. When one boat docked in Scotland, holidaymakers had to wait for a few minutes as a mark of respect as the coffins of some of the fire's victims were taken off the boat first.

Sir Peter Stallard, the Island's Lieutenant Governor, set up the Summerland disaster fund with initial contributions of £5,000 each from the Manx Government and Douglas Corporation. Sir Charles Forte had been in contact with the Lieutenant Governor about the fund, but there was no further announcement from Trust House Forte by the end of the day. A message of sympathy was received from The Queen, who said she was "very shocked to hear of the appalling fire…and tragic loss of life"; she sent her "heartfelt sympathy" to the relatives of the dead and to the injured. A report of the disaster was flashed to the British Prime Minister Edward Heath, who was attending a Commonwealth Summit at Ottawa in Canada. The British Government was expected to order a survey into the use of Oroglas and similar plastic materials in Britain. It was reported that this survey could result in some buildings being forced to close temporarily until their fire safety had been put beyond doubt. Mr William Whitelaw, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, said:

> "My ministerial colleagues and I were much distressed to hear of the appalling tragedy in the Isle of Man with which Northern Ireland has such close connections. We wish to express our deepest sympathies with all those bereaved and with those who have been injured."

Messages of sympathy were received from around the British Isles, including from the Independent Broadcasting Authority, the Chairman of Llandudno Council, the General Secretary of the Union of Post Office Workers and the Lord Provost of Glasgow.

Press reports conveyed the message that relatives of those killed at Summerland would almost certainly face a long legal battle before they could be paid damages with the first task being the apportionment of liability. Summerland was insured by a consortium of companies, with Commercial Union having the largest stake. Mr Stanley Blake from Commercial Union said: "We won't have any clear picture of how much damage has been caused until next week, although our assessors are already on the scene."

Mr Leonard Bond, the Isle of Man's tourism director, said he believed that the tragedy would not have a serious long-term effect on the Island's tourist trade. "After all the Isle of Man was operating as a holiday centre for 100 years before Summerland came into existence," a tourist board official later said. After the fire, the Isle of Man Tourist Board encouraged other entertainment venues to stay open for longer in the evening to fill the gap left by the destruction of Summerland.

DAY 2: SATURDAY, AUGUST 4TH

Locked doors, with comment from Trust House Forte

Several newspapers reported that the Island's Chief Fire Officer had found a fire exit in the rollerskating area on the Lower Downstairs floor (Level 2) chained and padlocked when he had inspected Summerland at the start of the 1973 summer season (**figure 5.5**). In fact, a letter that Mr Pearson wrote to Summerland's then General Manager Mr Remo Bertorelli on April 3rd, 1973 (note that Mr Bertorelli was not the manager at the time of the fire) and disclosed at the public inquiry spoke of "several of the

emergency exits [being] chained and padlocked". Mr Anthony De Lorka succeeded Mr Bertorelli as General Manager in June 1973. Mr Pearson refused to give Trust House Forte (THF) a fire certificate for the building until he had received a written assurance from the company that it would not happen again. THF gave that assurance and instructed Mr Michael Williams, a member of the security staff, always to keep the doors unlocked whilst the public are on the premises. Mr Kenneth Paxton, the deputy manager of THF's leisure division, said:

THE PHOTOGRAPH WITH NO CONTEXT

The Isle of Man Public Record Office holds two large folders of police photographs of Summerland. There are multiple copies of some photographs. The police were so interested in one photograph that they had made around ten copies of the same image showing an exit door padlocked and obstructed by a beer barrel (**figure 5.5**). Unfortunately, the folder of photographs contains no supporting documentation, which makes it difficult to place the photograph into context. There is no mention of an exit door being blocked by a beer barrel during the fire, so presumably this photograph was taken before the fire. It seems unlikely that the police would be interested in a photograph that merely showed an attempt to secure the building in the days after the disaster.

Figure 5.5: An exit door presumably at the eastern end of the building padlocked and obstructed by a beer barrel (Source: File of police photographs, Isle of Man Public Record Office)

> "We wrote to him to say that no chains would ever be used again on fire doors. I am convinced there were no chains or padlocks on any of the doors when the fire broke out. All of our staff were instructed on this order".

However, on the night of the fire, two five feet doors on the Solarium floor were fastened and the row of glass doors providing an escape route from Summerland into the Aquadrome were locked. In addition, the door at the bottom of the NE Service Staircase was chained and padlocked. This forced people to continue along the corridor into the rollerskating area to find an unlocked exit. It is also possible that some people could have mistaken the entrance to a crate store under these stairs as being the fire escape doors (John Webb, Personal Communication).

Despite these reports, especially with regard to the NE Service Staircase, Mr Paxton still denied that some of the fire exits had been locked: "We have investigated this very thoroughly…The only emergency doors that were locked were allowed to be locked by the regulations; keys were kept by them in glass cases." However, he admitted that a key for the Aquadrome doors was not readily available. He indirectly blamed Douglas Corporation for this because in 1972 the Corporation had stopped giving Summerland customers free use of the Aquadrome. These doors were thus made redundant, and reinforced the fact that the Aquadrome and Summerland were under different management systems. As a result, staff had to break down these doors to enable people to escape from the fire. Mr Paxton said these doors only opened on to a balcony (the spectators' terrace of the

swimming pools), but he did not deny they offered an escape route from the fire.

As Trust House Forte (THF) was the building's tenant, Mr Paxton said that the company never checked the materials used for Summerland or heard of Oroglas when they took possession of the centre in 1971. He said most of the staff that worked at Summerland had received no fire safety training and had not taken part in a fire drill in the 12 months before the disaster. Only £2,000 was spent on the building's firefighting equipment. These facts sit uncomfortably with statements in THF's 1970 annual report, which emphasised the company's commitment to high fire safety standards:

> "We have nothing to fear from the Fire Precautions Bill now before Parliament. Indeed our only objection to it is that it does not go far enough in the direction of a national code and leaves too much to local regulations which, in our experience, can be erratic."

The Sunday Times (August 5th, 1973) comments that this final statement "was to prove tragically true". In an interview with *The Sunday Mirror*, Sir Charles Forte said:

> "This is the worst thing that has happened to me in my business life…I have always made sure that fire precautions in our hotels and buildings were the best. We have never spared expense on this because safety for our own customers has been my biggest concern and worry."

Sir Charles Forte claimed that Summerland's structural fire safety was "the responsibility of the Manx Government". He added: "But this does not make me feel any better. Although it's not directly our responsibility everyone in my company feels deeply about this tragedy."

Mr Paxton said the Chief Fire Officer's contact with THF continued after the building's opening in 1971. Mr Paxton said:

> "After the building was completed, Mr Pearson came back with further demands for more access and for the cladding of steel supports. We thought it was strange to make the requirements after the building was completed, but we agreed to it anyway…We had to take out thatched wooden lampshades when Mr Pearson demanded that they go".

Among the additional precautions demanded by the Chief Fire Officer were emergency lights, exit signs and alarms on a separate power circuit; smoke doors in certain areas that could be closed electronically; and hose-reels with a rising main going through the building.

The kiosk and the firefighting operation

The Isle of Man's Chief Fire Officer said the kiosk on the crazy-golf course where the fire started should not have been there. He said: "I never gave permission for this…The kiosk was done without my knowledge or any authority from me. That's one thing I'll not be made a bloody scapegoat for." He said that any fire started in the kiosk would "lick straight up the plastic walls of the centre".

Mr Ken Harding, Summerland's Technical Services Manager (whose remit included fire safety) and a former power station engineer, described how members of staff had firstly tried to put out the kiosk fire with water and then extinguishers. When this proved unsuccessful, Mr Harding ran back into Summerland, uncoupled a hose-reel and threaded it through an open window. He said:

> "We tried to put it out from the outside with water, but the [Galbestos] was two layers thick, divided by a metal layer in between. We decided to go above and poured water down from the [Marquee Showbar level], but this had no effect either. The metal had buckled and it was impossible to get water down onto the flames."

He told the Summerland staff firefighting party to pull the kiosk further away from the building by hooking small flagpoles into it. He said:

> "But the flames were shooting 20 to 30 feet high from it and licking the [Galbestos] steel cladding. I could see that the steel was warping and opening with the heat, so I gave the hose to one of my crew, ran back for a second hose and gave the alarm. But the fire spread so rapidly that the only thing to do was to evacuate the hall [the Solarium]."

The Sunday Mirror (August 5th, 1973) asked: "Did blaze boys die?" The paper quoted Mr William Roberts, who said he had seen the three boys re-enter the building after they had run away from the burning kiosk on the crazy-golf course. "I feel certain they might be among the victims – certainly

if they went to the upper floors," he said. However, the Island's Chief Constable said this was "only a possibility"; Mr Weedon later discounted this theory because no male bodies of that age had been recovered from the building.

It was alleged the Island's Local Government Board had described Summerland as "an indoor and outdoor complex" rather than a public assembly building to justify the waiver of the bye-law requiring the building's external walls to possess two hours' fire resistance (section 3.3).

Building design: comment on the use of Oroglas

It was readily becoming apparent that Summerland would never have been built if UK fire regulations had been followed.

A spokesman for the Department of the Environment in London said: "It is unlikely that such a building as Summerland would be allowed in this country [UK] under existing British fire regulations." He cited the flammability of the building's roof and sea-facing wall, as well as the building's large enclosed area that forced people to walk long distances to reach a safe escape route, that is, one enclosed by concrete or brick.

Dr Keith Gugan, an expert on industrial fire precautions who was investigating the fire on behalf of the building's insurers Commercial Union, made similar comments when he arrived in Douglas. He said:

> "Oroglas was a totally unsuitable material for use in this quantity. It was used as a covering for a large building at an American exhibition [Montreal EXPO 1967: see chapter 3] – wrongly, I felt – but its use was justified at the time on the grounds that the building was only a temporary one".

Referring to the large undivided space inside Summerland, he said buildings of this type would have only been approved in England "with great reluctance". He added:

> "It [Summerland] would quickly smoke-log and people would have had difficulty finding the stairs. In a traditional building – of brick and wood – it is unlikely that the fire spread would have been so rapid, and that is the really horrifying aspect of the case".

Dr Gugan returned to London with some of the remaining pieces of Oroglas. Agrement Board Chairman Lord Peddie and board director Mr Thomas Lant also arrived in Douglas to examine the use of Oroglas in Summerland. "Our findings were that it was not fire resistant. We are here to check whether the material was used in the manner which we specified," said Lord Peddie. Whilst he said the Board "recommended its use under certain conditions", he would not comment directly to reporters on the use of Oroglas at Summerland.

The Island's Lieutenant Governor Sir Peter Stallard incorrectly speculated that the weathering of the Oroglas panels by the wind and salt water had made the material more hazardous than when Summerland opened in 1971. He denied that the Manx authorities had cut corners in the building's design.

Sprinkler and Deluge Systems

Summerland had no sprinkler or deluge system. A **sprinkler system** is a number of closed nozzles, with each nozzle only operating when the temperature in that area exceeds a particular value. In a **deluge system**, there are a number of open sprays that are turned on simultaneously by the operation of one or more sensing elements, which may be temperature-sensitive like a sprinkler or operated electrically from fire detectors. A **drencher system** covers a large area of an internal or external wall at the same time and is therefore similar to a deluge system (John Webb, Personal Communication). Oroglas' American manufacturers Rohm and Haas recommended a deluge system, whereby water is applied immediately to a large area of a building. Isle of Man Local Government Board member Mr Alec Moore said: "We were assured a sprinkler [or deluge] system was not necessary because there were numerous fire escapes and fire doors and the building could be emptied in a few minutes." However, Rohm and Haas employee Mr Frederick Rarig said: "We strongly recommend the installation of this deluge system when this material is used and this recommendation was passed to our London office." It was not known at this stage whether Rohm and Haas had passed this recommendation on to the Isle of Man authorities or whether the Manx authorities had requested information from

the company about the correct usage of Oroglas. Mr Moore said: "We did not ask for [a sprinkler/deluge system]. We thought the materials, although not actually fireproof, were in the same category as hard wood and would smoulder rather than flare up." Mr Dixon, THF's UK Fire and Safety Officer, later told the public inquiry that he was not approached about the installation of a sprinkler/deluge system during the planning stage of Summerland. Mr Kenneth Paxton from THF denied the company was putting "profit before safety" by failing to install sprinklers or a deluge system. He said a sprinkler system would have been installed had it been considered necessary, but Summerland "was not presented to me at any time as a particular fire risk". Chief Fire Officer Mr Pearson reacted with surprise when he learnt that Oroglas' manufacturers had considered a deluge system to be essential. "If it had been known in time…I think it would have stopped the whole project because the cost would have been astronomical," he commented.

Mr Pearson said the Isle of Man had no 'formal' fire regulations, but "tried to follow British practice where practicable", taking guidance from "loads of manuals and codes of practice". He complained that the facilities for testing new materials on the Island were inadequate. Mr Pearson also said the Summerland structure had no basic fire resistance. Meanwhile, *The Sunday Telegraph* (August 5th, 1973) reported that a Government bill containing new fire safety measures, which already existed in draft form, would be given priority in Tynwald during the autumn of 1973.

The Hunstanton Leisure Centre Project

In the light of the perceived importance of Oroglas acrylic sheeting for explaining the high number of deaths in the Summerland disaster, Britain's press was particularly interested in uncovering proposals for acrylic buildings in the UK. *The Sunday Times* (August 5th, 1973) followed up a story buried away on page 19 of the previous day's parochial *Eastern Daily Press* and elevated it to its front page lead story under the headline "**Summerland men planned 'fire-plastic' buildings for Britain**". The paper reported how Summerland's architects had submitted plans for a large leisure complex to be built on the old railway station site in the Norfolk seaside town of Hunstanton. Revised plans for the complex showed two large domes housing a solarium, multi-purpose hall and dolphinarium (**figure 5.6**). The solarium included a swimming pool, beach, wave machine, sunbathing facilities, palm trees, a waterfall, a restaurant and bars. There were firm proposals to use large quantities of Oroglas in the Hunstanton project to create a largely transparent building; the whole of the building's roof and external wall surfaces was to be clad in tinted acrylic sheets moulded as pyramids or domes. However, the Norfolk authorities were insisting on more stringent safety precautions than had applied to Summerland. These included an expensive drencher system capable of pouring thousands of gallons of water over the outside of the building. In addition, the authorities demanded an above average number of fire exits; the use of wired glass instead of Oroglas for the building's lowest levels; and for the building to be sited away from surrounding properties. In essence, the Norfolk authorities were insisting that the American regulations

governing the use of Oroglas be satisfied before the Hunstanton project could receive planning permission.

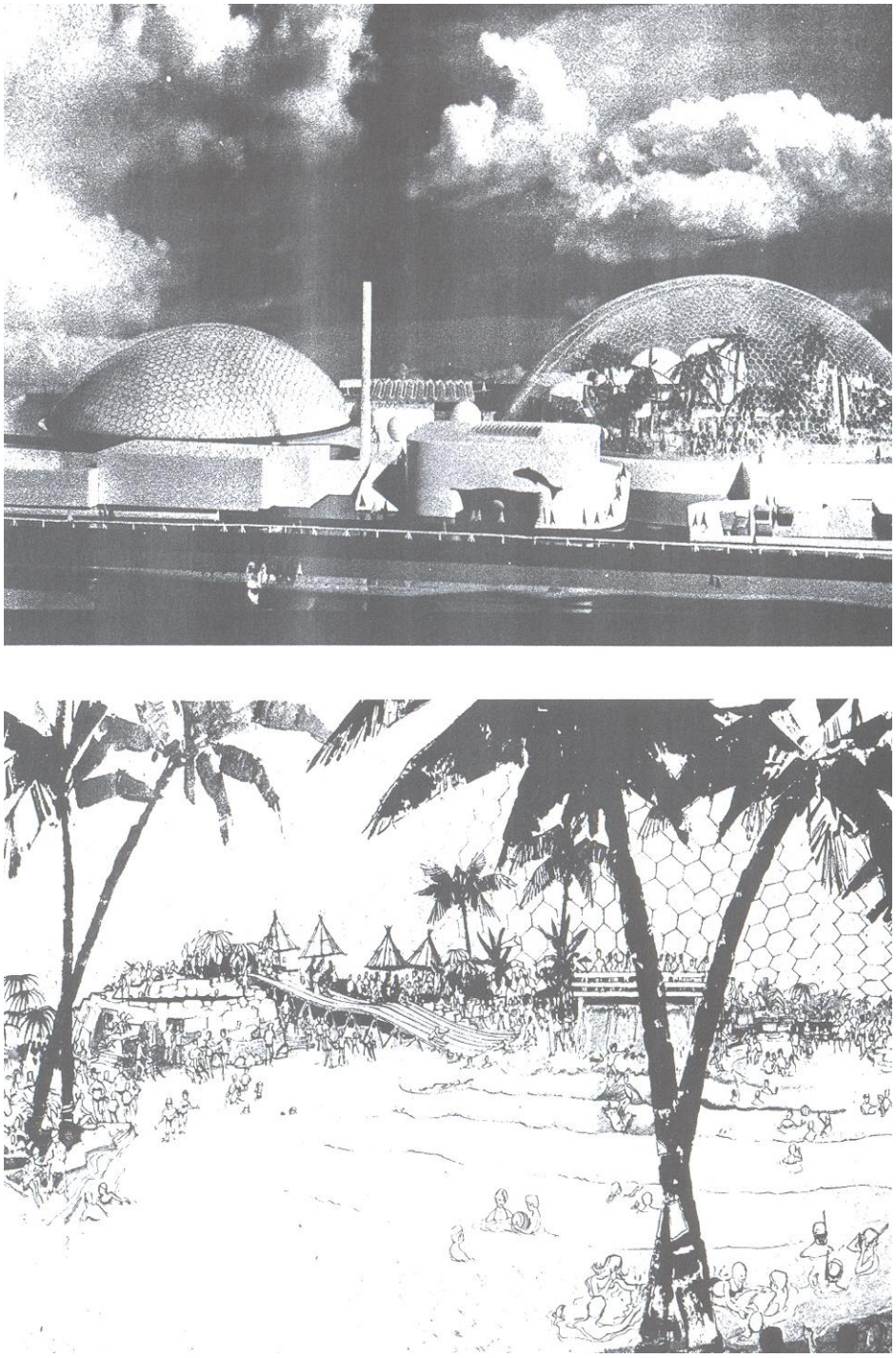

Figure 5.6: The Hunstanton Leisure Centre Project: model and artist's impression (Source: Quarmby, 1974)

There were, however several differences between the Hunstanton Leisure Centre Project and Summerland that *The Sunday Times* failed to mention in its story. Firstly, the Hunstanton building was to have a domed roof; there were no plans to use Oroglas to create a horizontal roof like as at Summerland. Secondly, an artist's impression of the Hunstanton project reproduced in Quarmby (1974) clearly shows how the building's Solarium was confined to one level (**figure 5.6**). This is different to Summerland, which was a *multi-storey* building (four floors) encased in acrylic. The Norfolk complex would have used the American triodectic system, which had not been heard about when construction work on Summerland began in 1968. Understandably, the Clerk to Hunstanton Town Council was keen to stress that their building would have been "completely different" to Summerland. For instance, Summerland was built into a cliff face, whereas the Hunstanton building would have been surrounded by open land on all sides, thus enabling better means of escape. He said:

> "The basic idea of a leisure centre was the same – but not the construction…I went to the Isle of Man to see what could be incorporated in[to] the scheme… We spent several days discussing safety with fire officers when considering the scheme. Only the amenities of the two centres would have been comparable".

While the Hunstanton Leisure Centre Project (cost of £1.05 million) had been approved in *principle* by the town's Council, councillors were concerned about the building's cost. Arguments for and against the scheme continued. Deadlock was reached at a Council meeting in February 1971.

Seven members voted for the complex and seven against; however, the Council's Chairman used his casting vote against. When a further meeting was held on March 11th, 1971, the vote was unanimously against: the Norfolk town had finally rejected the Oroglas-based leisure scheme.

The Sunday Times (August 5th, 1973) trawled through comments made by Summerland's architects in an attempt to uncover evidence that implied they were planning to replicate the Isle of Man complex on the British mainland. Indeed, Summerland's Associate Architects Gillinson, Barnett and Partners had drawn up plans for a solarium at Ayr in western Scotland, a fact that *The Sunday Times* did not mention. The Ayr Solarium would have been clad in 2 m (6 feet 8 inches) square pyramid shaped double skin acrylic panels and transparent PVC roof barrel vaults. This scheme would have required a bye-law waiver. Mr Peter Sargent, who worked for Gillinson, Barnett and Partners, wrote in the October 1971 issue of the trade journal *Building Specification*: "We have subsequently been able to obtain waivers or the promise of waivers on *more than one* [my emphasis] scheme in the British Isles." Mr Sargent admitted that acrylic "is a combustible material and that under the present British building regulations it cannot be used under normal circumstances". In order to overcome this "building regulation problem", he advised architects to:

> "…describe to local fire authorities the particular properties of acrylic, to show them various films of fire tests conducted under stringent American standards, and to discuss with them the particular methods of application in relation to the detail of the fixing and the design of the overall building."

Mr Sargent claimed: “When it does ignite, it does not drip hot lumps of plastic down your neck, as do some plastic materials, and neither does it produce toxic fumes.” *The Sunday Times* placed Mr Sargent’s most potentially damaging comments at the end of its article:

> “...As this type of building becomes more common.... we have no doubt that the problem of building regulation approval will be overcome...We may then see more use of this exciting material."

DAY 3: SUNDAY, AUGUST 5TH

Fire Research Station investigation

A four strong team from Britain’s Fire Research Station (FRS) travelled up to Liverpool by train from London Euston. The team was accompanied by a representative from the Building Regulations Division of the Department of the Environment (DOE) and a steel structures engineer from the Fire Protection Association (John Webb, 2013). A first class compartment had been reserved for the team, who were loaded up with their suitcases and equipment such as cameras and film. The team spent the first part of the train journey planning a course of action and studying plans of Summerland in the *Architects’ Journal*, which John Webb had managed to find on his tour around Bexleyheath and Erith libraries on the previous day. At Liverpool, the team was taken by Liverpool Salvage Corps vehicles from Lime Street station down to the Isle of Man ferry pier. After a smooth crossing, the men arrived in Douglas shortly before dusk and got their first

view of the "blackened, dirty looking hulk" of Summerland. They were met by Manx fire chief Cyril Pearson, who had two fire service vehicles on hand to take the team to their hotel on Douglas Head. On that evening, FRS Head George Nice went to visit various Manx Government officials before the whole team re-assembled in the hotel bar to discuss with Mr Pearson what they intended to do tomorrow.

Police investigation

Police received their first definite lead in the hunt for the three boys alleged to have started the fire from the owner of the Glen Dhoo campsite two miles from the Summerland centre. Mr Richard Cain said a group of boys, who had been due to stay at the campsite until the Saturday morning and were in a group of nine or ten youths, had ended their two-week holiday abruptly on the morning after the fire. He said:

> "They left the site in the morning – rather hurriedly. Normally I would have expected them to ask for their money back. I have given the police their names and addresses in Scotland [They were from Glasgow]."

A camper said: "They were a wild lot. They were always skylarking. We saw them fooling about in Summerland." Mr Larsen (33), another camper at Glen Dhoo, saw the boys at Summerland on the night of the fire. He said: "I recognised them because they had been causing trouble there the night before and I had a row with one of them." Mr Larsen's suspicions about the boys' actions were raised further when he lost sight of them in the minutes before the fire started. Taxi driver Mr Robert Prior (35) had also

encountered the Glaswegian boys and picked them up from Summerland as firemen were tackling the blaze. He said: "They were a pretty rough lot, although on Thursday night they struck me as being unusually quiet on the way back to the camp as if they were worried about something." He added that one boy "strongly resembled the baby-faced boy in the [police] photofit picture".

Meanwhile, the police issued new descriptions of two boys seen running away from the burning kiosk on the crazy-golf terrace. It is noticeable that these descriptions differ substantially from the original descriptions issued by the police on Friday, August 3rd. One boy is said to be about 14, be between 5ft 8in and 5ft 10in tall, have long untidy dark hair, be of 'very slim build', and have a thin long face and largish nose. He was generally unkempt and wearing blue/navy or black Wrangler-type jacket and blue denim jeans, and spoke with an unspecified accent. The second boy is now described as having dark hair. He was 10-12 years old, of chubby build, and was between 5ft 2in and 5ft 4in tall; he was wearing a windcheater or battledress type jacket of red and yellow or 'Clockwork' orange tartan design, dark trousers and dark shoes. Witnesses said the boy had a dirty face. The police released a photofit of the younger boy and an artist's impression of the older boy (**figure 5.7**), but admitted they were now uncertain as to whether two or three boys were involved. There was certainly no description available of a third boy.

Stephen McVie (8) from Glasgow claimed that he could identify the boys, whom he thought spoke with an *English* accent. Stephen was playing with the telescope on the crazy-golf course when he saw two boys light a

tyre in the kiosk. "Mummy, I watched those bad boys [talking and striking matches]. They started the fire. I saw them do it," he said. One eyewitness said the purple scar on the face of one boy could have been gentian violet that had been used as an antiseptic. The police said they were unsure whether the boys were islanders or holidaymakers.

Figure 5.7: Photofit and artist's impression of the alleged Summerland fire boys

Twenty-five officers from the Lancashire Constabulary were now on the Island assisting the Manx force in their search for the boys. There were no plans to send in further reinforcements from Lancashire. Nearly 200 witnesses had been interviewed by the end of the day. The Isle of Man Police were expecting to receive hundreds of additional statements given by holidaymakers to police officers in Britain. Detective Superintendent Ibison said the public appeal for assistance had been "wonderful to say the least".

He continued: “We have had offers from people wanting to do our typing or give help to the relatives of the deceased. The attitude of the public has been all that can be desired.” The police started the huge task of visiting all the campsites, holiday chalets and guesthouses where the boys might have stayed. The police studied a photograph of the Summerland blaze (**figure 5.8**), which showed two boys matching elements of the descriptions walking away from the fire along Douglas Promenade. Officers’ suspicions were raised by the fact that the boys did not show any natural curiosity in the fire and were merely walking away from it. However, this proved to be a false lead: the two boys went voluntarily to Douglas Police Station and were eliminated from the inquiry.

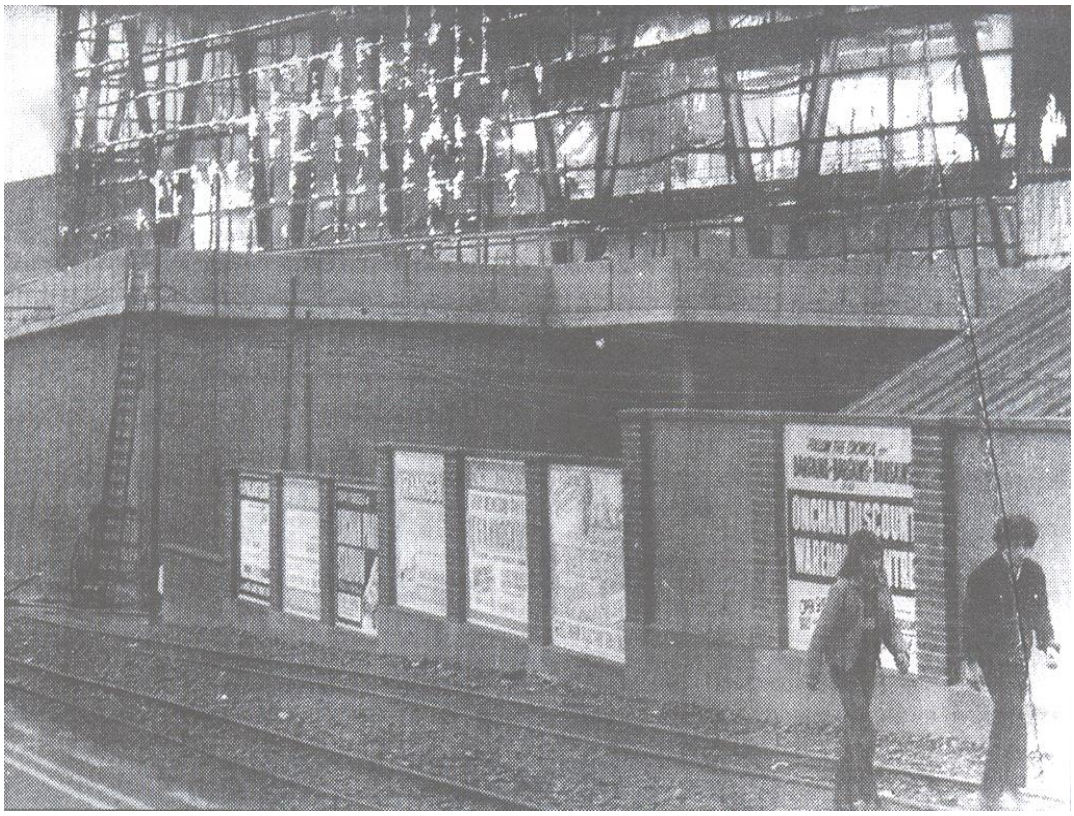

Figure 5.8: False lead - these boys were traced and eliminated from the inquiry

The police started to compile a list of the home towns of holidaymakers in the Isle of Man during the week of the fire, so that they could target their investigation in the appropriate areas of mainland Britain. A senior police officer said: "This may have started as a giggle…Now it must be a nightmare on their consciences."

Social welfare

Around 3,000 people attended a memorial service for the victims of the fire at the Villa Marina on Douglas seafront at 3pm on Sunday, August 5th. Among those at the service were survivors of the fire; the Island's Lieutenant Governor; members and officials of the Manx Government; and Sir Leslie Joseph, the Managing Director of THF's Leisure Division. Mrs Dorcas Heppenstall (57) from Huddersfield, who suffered a broken wrist and badly bruised leg in the fire, was one survivor to attend the service. She said: "Now I can cry no more. I felt impelled to go for the sake of those I left behind in hospital and for those who have gone. I went to the service to have a good weep and get it all over with." The Rt. Rev. Eric Gordon, the Bishop of Sodor and Man, said:

> "We felt everybody would like to come together and pray. This little island tries to give happiness to as many as it can. It built Summerland with that end in view: now that thing which was designed to please has brought disaster".

Despite the fire, he hoped everyone would work together to ensure that the remainder of the summer season was a success. He said: "There is an old

saying [in] showbiz – the show must go on. I believe this to be true for the Douglas season. The show must go on."

Firefighting and evacuation

The Island's Chief Fire Officer accused the management of Summerland of "incredible and appalling negligence". He raised serious doubts about the speed of the firefighting operation mounted by Summerland staff and their use of the building's fire alarm system. The first 999 call was made from the base of a taxi firm at 8.01pm after being radioed by one of their drivers on the promenade (section 4.5). This driver would not have seen the flames until they had got a good hold on the side of the building because his view would have blocked by the protruding crazy-golf terrace. However, the alarm operated by Summerland staff did not sound in the fire station until 8.05pm. From this, Mr Pearson concluded that four minutes had been wasted in warning the occupants of Summerland about the fire. He said this was a critical timeframe because the maximum evacuation time allowed for buildings like Summerland is around three minutes. "That was the difference between life and death for so many people," he said. Summerland survivors Mr Hugh and Mrs Heather Bryee told the Chief Fire Officer that the fire alarm did not sound until the building was engulfed in flames [These eyewitnesses were mistaken (see chapter 6) - *no alarm* sounded at any stage.]. Mr Pearson said: "About ten minutes passed without any fire alarm being heard by the couple. Why? Everyone could have been out of Summerland in three minutes…As it now seems, no one need have died."

Summerland's fire alarm system could be operated from the Control Room (**figure 5.9**) on the fifth floor of the building. The control panel had a Test button, which directly operated all sounders but only when it was held down. Outside the door to the Control Room was a staff break-glass fire alarm call point, which would have sounded the alarm at once and left it sounding. This control panel had vanished when a team from the Fire Research Station inspected Summerland four days after the fire (John Webb, Personal Communication). Mr Pearson said: "The man inside [the Control Room] could see what was going on at any time throughout the whole area [Solarium and terraces]." Mr Pearson claimed that the building's fire alarm system was geared to a two-minute time delay to allow staff to investigate the cause of the alarm to avoid calling out the fire brigade unnecessarily. However, he said that this delay did not apply to the area of the building where the fire was. "In the case of a serious fire they could immediately operate the whole system," he said. Mr Pearson said he did not know whether members of staff had used the capability built into the alarm system of overriding this time lag. Trust House Forte said that the four-minute delay was because members of staff had tried to fight the fire themselves, believing that they could get it under control before raising the alarm. The Trust House Forte spokesman claimed that an indicator panel would have lit up in the Control Room after a fire alarm glass had been smashed in a public area (a public break-glass unit: BGU). However, this description is incorrect because operating a public BGU sounded a buzzer in the Control Room only and activated *visual* warnings in staff areas until either the system was re-set or the time delay had run its course when the system would go into full alarm mode (John Webb, Personal Communication).

Mr Pearson was unimpressed by Trust House Forte's explanation for the four-minute delay in sounding the alarm:

> "This was absolutely fatal as far as the fire brigade was concerned. We always tell the public that if you have a fire, no matter how small, the very first thing to do is call the brigade…We [the fire brigade] turned out immediately the first call was received from a taxi firm at 8.01pm. The delay was in giving the alarm inside the building".

After hearing one couple's story of a locked and chained fire exit, Mr Pearson said: "As for the doors being locked, all I can say is that I am utterly horrified and I should think everyone else must be too." Mr Pearson said he had even found a padlocked emergency exit three days after the fire. Meanwhile, some survivors told police how members of staff at Summerland had informed them that some of the doors had been locked in order to deter gatecrashers.

Mr Pearson was exasperated by the level of criticism directed towards him since the disaster. He was particularly annoyed at speculation that he had informed the Manx authorities that Oroglas is non-combustible. Mr Pearson said:

> "People who claim I have are trying to make a scapegoat of me and I will not have it…Men, women and children died inside that building. This isn't the time for politicking…I am being hounded by all sections of opinion and I am not going to be treated like this".

Mr Pearson claimed there were "other interests" who were trying to "get from under" and make him "carry the can" for other people's mistakes. He said:

> "I am being crucified and made to carry the can. But my conscience is clear. If the finger of guilt is being pointed let it be pointed in the right direction. The planning authorities made the decisions, not me…At the moment some people who might well be to blame are saying nothing".

He added: "I cannot conduct a campaign through the press or TV – we will find out who is responsible for this." Mr Pearson said he was annoyed that the press had not said his men had done a good job in fighting the fire. "I am not going to be treated as though I glibly accepted this place and that our men did not deal properly with the fire," he said. He reacted angrily to suggestions that he should resign: "I am not running out of my responsibilities like a rat out of a trap…I am not going to resign and imply that I was responsible for this. It is a damned impertinent thing to suggest," he said. Mr Pearson continued:

> "I have got to live with the thought of 50 deaths. I have not slept since that night and I have been crying my eyes out this morning".

The use of Oroglas

It must be remembered that the decision to use Oroglas for Summerland had been taken by Gillinson, Barnett and Partners in England and not by Lomas and Gelling in the Isle of Man (chapter 3). Mr Basil Gillinson denied reports he had said Oroglas was fireproof. "In fact, we said it has medium to low flame-spread characteristics," he said. Mr Gillinson continued: "It must be obvious that we are deeply shocked and distressed. We take our responsibilities seriously and do not make decisions and choose materials without careful investigation". In the "emotional situation following the fire", Mr Gillinson stressed there was a "need for accuracy and not speculation or misplaced blame in getting to the root causes of the Summerland tragedy". He said people should not jump to conclusions and expect to find "simple answers" because "the building process is complex and many people are involved". He added: "There is a grave danger that things will be said that ought not to be said because they may eventually prove to be unfounded." Mr Gillinson's statement conveyed his firm's belief that the architects were shouldering a disproportionate amount of the blame for the disaster. "We want to furnish the proper authorities with everything possible to help find the *true* causes of the tragedy," he said. Mr Gillinson also argued that building regulations were not written with new constructional techniques mind. He said:

> "…the concept of Summerland was new. [We have been trying] to provide coming generations with places especially designed for them to enjoy their leisure in ways previously impossible for the family… Building regulations were not framed in the knowledge of this [new types of buildings and materials] and therefore everyone concerned is treading new paths in working out how materials can safely be applied."

Mr Percy Radcliffe, the Chairman of the Manx Local Government Board, told reporters that he had received written evidence from one of Summerland's architects that Oroglas was not combustible. He denied that the Board had sanctioned the use of Oroglas acrylic sheeting at Summerland. He said:

> "The planning committee was concerned solely with planning aspects such as the suitability of the site. The Douglas Corporation was responsible for enforcing the building bylaws [and checking the materials used in Summerland]…The Board's planning committee was only the building by-law authority for rural areas in the Isle of Man. As far as Douglas is concerned the planning committee has no authority in regard to building by-laws."

However, the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of Douglas Corporation's Works Committee said the Local Government Board "made the final decision to [approve the use of Oroglas] after sifting through reports from the architects, insurance company assessors, Trust House Forte's fire officer and the Island's own fire chief". The Clerk of Douglas Corporation refused

to be drawn into the debate: “I have nothing to say. The matter is *sub judice* until the official inquiry,” he said.

Details emerged about the checks the insurance industry made on Summerland before cover was granted. Commercial Union’s (CU) deputy chief surveyor was sent to Douglas from London to approve the building. Before issuing insurance, the company received a fire test certificate for Oroglas from Rohm and Haas and information from the Isle of Man’s “safety authorities”, as well as performing its own survey. Amongst the surveyor’s recommendations were the appointment of a full-time fire prevention officer from existing Summerland staff; the provision of a fire-fighting team to be trained and ready throughout the year; water hydrants and hoses that could reach all parts of the building; and the employment of a night watchman. Mr Charles West, CU’s UK Divisional General Manager, said: “I can’t see we would have accepted the cover of the centre if we had any real doubts about it.” However, a leading figure in Manx insurance conveyed the impression that the insurance of Summerland was far from routine. They said: “This question of the type of insurance caused quite a lot of concern at the time. CU went into discussion with the British agents for the manufacturers of Oroglas. No one had ever insured a building of this type before and the firm was shown films and photographs about Oroglas before they were satisfied.” Commercial Union would have reduced the building’s insurance premium by around 70% if a deluge system (Cost ~ £250,000) had been installed. At the public inquiry, Trust House Forte admitted that it did not make a technical inspection when it took on the tenancy of Summerland assuming that Douglas Corporation had already taken care of matters of structural fire safety.

Plastic buildings in Britain

The Isle of Man fire disaster heightened awareness and led to paranoia amongst the public about the use of plastics in construction in Britain. For example, in 1972, the swimming pool at the Robert Pattinson Comprehensive School at North Hykeham near Lincoln was covered by a plastic dome to give pupils a longer swimming season. Parents were concerned about this dome because planning permission had not been sought or obtained. In 1973, the Department of the Environment told the school to remove the dome because it constituted a fire hazard. The Department of the Environment even refused to waive building regulations temporarily, meaning that the pool was forced to close until the dome had been removed. Mr Francis Stuart, Lincoln's Chief Fire Officer, said: "We feel we cannot take any chances. We are satisfied that for all practical purposes it is safe, but we shall have to satisfy ourselves that it is also safe against acts of vandalism." In addition, a swimming pool at Wickham Gardens in Lincoln was forced to close temporarily four days after the Summerland disaster because of fears that a five-year old fibreglass cover might catch fire. Meanwhile, in North East England, it was reported that fire chiefs on Tyneside had rejected plans to use an Oroglas-type material for a leisure centre in South Shields because they "feared a possible tragedy similar to the one on the Isle of Man". There were also plans for a plastic clad building in Sunderland.

The Yorkshire Post (August 7th and 8th, 1973) contacted several local councils to find out whether Oroglas had been used in their areas. The paper did not find any examples of large-scale usage of the material. A building

surveyor who did work for Leeds City Council said: "There was a bit of a panic at one stage when we thought Oroglas was to be used in a Leeds building about three years ago." However, Oroglas was only used on a small-scale in "about six" schools in Leeds, mainly to "replace individual panes of glass [in ground floor windows] that were constantly being broken [by vandals]". In Huddersfield, the material had not been used in any council buildings; the only uses of Oroglas in the town were a fanlight in a bathroom in one private house and a skylight in another private dwelling. A spokesman for the West Riding of Yorkshire Fire Brigade (quoted in *The Sheffield Morning Telegraph*, August 8th, 1973) said:

> "There is no question of this material ever having been used in Britain in such a way as to be a danger to life, but as a structural risk precaution the architect's department is checking on buildings in which the material may have been used."

On the Isle of Man, the Peel-based newspaper *Mona's Herald* reported (August 14th, 1973) that Oroglas had been used at a Manx school. In this case, Oroglas had been installed in eight small panels near the locks on classroom doors to deter vandals. The Oroglas at this school was subsequently discontinued. Oroglas was removed from 40 schools in Kirkby in Liverpool following the Summerland disaster after a local councillor raised the issue as well as from Llanedeyrn High School in Cardiff. In 1973, it was planned to use Oroglas for the roof of a students' centre at Edinburgh University; after the Summerland fire, the University authorities hurriedly re-consulted the building's architects.

DAY 4: MONDAY, AUGUST 6TH

Fire Research Station investigation

The team was collected from their hotel before 9am and taken down to the site in the fire chief's official car and another fire service vehicle. The convoy was under blue lights for a short distance on the approach to Summerland when slow moving traffic impeded their progress. Isle of Man fire chief Cyril Pearson remained with the FRS team for most of the day. FRS team member John Webb said he formed the impression that Mr Pearson did this "to keep away from the press as much as to assist us and hear what we had to say". The heavy reinforced gumboots and torches lent by the fire brigade were soon put to good use as the team walked around those parts of the building where the floor remained dodging the rain showers as they went. John Webb recalled (1974b):

> "We went from the top of the roof, down a smoke stained staircase [the NE stairwell], and so to the basement discotheque nine inches deep in water from the fire-fighting operations overhead. We went from the slightly damaged swimming pool at one end, to the other end, where only the enclosed [NE] staircase and buckled steel beams and columns stood among piles of debris. I tried to link the place full of holidaymakers shown in the glossy brochure I had picked up in the deserted entrance booth earlier, with this fire-mangled ruin in which I stood. I could not really do so."

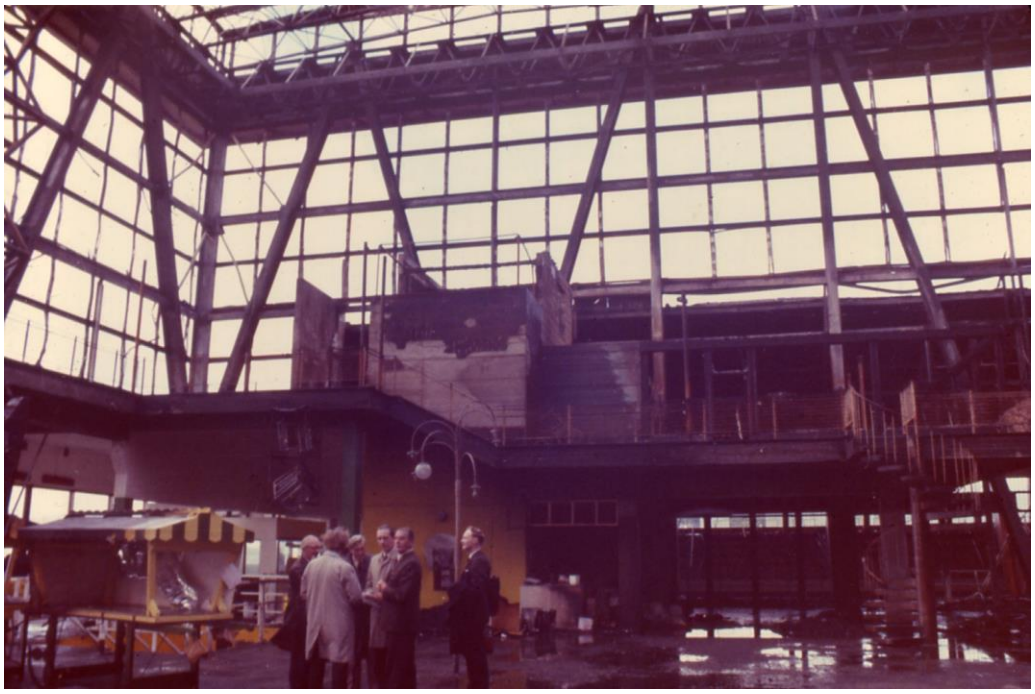

Figure 5.9: The Fire Research Station (FRS) team standing on the Solarium floor of Summerland. The remains of the Control Room can be seen on the floor above. The people from left to right are Alan Roach (Department of the Environment Building Regulations), George Nice (Head, FRS and with back to camera), Peter Hinckley, Alan Seacock, Mr Pearson (the Chief Fire Officer of the Isle of Man) and Peter Redpath (Fire Protection Association - structural steel specialist).

(Photograph: John Webb, FRS/BRE copyright.
This photograph appears with the written permission of BRE Global.)

John Webb (2013) added: "I pulled bits of the fire alarm system apart, and eased my way into the roofless, near floorless room where the alarm control panel was supposed to be but it had vanished."

A sandwich lunch was taken in a private room in a hotel on Douglas seafront, where the team discussed what they needed to do in the afternoon. Infuriating, the press found them and delayed the team's return to the site by about one hour. Mr Pearson and FRS head Mr Nice were interviewed at length, although at this stage they were not in a position to tell the press a

great deal. After an afternoon's work, the team returned to their hotel at around 5pm after handing over four reels of film to the Manx Fire Service (over 160 colour prints). These were returned from a local processor with two copies of every picture as the team ate dinner at 8pm. The number of telephone calls to FRS Headquarters at Borehamwood had reduced somewhat from the day after the fire, but they were still well above their normal level.

At this stage, the media and the public blamed Oroglas for the disaster. However, the work done by the FRS team on their first day had convinced them that Oroglas was a *secondary* factor in the spread of the fire. The team believed most of the deaths had occurred before the Oroglas caught fire because of the massive internal fire at Summerland's eastern end.

Police investigation

At least 300 statements had already been taken from people at Summerland on the evening of the fire. Returning holidaymakers gave statements to police in Britain, especially in Scotland. It was envisaged that 500 statements would be collected in total. The police said they were interested in tracing boys from Liverpool and Ireland. Whilst the police said the inquiry was "continuing satisfactorily", there was no major breakthrough in the investigation. Several boys had been interviewed in mainland Britain and eliminated from the inquiry. These included the three Scottish boys seen leaving the Glen Dhoo campsite on the morning after the fire (see day 3), who were interviewed by detectives in Kilmarnock. There was no malicious reason for their sudden departure; they had simply run out of money and could no longer afford the 18p a night campsite. Indeed, they

had already told the taxi driver who had picked them up from Summerland on the evening of the blaze that they were 'skint' and intended to leave the camp the next morning. As many people had 'latched on' to the campsite story, detectives investigating the fire emphasised they were not looking specifically for Scottish boys but information about *all* boys who were at Summerland. An artist's impression was released of one boy to aid the police's investigation. "We believe this [the fire] started as a piece of hooliganism that went horribly wrong. We do not believe anyone could have known what was going to happen," a police spokesman said.

The police used a questionnaire to gather information from Summerland employees.

POLICE QUESTIONNAIRE OF SUMMERLAND STAFF

1. What are your specific duties and responsibilities? Who is your boss?
2. Was part of your duties to do with the general safety of patrons?
3. How long have you been employed by Trust House Forte?
4. What is your length of service at Summerland?
5. Are you aware of any fire instructions on training having been given to staff? If so, what were they?
6. What instructions were given as to the security of doors at Summerland? How were they made secure and by whom?
7. What efforts did you make to raise the fire alarm? Fire alarm button, public announcement, telephone to fire brigade?
8. Did you hear any announcements over the loudspeaker system to warn the patrons of the fire or a fire alarm bell? If so, what time or at what stage of the fire?
9. At what time or stage of the fire did the lighting go off at Summerland? Did any emergency lighting come on?

(*Source*: The card containing these questions can be viewed at the Isle of Man Public Record Office)

The Fire Chief's warning

Most newspapers reported that the Isle of Man's Chief Fire Officer (**figure 5.10**) had described the standard of fire precautions on the Island as being 'pitiful' in a Sunday newspaper interview published four days before the Summerland disaster. Mr Pearson's criticism was directed at fire precautions at the Island's 1,242 hotels and boarding houses, and he did *not* refer specifically to Summerland despite what many authors (e.g. Faith, 1999) claim. Mr Pearson told the *Isle of Man Courier*: "We are running incredibly serious risks, and there does not seem to be a lot of action to do anything about it". Mr Pearson continued:

> "If we had a fire like Oban's [a hotel fire in the Scottish town killed ten people on July 24th, 1973] the national publicity that would result and the exposure of our standards of fire precautions would be a disaster. It would be a terrible thing for the Island".

He added almost prosaically that the Island could ill afford the present situation "being spotlighted by a fatal fire". Mr Pearson said even elementary fire precautions in many of the Island's hotels were missing. In 1973, the only requirement stipulated by Manx law was for hotels and public buildings over a certain size to have outside fire escapes. This was the 1950 Manx Fire Escapes Act. Mr Pearson said this law was not properly enforced. "A number of hotels in Douglas have fire escapes but few of those outside the town have even considered them…I know of one authority which has not served a single notice," he said. There were no requirements under

Manx law covering fire alarms, fire exits, smoke proof doors and emergency lighting in hotels at the time of the Summerland fire.

Figure 5.10: Mr Cyril Pearson, the Island's Chief Fire Officer, stands outside the burnt out shell of Summerland
(Source: *The Guardian*, August 7th, 1973)

Mr Pearson had already voiced similar fears when he was interviewed by the trade magazine *Manx Tourism* in early 1973. The article read:

> "Every time September comes and the big crowds go, moustachioed Mr Cyril Pearson breathes a big sigh of relief. For to him it means that at least one more year has passed without the great disaster in Douglas that he fears. His nightmare? A burning hotel…dense smoke…and charred bodies. Not a nice thought. But it is one that haunts him everytime he looks at Manx hotels and their fire precautions. 'They are just not good enough,' he says, and 'one of these

> days we will discover it to our own cost. People say it cannot happen here but why not? One day we are going to have a really disastrous fire and unless something is done about the present situation we could have 20 people burned to death…The main trouble is the age of the properties…No one knew about fire prevention when they were built and so no regard was paid to the subject in their designs. The only aspect that seemed to have been heeded was how many bedrooms could be built on a piece of land.'" [Mr Pearson goes on to praise the Villiers Hotel in Douglas and the Bayqueen Hotel in Port St Mary for improving their fire precautions without being required to do so under Manx law].

Four days before the disaster Mr Pearson told the *Isle of Man Courier* that he had made repeated representations to the Isle of Man Government urging them to introduce legislation along the lines of Britain's 1971 Fire Precautions Act (FPA). The FPA gave the authorities the power to order improvements to be made to hotels and guesthouses with more than six bedrooms. These improvements could be self-closing fire doors in long corridors; the installation of a fire alarm system and adequate firefighting equipment; and alternative escape routes in case one area is sealed off by flames. Mr Pearson's warnings continued to be ignored by the Manx establishment, who brushed his concerns under the carpet. "It was like banging my head against a brick wall," he said. For instance, on the day after his *Isle of Man Courier* interview and three days before the Summerland fire, Mr Pearson was called into the office of the Local Government Board. He said:

> "I was hauled over the coals and given the hard word by the secretary…I was carpeted because I said publicly that the fire prevention situation in tourist establishments was deplorable. I wanted tighter controls and the implementation of the same fire regulations as in England. When I told my views I was told by my superior, quite bluntly, to shut up."

A more formal meeting between the Chief Fire Officer and the Local Government Board had been planned for August 3rd, 1973. However, the meeting was cancelled: the previous night's events were to prove more than a 'local spotlight'. Mr Pearson felt he was being made a scapegoat for the Summerland fire. He told reporters on August 5th: "I am a responsible person...It is time people started looking at the real culprits." The Chief Fire Officer was annoyed at attempts made to stop him putting his side of the story after the fire. He said the Manx Government had given him a "firm warning" not to speak to the press in future. "I was told that from now on everything is *sub judice*," he said. LGB Chairman Mr Percy Radcliffe said the gag was for Mr Pearson's benefit and was designed to take the pressure of publicity away from him. However, LGB chief inspector Mr Peter Newbold denied the fire chief had been reprimanded. He said:

> "I discussed certain matters with him. I am not prepared to go further. I did not request him not to make damaging statements about hotels…In his own interests, and in the interests of the objectivity of the inquiry to be held, speculative or possibly speculative statements should not be

> made by anyone. That was the reason why he has been asked not to make statements".

It was alleged the gagging order had ultimately come from the Island's Lieutenant Governor, who was said to have come under pressure from Manx politicians following a history of disputes between the Isle of Man Government and the Fire Chief. Mr Pearson was unperturbed:

> "No one can gag me – not even politicians. I am a frank, open man. I have no guile or diplomacy. I have always said exactly what I think…When the time comes I will talk frankly about everything I know".

Mr Pearson said that only a minority of hotels in the Isle of Man had adequate fire escapes and firefighting equipment. "It is not enough to have an efficient fire brigade. It has to be backed up by fire precautions built into every hotel…There are many hotels who are simply not willing to install fire escapes," he said. Mr Percy Radcliffe, the Chairman of the Local Government Board claimed: "I do not believe that [Isle of Man] fire regulations are more relaxed than on the mainland. In some cases we are far more stringent." This statement is not supported by the facts and Mr Radcliffe was "much mistaken in his belief that Manx precautions were far more stringent than on the mainland" (John Webb, Fire Research Station, Personal Communication).

The use of Oroglas

Mr Frederick Rarig, secretary and legal counsel of Oroglas' manufacturers Rohm and Haas, claimed the builders and the Isle of Man authorities never consulted the company about the use of Oroglas at Summerland. He reiterated his company's advice that Oroglas should never be used on an extensive scale without a deluge system. The Manx fire chief said the decision whether to allow the use of Oroglas for Summerland "could have gone either way". He said: "I was forced to rely on the architects' advice. The architects were very keen to use this shape and design. It is true to say that we were rather impressed by the qualities claimed by the material."

Details about the fire properties of Perspex (which is virtually identical to Oroglas) are given in a report published by ICI in August 1972. Its *Guide to Building Regulations* gave Perspex a DDX rating for the fire test of British Standard specification 476: Part 3: 1968. The ratings run from A and D. The first D means that the material is penetrated by a flame within one minute; the second D indicates that the material continues to burn five minutes after the withdrawal of any flame; and X means that molten material falls and drip from the panel during the test. These properties were clearly stated in an advertising leaflet produced by Cox of Tring, who moulded the panels from the flat plastic sheets supplied by Rohm and Haas. There were no official lists giving these classifications; thus, the fire resistance of new materials was inadequately publicised at the time of the Summerland disaster. A leading architect in Britain said: "The present situation is by no

means satisfactory and leaves individual fire officers as the ultimate arbiters."

It was disclosed that the Manx fire chief had halted the construction of Ramsey Town Hall in January 1973 because he was not happy with the use of a PVC type material for the building's walls. Interestingly, this building was designed by Summerland's principal architect Mr Lomas. Mr Cowley, surveyor to Ramsey Town Commissioners, said: "When we sent a sample of the cladding material to the fire chief, he said it was not good enough and he would not have it". He continued: "We agreed that the cladding should be removed and replaced with cement rendering on a metal mesh."

DAY 5: TUESDAY, AUGUST 7TH

The Isle of Man Parliament met for the first time since the disaster for a brief meeting conducted in an atmosphere of profound shock. Members expressed their sympathy to the bereaved and injured, with Mr Charles Kerruish, the Speaker of the House of Keys, choosing the following words of Tennyson to convey the Islanders' feelings:

"Oh for the touch of a vanished hand.
And the sound of a voice that is still."

Mr Kerruish said: "It is the strong conviction of all members that the unhappy circumstances surrounding the fire be thoroughly and scrupulously investigated." The Lieutenant Governor reassured members that any inquiry would be "authoritative, independent and all-embracing" and would be "made without delay". He said:

> "It is the responsibility of making certain that those who come to our shores to find rest and recreation only to be engulfed in this disaster will not have died in vain. If there is any fault revealed…then such knowledge must be used to ensure that never again can human life be put in such peril."

It is understood that the Lieutenant Governor had specifically requested the Chairman of the inquiry to be a person "with legal qualifications". The other two members of the tribunal are likely to be experts in fire safety and the use of plastic materials in construction.

The Summerland disaster fund had reached £15,000, with a further £10,000 promised from Sir Charles Forte. Amongst the donations was a £1,000 cheque from the high street retailer Marks and Spencer. The decision was taken to make immediate payments from the fund to persons directly affected by death or injury, with £10,000 having been paid out by August 10th.

Despite conducting more than 600 interviews, which included around 160 from staff at Summerland, the police issued a further appeal for information regarding the two or three boys. Det Sup Ibison said: "It may well be that as a result of the serious and tragic consequences arising from the fire which may well have been unforeseen, the boys or youths concerned, or their parents, are at the moment naturally reticent." Meanwhile, Mr Rex Denby, a doorman at Summerland, told police that he had refused entry to three boys just before the fire started because they looked like potential troublemakers. One boy had blond hair; one used eye make-up; and the third had a long scar on his face. Whilst elements of Mr

Denby's account tallied with previous descriptions, he believed these boys were older between the ages of 15 and 18 (and perhaps as old as 20). In the seven days after the fire, the Isle of Man Police had taken around 1,300 statements.

On the Tuesday morning, the Fire Research Station Team returned to Summerland to complete their investigation. They visited the top of the cliff to get a view of the back of the building. After lunch with Mr Pearson, the team was taken by fire service vehicles to Ronaldsway Airport for the flight back to London via Liverpool and Heathrow. In the meantime, forensic scientists on the mainland continued their work investigating the cause and rapid spread of the fire. Scientists had spent three days on the Isle of Man collecting samples; they also conducted tests that involved setting fire to a small kiosk and some Oroglas sheeting. The forensic science team had left the Isle of Man by the time the Fire Research Station team had arrived in Douglas on the Sunday evening.

The mood on the Island was still sombre. Matthew Partington (2), who lived a few hundred yards from Summerland near Port Jack, said (personal communication): "My Mum recalls going into 'town' [Douglas Town Centre] in the following weeks and there being near silence as people struggled to come to terms with what happened." Some holidaymakers took their anger out on the local people. Manxman Rob Farrow (personal communication) was on a bus when he heard one tourist shout: "You're to bloody blame for this."

DAY 6: WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 8TH

The cause of the fire: the fruit machine theory

The consensus at this stage was that the fire was started by two or three boys in a disused kiosk on the crazy-golf course outside Summerland. With the police investigation focusing on the kiosk fire, it is unsurprising that there was no further mention of the electrical fault theory that circulated widely on the evening of the fire (section 4.4). This changed on August 7th when Mr Trevor Castree (46), a milkman from Preston, resurrected the theory that an electrical fault in a fruit machine was the cause of the disaster. Mr Castree said on the day of the fire that the windows of the Amusement Arcade "seemed to be steaming up". Mr Castree, who had not seen the fire outside on the crazy-golf course, continued: "I had heard a number of complaints that day that the machines kept going wrong. Shortly afterwards, I saw the fire starting on the wall behind them." When smoke went up the Amusement Arcade's wall, he realised that something was wrong and collected his wife and daughter in order to leave the building. However, he decided to stay after being reassured by the organist that the situation was under control. The organist said: "Sit down – everything is all right and under control. I'll give you a few more tunes." However, within 30 seconds of sitting down with his family, "great clouds of black smoke billowed up to the plastic roof", which ignited immediately. Mr Castree and his family escaped by smashing a window with a chair. It is not known which window he broke.

Building design

Mr Tyrone Byrd, the assistant technical editor of *Construction News*, conducted an investigation into the Summerland fire disaster, whose results were widely reported in the press. It is not clear whether Mr Byrd was actually granted access to Summerland or whether he formed his conclusions by studying the building's exterior, floor plans, newspaper reports, television footage and photographs of the fire. The official Fire Research Station team in Douglas from August 5-7th did not remember seeing him (John Webb, Personal Communication).

Mr Byrd alleged in his report that there were defects in the building's means of escape. These alleged defects had received limited coverage to date, as fire and building experts had concentrated their attention on the use of Oroglas in the immediate aftermath of the fire (August 3rd). Furthermore, the Fire Research Station's comments on this matter were *sub judice* until the *Summerland Fire Commission* reported in May 1974. Firstly, Mr Byrd said many people died on the building's main staircase connecting the Solarium floor and the Leisure floor (the Flying Staircase) because it was open plan. Secondly, he said the only enclosed staircase (the North East Service Staircase) serving the terraces (excluding the Cruise Deck) was hidden away in one corner of the building, meaning that many people were not aware of its existence. Mr Byrd claimed this staircase had stood-up well against the fire, with doors, though well charred, being still largely intact. Referring to this staircase, he said: "It is just a pity that there were not two or three more of them, as would have been required under mainland regulations and that it was not more conspicuous." Mr Byrd's

claim about the robustness of the NE Staircase is not factually correct. This stairwell suffered significant smoke damage on the upper levels because an opening had been cut on to the stairwell after Summerland opened and no door provided (section 6.5.2).

Mr Byrd alleged "basic building control principles" were ignored "in an exercise that could be construed as strong commercial pressures influencing what little protection is given by the Island's statutory fire precautions". He wrote:

> "Gross deviation from basic building control principles – with recognised local authority requirements seemingly ignored for economic reasons – have [*sic*.] played the major part in Summerland's tragic fire."

Mr Byrd said he had reached this conclusion after interviewing the Island's Chief Fire Officer Mr Cyril Pearson: "He [Mr Pearson] told me that there were very real vested and commercial interests at play. The regulations are inadequate against someone really wanting to get a building put up," he said. Mr Byrd's suspicions were heightened by the fact that the building's client (the organisation that wanted to build Summerland) and bye-law authority were the same organisation, that is, Douglas Corporation, creating an obvious conflict of interest. He said:

> "Strict application of the Isle of Man's own building bye-laws, inadequate and outdated as they are, should have resulted in the plastic clad solarium being turned down at the planning stage, with the insistence that the entire concept be radically re-thought."

Mr David McNeill QC, who represented the relatives of the dead and injured at the public inquiry, said: "Not merely did the Corporation not insist on having such a building constructed as would comply with the Regulations, but they become profit-sharing partners with the occupiers [Trust House Forte] …"

Mr Byrd identified a new factor that he believed was partly responsible for the rapid spread of the fire. He said there was a gap between the floor beams of the terraces and the external Oroglas cladding. Mr Byrd claimed this gap would have acted like a 'chimney'. This gap would certainly have channelled heat and smoke against the inside of the Oroglas wall, which would have helped to spread the fire up the inner face and draw the flames up to Summerland's acrylic barrel roof. FRS investigator John Webb doubts whether a pure **chimney effect** was seen at Summerland. He believes that the **coanda effect** was more at play, where a moving gas or liquid stream close to a surface has a tendency to 'stick' to that surface.

The method of panel fixing used for Summerland's plastic roof received attention in an article in *New Civil Engineer* (August 9th, 1973) by Mr Ken Taylor. The Agrement Board stated: "In the event of fire the method of fixing allows Oroglas sheets to fall out of their frames without igniting as they soften." The Board recommended that the Oroglas panels

should be held between filler tapes and sealed with two-part polysulphide or silicone mastic. However, the panels at Summerland were "held by a specially designed spring clip and gripped in a neoprene gasket" (*The Architects' Journal*, August 15th 1973, page 346), thus contravening the Agrement Board's recommendations. Moreover, an eyewitness told *The Architects' Journal* how "at least in one case, bolts had been inserted through [the] acrylic, neoprene and frame to hold the sheets more firmly".

DAY 7: THURSDAY, AUGUST 9TH

The cause and spread of the fire

After any disaster, it is common for so-called 'experts' in the field to chip in and give their opinion about the reasons for the large loss of life. Their statements are often speculative, not even based on site visits and often give no new insights into the causes of that disaster. Furthermore, the press will have a tendency to publicise views that differ from the consensus position in order to stir up debate and inject controversy into their coverage.

For instance, the technical magazine *Building* reported that the building's plastic exterior may have been the least important factor in the spread of the fire. Whilst this statement was largely confirmed by the Fire Research Station's investigation and the report of the *Summerland Fire Commission* (chapter 6), an investigation by so-called "fire experts" that drew attention to bitumen used for floor waterproofing in areas like the kitchen was not. The 'experts' suggested the lethal smoke that asphyxiated victims was caused by the bitumen and not the acrylic ceiling and wall panels. The report stated: "the bitumen flooring was blazing furiously,

raising the temperature to a point at which the acrylic burst into flame." However, there was no point at which the bitumen flooring was in a position to set light to the Oroglas, even if it was alight itself (John Webb FRS, Personal Communication). The Fire Research Station's report into the Summerland fire made it clear that the bitumen played little part in contributing to the fire load (Silcock and Hinkley, 1974, page 6).

Similarly, Professor Isaac Goodman's suggestion that a highly inflammable gas produced by the Oroglas sheeting at temperatures significantly below its combustion point could have contributed to the rapid spread of the fire provides no new insight into the fire. Any organic compound – including wood – will give off flammable vapours when heated by the sort of intense fire that developed at Summerland. These gases will ignite either spontaneously or from the adjacent flames and spread the fire (John Webb FRS, Personal Communication).

The alarm system and evacuation

A Trust House Forte spokesman said the fire alarm should have sounded inside Summerland at 8.05pm. However, survivors of the fire were adamant they had heard no alarm. Mr Harry Greenwood, the guitarist in the Marquee Showbar said: "I did not hear any sirens or alarms. The first we knew of anything wrong was when a group of customers were standing on the Showbar balcony looking down to where the smoke was coming up." The accounts given to police by survivors have logically raised the question as to whether there was a fault with the building's fire alarm system.

Whilst people on the terraces had seen smoke emanating from the Solarium floor, the absence of any alarm meant that people were unaware of the gravity of the situation. For instance, people stood at the railing on the building's top floor (the Cruise Deck) peering down at the smoke, not realising the danger of the situation. Meanwhile, on the Solarium floor, the organist made a light-hearted comment when smoke was seen coming from the Amusement Arcade at the back of the audience. "There appears to be a little fire. Let's put it out with the Blue Danube," he said. As the smoke increased, some of the audience got up to leave only to be told to retake their seats by an employee on the stage. The employee said: "There is no need to worry. It's only a fire in a chip pan." The employee then made jokes about having to clean the smoke from the windows the following morning.

Locked doors

Statements given to police by survivors confirmed that some of the building's fire exits were locked. Mr Greenwood, the Marquee Showbar guitarist, said:

> "We went down the stairs [the NE Service Staircase] to the ground-floor level where there were two sets of doors leading to the tram terminus…The first pair of doors were padlocked and chained. I saw several men trying to force them open. We then went to the second set of doors a few yards away, which were not locked. We made our escape through them."

Given that Mr Greenwood worked at Summerland, he would have been more familiar with the building's layout than most holidaymakers. Despite the darkness, it is thus unlikely that he would have confused the locked entrance to the beer cellar at the foot of these stairs as being the fire exit doors (see day 2: August 4th). On the Solarium floor, people found the fire exit leading on to the crazy-golf terrace at the front of the building was locked.

The Pwllheli holiday camp fire

With the onslaught of negative publicity about the Isle of Man since the Summerland fire, some Manx people were relieved that a major fire at Butlin's holiday camp at Pwllheli in north Wales on August 9th had at least temporarily diverted media attention from the Island. Fortunately, there were only nine minor injuries in the Pwllheli fire. One Manx hotelier commented: "It has become a sick joke. We had begun to think that nothing else burned anywhere except on the Isle of Man."

5.3 The remainder of August 1973

Press coverage of the Summerland disaster declined sharply around eight days after the fire. There were few new angles, with newspaper coverage being confined largely to the hunt and possible prosecution of the two or three boys.

The electrical fault theory resurfaces again

Despite the extensive police and FRS investigations, some 'experts' – presumably speculating from the mainland and without having the benefit of a site visit - still believed the fire started by two or three boys in the kiosk outside the building was a red-herring and that the real cause of the blaze was an electrical fault that had occurred in a one-armed bandit earlier in the day. According to this theory, the fire had been developing for several *hours* as opposed to minutes. An unnamed fire assessor with more than 30 years' experience said:

> "In my opinion, you can forget about boys setting fire to a kiosk outside the building. The most likely cause would be an electrical fault, perhaps in one of the gaming machines…I feel sure that there was a build-up of heat somewhere inside the building [*over a period of several hours*]."

He said the area affected by combustion would have gone up "like a bomb" following ignition. FRS investigator John Webb recalled: "I can only say that those who stuck to this theory had not seen the clear evidence we had before us on our visit."

It subsequently emerged at the public inquiry that major concerns had been expressed about Summerland's electrical system before the fire, especially the overloading of circuits. For example, Mr Roger Worsley, an electrical engineer employed by Trust House Forte, managed to find enough faults to fill two sheets of foolscap paper on his first day at work in 1973. He reported the faults to Mr Harding, Summerland's Technical Services

Manager, and made it clear to him that it was "a matter of public safety" that the faults be rectified. However, Mr Harding failed to take any action, saying he had "other priorities".

The Isle of Man fire brigade

Whilst praising the "Herculean feat" of firemen in saving so many lives at Summerland, Mr Enoch Humphries, the President of the National (UK) Fire Brigades' Union, was scathing about the Isle of Man fire service (*Isle of Man Examiner*, August 10th, 1973). He said training conditions were "the worst in the British Isles"; the facilities at Douglas Fire Station were "shocking"; and that the Island's firemen were "notable by their absence" from training courses held at the Fire Technical College in England. Mr Humphries claimed that the Island did not have enough full-time firemen. There were 24 full-time Manx firemen in 1973, with 93 full-time and retained firemen tackling the Summerland blaze.

These criticisms were rejected by Mr Percy Radcliffe, the Chairman of the Fire Services Committee of the Local Government Board. He said the number of full-time firemen on the Island was recommended by the UK Home Office's chief inspector of fire services. Mr Radcliffe said that all recruits to the full-time brigade underwent a training course in Britain and many had received qualifications above the basic requirements. "I challenge Mr Humphries to point to one instance when the service has not carried out its duty efficiently, or failed to match up to the highest standards," he said. The Island's Chief Fire Officer entered into the debate, clearly having been stung by Mr Humphries' comments and the way in which they had been

reported by the Manx press. In a letter to the *Isle of Man Examiner* (August 17th, 1973), Mr Pearson wrote:

> "To suggest, directly or by implication, that a lack of training in specialised subjects or an outdated station, in any way contributed to the Summerland tragedy, is not only in the most deplorable taste at this time when so many families have been bereaved but in my view totally misleading."

Mr Pearson acknowledged that the Island's retained firemen had not been on specialist courses. However, he pointed out that "their work on this fire [Summerland] was no less efficient or courageous than that of the whole-time men who were present". Mr Radcliffe said he was convinced the Island's firemen would be "completely vindicated by the inquiry" into the disaster and, indeed, that was the case.

The hunt for the boys

On August 13th, the Chief Constable of the Isle of Man said that the three boys responsible for the kiosk fire had been traced and interviewed by Liverpool and Bootle police. One of the boys was aged 14 and the other two were 12 years old. Detective Superintendent Ibison refused to say whether the boys were going to be charged or whether they would be brought to the Isle of Man. On the following day the Manx Chief Constable said: "I have no comment to make regarding possible prosecutions in relation to the Summerland fire." Papers regarding the case were passed to the Island's Attorney General. The decision whether to press charges had still not been made a week later. On the August 19th, a spokesman said: "Even if there is

an offence to consider, we may decide in view of their age and the aftermath of the fire that they have had enough already." It was reported that the police had no evidence the boys had started the fire deliberately and were coming to the conclusion that the fire was no more than a tragic accident. One islander said: "They will have to live with this for the rest of their lives, so why put them into court as well?"

5.4 The three boys appear in court

The three boys appeared in Douglas Juvenile Court on September 17th, 1973 on a joint charge of causing unlawful and wilful damage to the door lock of the kiosk amounting to £1. No further charges were brought against the boys in relation to the deaths resulting from the fire because the police were satisfied there was no malicious intent to the boys' actions. I know the names and home addresses of the three boys, but I am not going to repeat these details here for legal reasons or provide any details that could lead to their identification. Suffice to say, all three boys have traditional English Christian names; one boy has a foreign-sounding surname, possibly Greek. The youths came from the same working-class area of Liverpool. This area consisted of terraced housing and several shops, where youths would congregate outside. Whilst the boys grew up in a gritty and rather run-down area of the city, there were far rougher areas of Liverpool in the early 1970s (Mike Eden, Personal Communication). The street where one of the boys lived cannot be found on a modern day A to Z atlas of Liverpool.

The three juveniles attended the Court in person together with their parents. They were not represented by a lawyer and pleaded guilty to the charge. The 25-minute hearing, which included an eight-minute adjournment by magistrates, consisted largely of Inspector Alan Killip of Douglas Police reading oral and written statements given by the three boys to detectives in Liverpool and Bootle. This was the boys' first brush with the law. "There is nothing detrimental to the families in these statements," said a background report read out in Court. Previous reports that *all three* boys were on a school camping holiday proved to be unfounded, with *Manx Radio* reporting that one boy had travelled with his parents to the Isle of Man on the Liverpool ferry the day before the fire.

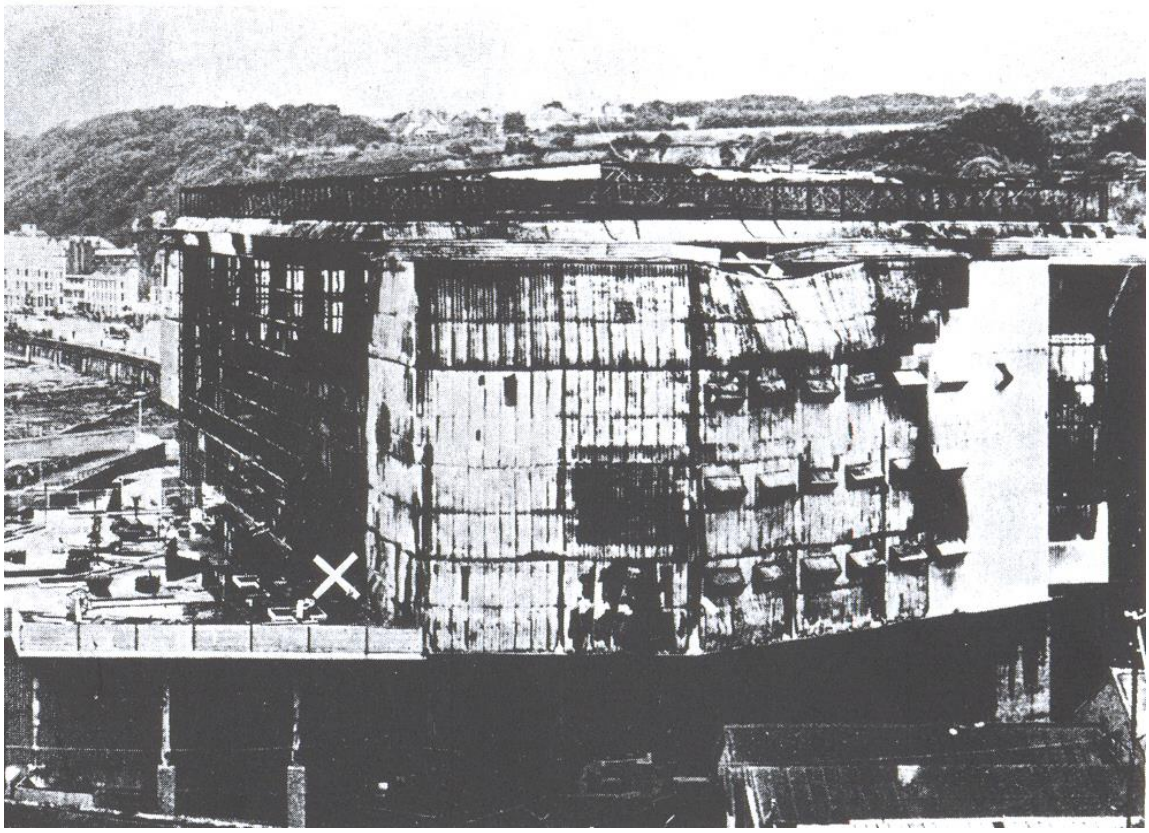

Figure 5.11: The three boys started the fire at X

(Source: Barlay, 1976, page 45)

When questioned by detectives, two of the three boys initially denied being at Summerland. However, they subsequently changed their story and told police they arrived at Summerland at around 7pm and had gone to the kiosk (**figure 5.12**) for an illicit cigarette at around 7.30pm to avoid being spotted by the adults in their party. The boys smashed the kiosk's lock with a rock and its door with a big stone; one boy even managed to gain entry by simply climbing through a broken window. The kiosk's dilapidated condition reflected the fact that it had been damaged by a storm about two months before the fire. As a result, most of the kiosk had been dismantled and stored in the basement of Summerland; however, the staff failed to finish the job (a sign of poor housekeeping) and one section of the hut had been left lying on its side adjacent to Summerland's external Galbestos wall. The boys thus merely entered the *remains* of the original hut. The boys shared a solitary cigarette in the kiosk; one of the boys threw the cigarette end on the floor and stood on it to extinguish it completely before leaving the kiosk. On the crazy-golf terrace (**figure 5.12**), they chatted to a 'coloured' schoolboy about football, but soon smelt burning coming from the kiosk. One of the 12 year-old boys said: "We looked in the kiosk and saw the floor was on fire. We tried to stamp it out, but it got too hot and dangerous so I panicked and ran away." The 14 year-old boy said: "We all went into the kiosk to try and put the fire out…but there were too many flames and smoke, I was scared and ran away [to the Promenade] with the others." It is a matter of speculation as to whether a roll of wire netting (which was covered in combustible plastic) in the kiosk, together with possible paper and other litter, contributed towards the development of the fire. The police were convinced that the boys had not started the fire deliberately. The *Daily Mirror* reported that the boys "looked pale and

frightened" at the Court hearing. Breaking down and crying when questioned by detectives, one of the 12 year-old boys said:

> "We didn't do anything on purpose…We were too worried to tell anyone about the accident. I was scared to admit this before, and I am sorry I told lies."

The 14 year-old said: "I am sorry about making a false statement but I was scared of being blamed for the fire in which all the people were killed." Each boy was fined £3, and ordered to pay 33p compensation and 15p costs.

Figure 5.11: The crazy-golf terrace where the fire started (Source: Isle of Man Tourism Brochure for 1973)

At the public inquiry, Mr Ogden, a lawyer representing Trust House Forte, contended that one of the boys had deliberately set fire to the kiosk. He said an eyewitness had seen one of the boys holding a lighted match to the

kiosk's ceiling. However, the boys were not called to give evidence at the public inquiry because this would have served "no useful purpose" but they did receive legal representation. The *Summerland Fire Commission* (Paragraph 104, Page 38) concluded: "There is no suggestion and no cause to suspect that the boys intended to cause a major fire or to endanger the structure of Summerland."

5.5 Summary

Police investigations revealed that the fire was started by three Liverpool boys (12, 12, 14) smoking in the remains of a disused kiosk on the crazy-golf course outside Summerland. Each boy was fined £3, and ordered to pay 33p compensation and 15p costs. No further criminal charges were brought against the boys because the police were satisfied that there was no malicious intent to their actions. After the fire, an acrimonious climate developed as Summerland's architects, the Chief Fire Officer, Trust House Forte and the local planning authorities attempted to put their side of the story. The fire chief revealed that he had had misgivings about the use of Oroglas, but said he had received assurances from the architects that the material was fireproof. He accused Summerland's management of "incredible and appalling negligence" for not calling the fire brigade and sounding the fire alarm immediately. Four days before the disaster, the fire chief said Manx fire safety standards were 'pitiful' and accused the Island's authorities of taking "incredibly serious risks". Debate raged about locked fire exits and whether Summerland should have had a deluge system. Most fire and building experts in Britain (e.g. Fire Research Station) said Oroglas was unsuitable for large-scale usage; they also criticised the building's open-

plan design. Unsurprisingly, Oroglas' manufacturers and the British Plastics Federation claimed the material was being unfairly scapegoated. In the 72 hours after the fire, Oroglas was almost exclusively blamed for the disaster. However, by August 6th, it was the view of the Fire Research Station and the Manx fire brigade that Oroglas was only a secondary factor in the spread of the fire, and that most of the deaths had occurred before the Oroglas caught light because of the massive internal fire at Summerland's eastern end. Experts conducting on-the-spot investigations identified defects in the means of escape (main staircase was open-plan, only enclosed staircase hidden away in one corner). A gap between the floor beams of the upper terraces and the external Oroglas cladding was identified at an early stage as being an important factor for explaining the rapid spread of the fire. The flow of hot gases and flames over the front of the terraces would have also played an important part in the fire's spread to the upper levels.