

Female Firefighters at Gordonstoun

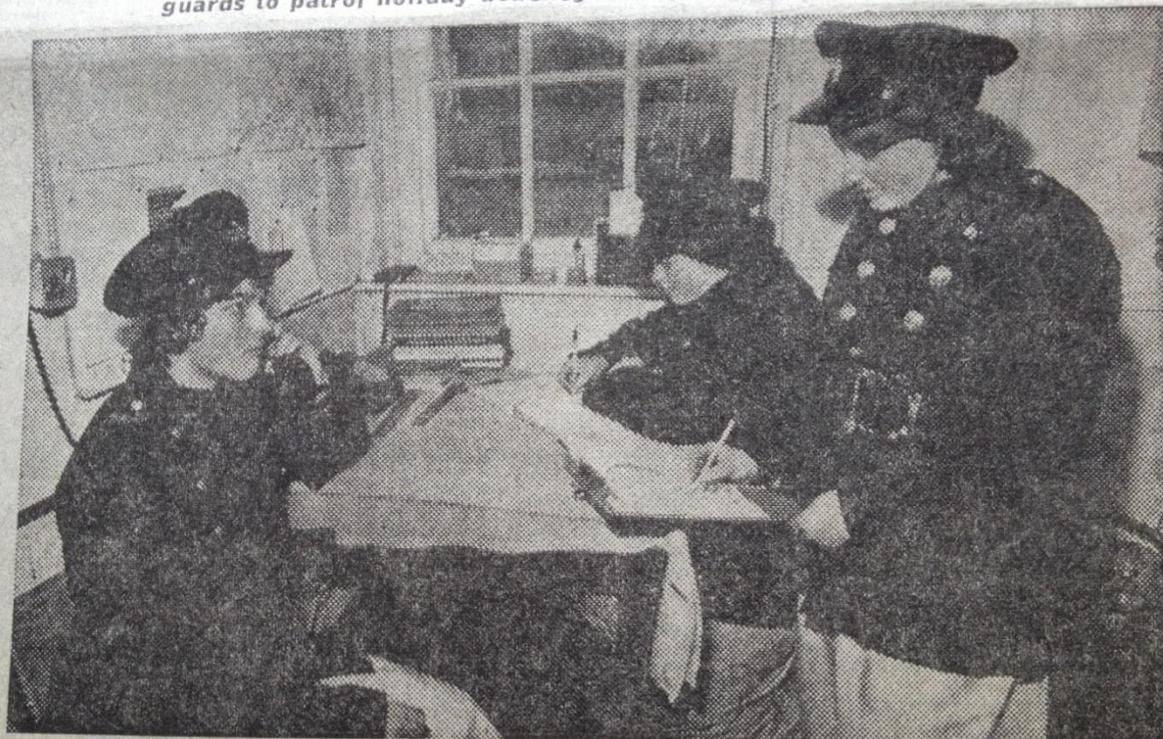
Girls joined the school in 1972, a year in which coincidentally far reaching changes were made in the Gordonstoun Fire Service. The **Gordonstoun Record of 1972** reads:

This year has been a most significant one: at last we are becoming a viable unit which is being called out with increasing frequency. The reasons for this happy state of affairs are as follows: first and foremost, the North Eastern Fire Brigade Officers have been tremendously helpful. Our elderly Tender has now been replaced with a splendid modern Commer Pump Water Tender. It is very well equipped with two-way radio, twin hose reels, 400-gallon water tank and luxurious accommodation for the Crew. This has meant great keenness all round —inspired not least by J. M. Marland's excellent leadership as Captain. Another new factor is that we now have Drivers available twenty-four hours a day. (Mr Cleaver, who recently joined us, and Mr Spooner have recently passed the Heavy Goods Vehicle Test.) Guy Fawke's Night put this Rota to the test: the crew attended three different incidents covering over 60 miles in the course of the evening.

It is evident that although girls joined the school in 1972, it did take some time for them to be fully integrated into the Fire Service. They seemed to be mainly involved with administration and watch duty. This is illustrated in the **Gordonstoun Record of 1973**:

Recent fires have brought a considerable improvement in watchroom procedure. Here Firewoman Sarah Harris has been a great help and her efforts have included making an index of all main fire risks within a five-mile radius. Cards in the index list route directions, map reference, type of property and availability of water.

...peman beach during a ...
guards to patrol holiday beaches at nearby Pindhorn.



Three girls in the Gordonstoun fire service, manning the control room at the school, Left to right: Elizabeth Wilson, Juliette Wood and Wendy Price. The school fire service is called out regularly to deal with fires in the area.

Anthony Montgomery, who ran the fire service from 1968 to 1990, writes about an extensive and memorable fire at which girls were present in force, though not yet as official Brigade firefighters: 'The fire on Ben Aigan above Craigellachie in 1976 was to prove significant for two reasons: first in terms of fire-fighting, the unit showed itself able to establish and maintain a relay of ten portable pumps (and branches) stretching from the Spey to the summit for seven days and nights; we had finally shed our amateur image and found ourselves accepted on a par with other retained units. Indeed at night most other units were withdrawn from the fireground. The second reason arose from the extent of the operation: for the first time the Divisional Commander had to make use of a light aircraft to determine his plan of action. The result of this was a call for volunteer helpers: although principally from the RAF (who supplied us with cans of water dated 1947!), it provided a unique opportunity to provide a crew (by minibus) consisting entirely of girls from Gordonstoun: although fully trained and immaculately turned out, they had never, hitherto, been allowed to engage in firefighting. Their competence – and endurance – turned out to have been the deciding factor as far as the Fire Authority was concerned in taking on women in a firefighting role not only at Gordonstoun, but throughout the Brigade.' Station 39 (the Gordonstoun unit) log book records that Bridget Koch was in the crew riding to a house fire in Coularbank Road, Lossiemouth, on 19th October 1978, and was thus the first trained female firefighter in the UK to respond officially to a call.

The Gordonstoun Record, the previous year, contained the following report:

Now a look at a different, though not unrelated, area: that of girls. What I have noticed particularly is that here also their contribution has been to provide an 'adult' context for the day to day running of the Unit. It has not been easy for them: while all senior girls have some 'fireground' experience, it must be hard to have all the grind (training, administration, watch duties) without all that much of the excitement. It is greatly to their credit that they are prepared to accept this, for the sake of their successors. Our experience here has been, we believe, of some interest to the Fire Authority: it is a well known fact that they experience difficulty in manning retained Stations (due to some extent to the less than helpful attitude of employers), and hence that they are evaluating the role of women on the fireground. I still feel that the opportunities for girls are limited in the Gordonstoun Services. I am not criticising existing Services: some are suited to girls, some are not. We tend to forget that we are dealing with 'outside' bodies to a large extent, whose constitution cannot be changed.

Girls very soon became integrated into the fire unit on equal terms with the boys. Here is an extract from a description by seventeen-year-old Charlotte Platts of what it was like to be at the fire that gutted the Anderson & England furniture store in Elgin during the night of December 10th 1984: 'Just after we were mobile an 'informative' message came through from ADO Morrison. It told of two buildings used as furniture shops, and well alight. We heard about six different pumps being called, getting mobile, and arriving. As we neared Elgin we saw the smoke becoming thicker and the glow brighter. As we approached the fireground the flames were shooting about fifty feet into the air. ADO Morrison directed the appliance round to the back of the row of shops on the opposite side of the road (Lossie Wynd) to the fire. He told us to set into the lake (Cooper Park) with hard suction and to cover the flat roof from being set on fire by drifting sparks. We ran out a couple of lengths and had water on, but made no impression because of the height of the building, so we pitched the ladder, but were about five feet short. 37-2 (Elgin's crew) were set into the lake about fifty yards from us, so we joined some of their crew in pitching their bigger ladder which got the height. I went up behind one of the crew from 37-2. We pulled the hose up, but it was too short so the others added a length at the foot of the ladder. I backed up the branchman while he dowsed down the roof and the sparks on it...'