

# Fire Safety Specialist Award

## Wilkinson Construction Consultants

**Geoff Wilkinson is Managing Director at Wilkinson Construction Consultants, a consultancy practice specialising in Building and Fire Regulations in the UK. We speak to Geoff about the reasons why Wilkinsons won the prestigious Fire Safety Specialist award.**

### So Geoff what's it like to win this prestigious award?

It's great to accept this award as recognition of the excellent service that we have provided to our clients. When we first set the company up in 2009, we aimed to offer a high quality personal service, with a focus on customer satisfaction. This culture of excellence has already seen us achieve ISO 9001 and EXOR Silver accreditation for our services in just a few short years. This award, however, is special as it comes by way of nomination from our existing client base, and it's great to know that our clients rate our service so highly.

### Can you explain what those services are?

Wilkinsons offer a wide range of compliance services including building regulations, fire risk assessment, fire engineering, health & safety and also act as an expert witness. We are one of just a few companies that are licensed as approved inspectors by the Construction Industry Council in the UK. This means we can offer clients an alternative route to apply for Building Regulation Approval instead of using the often bureaucratic local authority service. Our expertise and flexibility in applying the fire safety provisions of Building Regulations means we can help clients achieve unique and cost-effective buildings.

### What makes you different?

Unlike many of our competitors, our staff have a unique understanding of the entire construction process from feasibility, through design, construction and maintenance of facilities. We bring that experience to every service we offer and every project we work on. As a result we can fully explain the practical implications of our recommendations, and have close working relationships with the fire authorities. We can also be brought in at any stage to help with design, secure approval or act as expert witnesses when something goes wrong.

### Not everyone will be familiar with these services: can you explain more about what's involved?

The UK's fire regulations changed in 2005 with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order (RRO) replacing the Fire Precautions Act. This meant that the fire service no longer issued fire certificates and that the owners of properties were responsible for undertaking their own fire risk assessments. The RRO also removed the 'statutory bar' which gave fire authorities powers to insist that existing buildings were upgraded to modern standards and not just maintained to the standards when they were originally built. This has seen the London Fire Service alone serve over 1,000 enforcement notices on landlords for inadequate risk assessments. We

work closely with clients to get these notices lifted and ensure that buildings meet the necessary standards.

Ideally we are brought in during the design phase of any project. One example was a developer who was planning to convert a Grade I listed mansion to provide 40 breath-taking apartments. Fire escapes in such developments present a number of potential challenges and in this case the escape route for some of the apartments was through a furnished atrium. The local authority would not give approval for this and wanted changes that would have destroyed the character of the building. Our client appointed us to come up with a solution that enabled them to use the atrium as an escape route. We put together a design and calculations that were approved by the local authority enabling the atrium to remain furnished and achieving the homely feel desired by the client. The client City & Country said they were, "very satisfied with the service which dealt with a specialist area of building control which was proving difficult to obtain an approval".

There have also been a number of high profile fires in timber framed buildings during the construction process and we have been called in to help clients who faced enforcement action from the Health & Safety Executive (HSE). In one case we were able to come up with a solution that allowed the use of timber frame in a densely populated part of London where the HSE had closed down the site due to the potential of fire spreading to adjoining buildings. If a solution had not been found the contractor would have had to scrap hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of materials and changed the entire construction method. We have since gone on to provide training in site fire safety to over 200 staff in the contractor's entire network of offices in the UK.

Unfortunately we are not always brought in at an early stage and have acted instead as expert witnesses in cases where things have gone wrong. One such case involved substantial losses to a listed building which had been undergoing refurbishment work at the time of the fire. Wilkinsons were appointed on behalf of the insurer and advised on the standards expected of a competent contractor and what had gone wrong in this case leading to the fire.

Our clients in that case Weightmans said: "The case was complex and had some very tight deadlines, and we were very impressed with the service received from Wilkinsons." Another of our expert witness clients Kim Franklin, of Crown Office Chambers, said: "I must say Wilkinson's report is excellent and will save an enormous amount of time."



### Fact File



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