

The Poole Family – Bootle, Merseyside

On Thursday, 8th January 2004, everyone in the Poole family went to bed as normal – Alice, her husband Joe, their two grown up daughters, Katie and Jo, and Alice's mum who was staying with them at their home in Bootle over Christmas.

Joe woke at around 2.30am: the bedroom was full of smoke.

“Joe took control,” Alice explains. “Ever since the kids were small, we'd had an escape route planned in case a fire broke out. The plan was to get out through the window of the back bedroom on to the roof below.

“Joe went to get my mother whilst I ran to wake the girls. It was completely disorientating. Joe came back to take me to the back bedroom where he'd already broken the glass and the frame of the window as the catch had jammed.

“We've lived here for 11 years but despite having an escape route planned, it was impossible to see anything. It was thick, black, dense smoke. It was so hot. You couldn't see your hands in front of you.

“We were frightened, but you just focus on what you have to do.”

Alice climbed out of the window on to the roof below before pulling her mother through. She could hear Joe trying to get their daughters to the back bedroom. He got Jo as far as the bedroom window, where she collapsed, before going back for Katie. Joe managed to reach the back bedroom with Katie in his arms before the two of them collapsed.



The Fire and Rescue Service were on the scene in six minutes. Alice could tell the firefighters exactly where Joe and the girls were lying.

“They were rescued, but Joe had gone into respiratory shock and both the girls were unconscious through smoke inhalation,” Alice remembers. “We were all taken to hospital.”

Alice had not inhaled as much smoke as her husband and daughters and spent anxious hours waiting to see if her family would be all right.

“It was an ordeal. Joe remained in a critical condition and had to be transferred to another hospital for specialised treatment. No one knew either way what would happen with him.

“My daughter Jo woke up first on the Saturday, followed by my husband, but he had to be sedated because he was suffering from such anxiety. When he came round again, he could remember everything – the first thing he said was ‘Where’s Katie?’”

Katie remained unconscious until the following Thursday.

“Everyone has made a remarkable recovery,” Alice says. “Joe, in particular, has been fantastic. Katie has a bit of problem with scarring on her windpipe from inhaling the smoke and has to go back to the hospital for treatment frequently - otherwise she sounds like Darth Vader!”

The fire started in a sitting room. The cause of the fire is still not known but it may have started from a pile of clothes which had just come out of the tumble dryer.

With Christmas guests and fairy lights on the tree, Joe had checked the smoke alarm before Christmas. The Fire and Rescue Service confirmed the alarm was sounding as they entered the house but the family had not heard their one alarm as it was installed downstairs.

The house was so badly damaged that it took six months for it to be repaired – the Pooles finally moved back in in early July.

“The room where the fire started was devastated. The doorframe was completely burnt away.

“We’ve got an alarm in every room now, hard-wired alarms which are linked to one another and all the kitchen appliances now have isolator switches.

“It does change your life. We do have bad days, which is only to be expected, but on the whole we’re doing fantastically. We all feel a bit anxious still but it’s our youngest daughter, Jo’s, job to check everything is off before she goes to bed, which helps.”

Alex MacDoughall from Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service comments, “The Poole family were extremely lucky they woke when they did. Although they did have a working smoke alarm that they had recently tested, it did not wake them. We always advise people to have a working smoke alarm on each level of their home to give them the best chance of escape in the event of a fire.”