

Dalmunzie Hotel fire Remembered

It would be wrong to write so many stories about people and say nothing about the place in which they abode. Dalmunzie Hotel was the life work of the author. In 1974, when it was sixty per cent gutted by fire, it seemed to be the total end of an era. The finality of the event, and the sense of pointlessness after all the years of strife and hard work, left a vacuum into which nothing seemed to fit. The death of James Ramsay two days later seemed to be simply the last nail in a coffin. To walk away with the insurance money seemed wrong because there was the land and the cottages. The challenge to rebuild was strong – there were lots of changes to be made for the better – the challenge won.

And, looking back in time and recalling the night of the fire, there were a host of incidents which have caused me a lot of laughter. With the top half of the building ablaze, more or less from end to end, I was particularly keen to salvage my personal 18th century Huguenot marquetry cabinet. Collecting two local bystanders, I persuaded them to come back into the building to assist me in getting the cabinet out. I do not know how I was able to lift off the top half as it weighs more than a hundredweight and is bulky, but I did. The two lads roughly pushed the bottom half across the floors and down the corridor, bumping into doorways and generally making a right hash of it.

‘For God’s sake be careful or there’ll be nothing worth saving – take it easy’. All this while, we could hear the crackling of the fire above. To which came a chorus ‘Do ye no ken there’s a bloody fire up there, we’re getting oot as fast as we can’.

Once the police arrived, followed by the brigades, we were not allowed to go back in so were available for statements. The only people to be interviewed were myself and Adrienne.

‘When did it start? What were you doing? Where were you at the time?’. To the question, ‘What did you do?’, she described everything that she had done, but she never mentioned the fact that I had lit the hall fire, and that the chimney had caught fire as well. When I was questioned, I told the officer all about the chimney and what I had done. So the fellow goes back to Adrie – ‘Now Miss Hill, why did you not mention that Mr Winton had lit the hall fire

and that the chimney had caught?', accusingly. 'Because you asked me what I did and not what I saw!'.

I thought that that served the officer right.

I can clearly recall two enormous ladders high in the night sky, silhouetted against the swirling smoke and flames, with a helmeted man on each, shouting to each other – 'Hae you git eny watter, Jock?', 'Nae, not a bloody drop'.

I was more aware about water supplies, because I was chief fireman (ex) and I knew exactly where the pump was situated. So I charged off to the burn and, when I got there, the reason for there being no water for the hoses was simply that the crew were shifting the pump further up stream. 'What's the trouble?' I shouted to them down below in the darkness of the night. 'It's that bloody new sceptic tank you put in – all the water is pouring off the roof and finishing up doon here – we're all covered in it'.

I refrained from mentioning this episode to anyone till a lot later, and it was only a chance remark that prompted me to explain why some parts of the building were browner than other parts.

Thinking of important things to do in the middle of a fire is not easy. There is this persistent feeling of helplessness. Then, suddenly the thought – 'KEYS'. All those keys in the back office, the realisation that, if all the estate keys are lost then there is going to be a lot of difficulties ahead. So I hastened back into the building and, with a screwdriver, took off the cupboard door on the back of which all the keys hung. It was a simple walk to the garage where I placed my prize.

It was the following morning that the game dealer came to collect the stags and, looking somewhat put about, walked over to where Adrienne was crouched in front of the key door, and asked her 'Miss, do you think it will be possible to get the keys for the game larder. I'm sorry to be a nuisance at such a time'. 'No problem', replied Adrie, reaching to the hook that held the game larder key. 'Here you are, put it back on that hook when you're finished'.

You should have seen the look on his face!

Oh, that reminds me. The service engineer for Minimax Fire extinguishers came as well. With the whole area like a battlefield, he remarked, 'I think I've come at an awkward moment'.

