

A major scotch whisky manufacturer has been fined after two workers had to flee a warehouse fire.

Glasgow Sheriff Court was told at an earlier hearing that two workers were filling casks in a warehouse in The Edrington Group Limited's premises on Great Western Road when the incident happened on 29 June 2011.

The men were on a metal walkway at the top levels of the warehouse using flexible hoses to fill the 450-litre casks with whisky which was being pumped from steel vats. After filling four of them, one worker felt the hose he was using relax then heard a whoosh of liquid towards the forklift truck. He turned to see a jet of whisky shooting up towards a ceiling light fitting above the truck. The whisky hit the light fitting and a flame engulfed the cage of the forklift truck.

Around the same time his colleague heard a 'pop' from the cage and then saw a flame spread across the roof from the light fitting both towards and away from them. Both workers ran towards the stairs at the back of the warehouse, activating the fire alarm as they left, prompting the evacuation of the whole site within several minutes.

The court heard that thousands of litres of the burning spirit poured down the racked casks and onto the forklift truck until the supplying pump was turned off about 15 minutes later. Another worker who witnessed the fire through a door into the warehouse described the forklift truck as looking like 'a Christmas pudding once brandy is set alight'.

It was later discovered that 70 of the 110 sprinkler heads in the warehouse had been activated.

An investigation into the incident by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) found that the central aisle lights in the warehouse should not have been used in a flammable atmosphere and, had they been checked, they would have been identified as an ignition source risk.

HSE's investigation also revealed that the filling equipment was not suitable for use to transfer a hazardous substance like alcohol at pressure.

The Edrington Group Limited, Great Western Road, Glasgow, was today (27 February) fined £40,000 after pleading guilty to breaching Section 2 of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974.

After sentencing, HSE Inspector David Stephen said: "This was a major incident that could have had disastrous consequences. The two workers had to run for their lives and were extremely lucky not to have been killed or seriously injured. More than 17,500 litres of whisky were lost during the incident. This volume of flammable liquid could have served as fuel for a significant fire, which would have caused major disruption and damage to the environment. Had the company taken the simple steps of checking the light fittings were suitable for use in a flammable atmosphere and that the equipment used to transfer the alcohol was fit for purpose this incident could have been prevented"

Since the incident, the filling of whisky casks in this way at the premises has been made redundant with the introduction of a new tank facility in October 2011.

Source: HSE 27 February 2013