

Victoria Pearse

Victoria Pearse, aged 21, was a bright, fun loving and adventurous young girl enjoying her final year studying biology at Exeter University. Tragically, Victoria's young life was cut short because a battery had been removed from a potentially life-saving smoke alarm.

On Saturday 16 December 2001, Victoria had been on a night out with friends. She was due to be going back to her parents for the Christmas holidays the following day and was in high spirits when she returned home. Although she lived with 4 other girls, she was alone in the house on this particular night, having stayed on an extra week after the end of term to complete a biology project. She stayed up talking to a friend who had accompanied her home and together they smoked several cigarettes. When he left she settled on the sofa, wrapped in a duvet.

Victoria then fell asleep and fire investigators believe either a lit cigarette fell onto the sofa or the ashtray was knocked over. The sofa began to smoulder causing the room to fill with black, noxious smoke. What makes this story so tragic is that the house was fitted with two smoke alarms, however the battery had been removed from the downstairs alarm. Victoria was probably woken by the heat from the fire and became disorientated by the black smoke and finally, overcome by breathing in the toxic fumes.

Victoria's mother Julia Pearse says. "Most people think that it's the fire that kills, but the real killer is the smoke and fumes. I'd really like to emphasise this as people seem to think that if they don't see flames then there is no danger." In fact, on this occasion the fire was relatively small and contained, with no one noticing until several hours after the fire had started. A passer by put in a call to the fire brigade the following morning, after spotting smoke coming from the roof of the house.

Julia Pearse says of her daughter: "Victoria was a girl who loved life. She'd battled through illness when she was younger and had come out even stronger. Everyone who met her said she was the most caring person they knew, but she also had a great sense of fun. She loved travelling and was very proud of her Australian roots. She was looking forward to a bright future after university and was applying for jobs. This has been taken away from her now. I've lost my daughter, but maybe if more people are aware of the risks of removing batteries from smoke alarms then this won't have to happen to someone else".

Barry and Sam Bradley

In the early hours of the morning on 8th April 2006, Barry Bradley was woken by a beeping noise he quickly identified as his smoke alarm. In preparation for a trip to Spain the following morning, Barry had switched on his tumble dryer before going to bed. The appliance caught fire and was spreading smoke throughout the house.

Barry explains: "My first thought as I went downstairs to investigate was that I had left the oven on, it never occurred to me that my tumble dryer could be responsible for such vast amounts of smoke."

"The fire safety advice to get out, stay out and call 999 immediately came to mind and I shouted to my son Sam who was still sleeping that we needed to leave the house as quickly as possible."

Barry and 15-year-old Sam managed to make their way out of the house before the smoke took hold and Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service arrived shortly after to take charge of the incident. However, the subsequent damage to the Bradley's home was substantial. Four months on, they have not yet managed to return.

Speaking about the experience Barry is philosophical. "At the time as I watched my house burn, I was concerned about all the material things inside and the disruption to my holiday plans. Looking back I realise that my son and I were extremely lucky no one was hurt."

"The fire officer at the scene said that the presence of a working smoke alarm had undoubtedly saved our lives."

Barry admits that before the fire he had not been very conscientious about checking the battery on his smoke alarm. Following the incident he is adamant about the need to have smoke alarms maintained and checked regularly.

"In this instance, we narrowly escaped tragedy. I would urge all families to ensure that not only do they have smoke alarms fitted, but that they undertake regular checks to see that they are working properly."

"It is also important to plan an escape route and make sure that your family know how to get out in the event of a fire. When fire struck at my house I realised that most of my windows were locked and I couldn't easily locate a key."

Barry and his family were fortunate, although around 80 per cent of the population own smoke alarms, statistics show that in one in every eight fires

attended by fire and rescue services, the smoke alarm failed to work, mostly due to flat or missing *batteries.

*Communities and Local Government Fire Statistics, UK 2004.

Sue Thompson

On the evening of January 10th 2005, Sue Thompson, 53, was enjoying a candle-lit bath before going to bed. Sue was woken from her sleep by a loud noise, which could have claimed her life.

Sue recalls: "It must have been about five in the morning when I woke up. I lay there paralysed with fear and I couldn't move because I thought I had intruders. I was very hot and I felt so confused. I didn't want to unnecessarily call the police if nothing was wrong."

"I then thought it was one of the toys in my grandchildren's bedroom that was going off. As the noises got louder it also sounded like hailstone because at the time the weather was really bad. It was a bizarre experience and overall I felt an overwhelming sense of danger in the house."

Sue immediately rang her daughter who sent her husband to the house to check up on her mother. When Sue's son-in-law arrived at the house he could see the house was on fire.

Sue says: "He went into shock. He tried calling me from his mobile but of course I was on the phone to my daughter. When I saw the smoke pouring in through the bottom of my bedroom door, I suddenly realised it was a fire. I knew I couldn't open the door because that was preventing the fire spreading into my room. At the same time, I had no idea how serious it was but I just knew I had to get out of there. I climbed out of the bedroom window and on to the roof. In the meantime, my daughter called the Fire and Rescue Service who arrived shortly after."

Luckily Sue escaped unhurt, but the consequences could have been worse. The fire had spread to the other bedrooms, hallway and stairs. The entire first floor was damaged.

Sue says: "After having a bath I thought I had extinguished all the candles, but obviously I didn't. I think its fine to use candles, but treat them with the respect they deserve and make sure you put them out. I would even encourage people to go back and make sure they are completely out.

"Keep all doors in the house closed when you go to bed. The fire and smoke spread into the other rooms because the doors were open. Fortunately, my



bedroom door was closed. This prevented the fire from killing me. If you are in any doubt, keep the door closed, get out, stay out and dial 999. I would also advise people to have good-sized windows in their room. If you find yourself trapped in a fire you can climb out of them."

Sue concluded: "To my shame, I didn't have a smoke alarm. I had one in the garage but it wasn't fitted. I now have smoke alarms throughout my house. My advice to everyone is to make sure you have a working smoke alarm in your house. It will save your life.