

Beyond the fire: an account from Managing Director, Russell Hirst

Is it only five days since fire destroyed our recycling plant at St Ives? It seems that day was a week all on its own.

A Monday afternoon playing golf (badly) ended up with a playing partner on the 18th on his mobile phone (how rude?) and then apologising but he was worried as had heard of a fire near his factory. Where is your factory? St Ives. A look at my mobile with 16 missed calls told its own story. The plume of black smoke visible on my drive to the site told of the likely damage.

By 4.30pm I was walking through a movie scene of fire engines with bright blue lights, stepping over bright red hoses, past brightly uniformed fire service personnel and high visibility clothed police officers - a real contrast to the thick black smoke and dark conditions. Some familiar faces from the pubs in St Ives were now on duty. I must have looked very out of place in a pink polo shirt as I was waved through the road blocks some two hours after the fire had started.

Our excellent team sitting on a grass bank opposite the muster point, looked shocked as they watched their workplace burn - such relief knowing that everyone was safe and there were no injuries. The Fire Commander was later to confirm no injuries to his team – another big relief considering the scale and intensity of the fire and the smoke. It was already clear there was nothing left to save with the building and equipment so I listened in numbness to what had occurred. Hugh and Kirk put their training into practice applying foam extinguishers to the flames but the fire was quickly beyond control so they made a clear and crucial decision to evacuate the factory and quickly everybody was out. Fires can spread very quickly – a first-hand example of that was to follow.

Watching the Fire Service go about their work was impressive to say the least. The organisation, discipline, communication, control, clear direction and method are a lesson to a business and something inspiring. Thank you Morris – an occasional drinking friend who I didn't realise was Fire Service Area Commander – for taking the time out to speak to us and explain what actions were being taken, the progress in saving adjoining buildings (and their businesses) and then turning to extinguish the fire within our site. Other commanders on the scene, in particular Dave Lynch, were also incredibly clear and professional, and continued to update on progress as they gradually gained control of the fire, smoke and lastly the remaining hotspots during the late evening and into the next morning. I haven't mentioned their bravery yet – does that go without saying? Well it should be said because what a job those men and women do.

On Tuesday, the first song I heard on waking up was Walk Away by Cast – no chance of that. I smiled the first smile for a while. Monday 5th September 2016 was a strange and long day. Tuesday onwards has been strange for many different reasons and almost entirely all positive.

The management team of Dominic (Hirst), Nicky (Minnett), Charlie (Thomas) and Paul (Duggan) – along with some excellent suppliers (thanks Rob Childs) enabled our administration and accounts team to be up and running in the Wiser Environment

consultancy office by 9am and lead to some shocked customers receiving invoices the morning after the disaster! The collections team were up and out by 7am and materials diverted to our Norfolk site. Customers were informed of the fire and told there would be no impact on their collections. I don't think we missed a single collection the rest of the week. Now that's impressive! Well done to a remarkable team.

As usual our seemingly unflappable Operations Director, my brother Dom, has taken everything in his stride. I won't tell him to his face (because that's not what brothers do) but what a performance over long, long hours this week! On Tuesday as well as ensuring the logistics were seamless, Dom also ensured that our Norfolk site was reorganised and prepared for additional volume and additional labour. Most of the St Ives team had the day off whilst some were posted to Norfolk to help preparation.

By Wednesday, it was arranged for all the St Ives team to be relocated to the Norfolk site. Meeting outside the shell of St Ives, no moaning and an amazingly high morale seemed to be the order of the day that continued the rest of the week. Such a positive attitude! What more could we want as we deal with the immediate needs and then set about rebuilding what we have lost? Hopefully any fear of losing jobs is receding rapidly. With a lot of patience from a great team, we look to reorganise and re-establish some business functions in St Ives area as quickly as possible.

There are lots of information and decisions to be made at the moment - office and warehouse space essential for the short term, and ensuring retention of our great staff. From viewing videos and photos taken by Oscars on Tuesday morning (bringing home the speed and intensity of the fire) I was pretty glad I wasn't sat watching the worst of it. There have been continuous phone calls and meetings – insurance assessors, Environment Agency (thankfully there appears to have been no water pollution from fire water run-off), loss adjusters, landlords (thank you Tom Dixon – a phone call I was not looking forward to but what a true gentleman), equipment suppliers, friends offering help and support.

I've learnt this week how great our customers and suppliers are and most of all how seriously great our team is. I have been greatly touched by all the well-wishers, by neighbouring businesses who have offered support, and by interested local residents who offered their sympathy. My experiences this week have given me great confidence in our ability to move on from the fire and to rebuild, stronger than before.

A very positive week ended with many staff letting off some steam over the weekend! After a few days respite the gallows humour (always acceptable surely?) was well to the fore. I found out that St Ives has many Keith Flint (Prodigy) impersonators... LOL moment though was hearing that at the golf dinner on Monday, my veggie meal was brought out only for the waitress to be told I had gone to 'a barbeque'. (I know where you live Mr Lingham).

One last note – thank you mum for coming from Yorkshire to sort the domestics and give your support whilst so much time was being absorbed elsewhere!

Let's see what next week brings...