

CAREERS IN THE FIREWORKS INDUSTRY

The fireworks industry, as it stands today, is highly fragmented. There are relatively few large companies with multi-million pound turnovers operating in the display sector. Instead, the demand for professionally fired displays is served by thirty or so well known companies (usually, but not exclusively, BPA members) and a significant number of smaller operations.

A typical display company will have several full time employees, supported by a substantial number of part time assistants, who help with shows on an occasional basis. Generally, fireworks displays tend to take place at weekends and there is naturally an increased seasonal demand around November 5th and New Year.

Within a company - the **display manager** usually designs displays, although in some cases an **artistic director** will be responsible for the creative aspects behind the show. The display manager may also be involved in the **logistical planning** of a show, which could include transportation and licensing. If a display is undertaken abroad, a significant amount of paperwork has to be dealt with to ensure that the fireworks are shipped securely and legally. Even a modest show requires many hours of pre-planning, involving a site survey and risk assessment. In some companies, a specific person carries this out.

Setting up a large fireworks display is a time-consuming and, at times, demanding process. Translating a design on paper to something that produces a spectacular end result in the sky involves a great deal of manual work and some basic skills in electrical wiring. Preparing the display hardware (mortar tubes, racking systems etc.) can be physically demanding and there are usually strict time schedules to adhere to.



A large display will involve a considerable amount of hardware

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The duties of a typical display operator may include transportation of the fireworks to the site, rigging the hardware, fusing the various firework sequences in the show, wiring the display for electrical ignition, firing the display, de-rigging and clearing up! It has to be said that many (if not most) part-time display operators are involved in fireworks simply because they enjoy the experience. Financial rewards are secondary and, in most cases, not excessive. Typically, payment rates are in the region of £8 to £10 per hour. For a small to medium sized display, an operator's fee may be in the region of £75 to £100. However, payment rates can be higher where operators are involved in more complex projects. There is no 'industry standard' in respect of remuneration.

The majority of people working in the display industry today start as assistant operators on smaller shows, working up to 'senior firer' level after a few years. As with many occupations, experience is a key ingredient and learning is very much 'on the job'. Most display companies rely very heavily on a network of firers who can be called upon to assist as and when required, and the first step in becoming a firework display operator is to approach a local display company and express an interest. The **BPA Members List** on this website provides contact details for the majority of the most well known display companies in the UK.

Training is normally provided 'in house', with the majority of display companies undertaking a comprehensive programme along the lines of the **BPA Operators Registration and Training Scheme**. This scheme has been in existence for over twelve months and provides a common syllabus for the training of display operators in the UK. An increasing number of firework companies are subscribing to this training method, which incorporates a facility for registering individual firers as being recognised display professionals. Details may be checked by reference to BPA records, which may be accessed via the BPA website.

A very limited number of companies undertake manufacturing of fireworks in 2004. This is a highly specialised business – requiring an HSE factory licence. Immediately after World War II, firework manufacturing in the UK was buoyant, with a number of companies producing millions of fireworks annually. The factory output was almost exclusively for November 5th celebrations. However, manufacture gradually declined and in the 1990s the majority of companies who were still in existence and serving the shop-goods market transferred production to China.



Hand-finishing rockets in a fireworks factory (1990s)

The prospect of obtaining employment in a fireworks factory these days is very slim indeed. In years gone by, a large company engaged in manufacture of shop goods for retail sale may well have employed several hundred people with a variety of jobs in raw manufacture, finishing, laboratory analysis and testing, packaging, and sales. The situation is very different today; at sites where manufacturing has disappeared, employment is mainly in distribution and sales.

There are a few exceptions. A minority of companies operating the display market, or producing specialised theatrical products, do manufacture fireworks from scratch. The traditional skills are still required but the opportunities available for employment in such highly specialised areas are few and far between. This trend is likely to continue as the volume of imported fireworks increases year on year. With the exception of some specialised products, the future of firework manufacturing in the UK is, at best, uncertain. As such, planning a career in the fireworks industry is exceptionally difficult unless your interest lies in the field of displays, where the best chance of success is to contact your local company in the first instance.