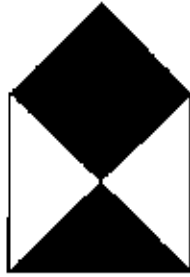


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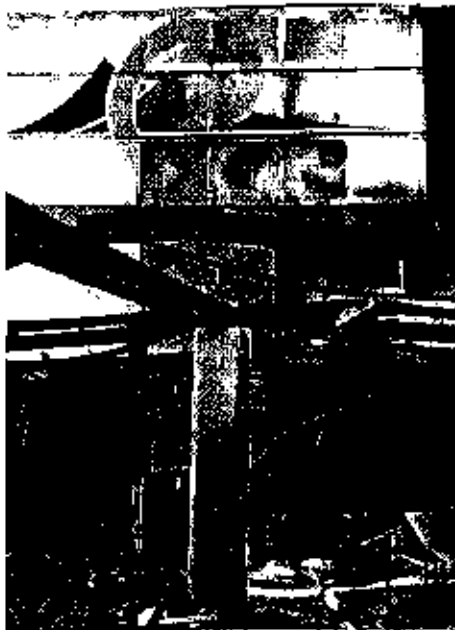
DISASTER SALVAGE TEAM

Working Towards Saving Cultural Collections

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NEWS LETTER

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Fire at the Canterbury Regional Council

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FIRE AT THE CANTERBURY REGIONAL COUNCIL

On Monday November 16, 1992, a fire swept through the Canterbury Regional Council's Kilmore Street Headquarters with devastating results.



1 Events on the night of the fire

It was eight o'clock in the evening when the Council's Property Manager, Neville Bishell, received a phone call from the alarm service company alerting him that an alarm had gone off in the Kilmore Street building.

When he arrived at the scene, the top floor of the building was already well alight. Firefighters were doing their best to contain the blaze and save what they could.

By 9.15, thousands of litres of water had already been pumped into the fifth floor where the heat from the flames had reached temperatures of around a thousand degrees. Water had started to seep through the ceiling of the floor below and smoke was spreading throughout the building.

By now other Council staff had also arrived at the scene and were offering to do whatever they could to help. Together with firefighters they salvaged building floor plans from the third floor (which proved invaluable to brigade staff battling the blaze), retrieved computer back-up tapes on which all Council digital data was stored, and helped lay large plastic sheets over desks and cabinets throughout the building in a bid to prevent further water damage.

It was midnight before the fire was finally brought under control.

An inspection the following morning revealed severe structural damage to the top floor and substantial smoke and water damage to the four floors below.

It was clear the building would have to be rebuilt to a large extent - a job that was expected to take five to six months, during which time the Council would have to find itself a temporary home.

2 Getting the Council up and running again

In the days following the fire, numerous decisions had to be taken by Council management and their insurance assessors both towards organising new premises and preventing further damage to the Kilmore Street building and its contents.

The first priority was to get the water out of the building. Once emergency power was installed, commercial operators went to work - sucking 28,000 litres of water from the carpets during the first day of the salvage operation. That same day all computer equipment, photocopiers and electronic equipment were removed from the building and transported to a safe place.

On the Wednesday the Council opted to lease several furnished floors in the AMP building in Cathedral Square as its temporary premises, also renting a huge warehouse at Ferry Road for the storage of documents. Floor plans for the use of the AMP building were drawn up as well as schedules for the shifting of documents from the Kilmore Street building.

The following day the Council's centralised records and library systems were packed and moved to the Ferry Road warehouse.

On the Friday, staff entered the fire ravaged Headquarters to clear out their offices. They were allowed to take one box of documents with them to their temporary home in the AMP building, the rest had to be packed for the shift to the Ferry Road warehouse. Personal belongings had to be taken home.

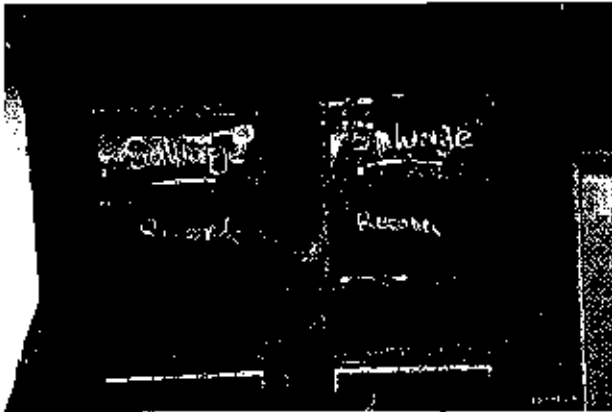
The move was made that weekend. Computer equipment, copiers, electronic equipment, the centralised records systems and a limited number of boxes of office documents went into the AMP building. All other office documents and some furniture were transferred to the Ferry Road warehouse.

Monday the 23rd, staff took up residence in their new home. It had taken less than a week for the Council to be up and running again.

3 Records role

After the fire, it fell to the records section to undertake a range of unexpected duties the most important of which were:

- organising the shift of the centralised records system and library;
- assisting with the appraisal of damaged office documents;
- assisting with the packing and registration of office documents; and
- replacing fire damaged office documents.



3.1 Shifting the centralised records system and library

At the time of the fire only active items of the centralised records and library system were housed in the Kilmare Street building. This material was stored on the third floor in about 25 cabinets, most of which had lockable doors.

Their position on the third floor meant none of the items suffered any fire damage. The lockable cabinets had also saved them from water damage. It was, therefore, simply a matter of packing them safely and in a logical order, before they could be transported and stored.

Brambles storage boxes were used to pack the items away safely. These boxes, made of durable cardboard, were capable of taking 15 items each. Each was packed according to the alphanumerical order in which they'd been stored in the cabinets.

After the appropriate item number and range was recorded, the boxes were loaded into a removal van and taken to the Ferry Road warehouse where they were again stored in alphanumerical sequence, according to the instructions on the front of each box.

Two days later boxes containing files were transferred from the warehouse to the Council's temporary home in the AMP building allowing individual officers to freely access and retrieve data, without any problems.

3.2 Appraising damaged office documents

The Friday following the fire, Council staff returned to the Kilmare Street building to clear out their offices. It was clear from the beginning that this would involve a wide range of material from personal items to Council documentation and files belonging to the central records system.

The majority of the documents suffered damage of some sort - most affected by water to varying degrees. Those from the fifth floor were generally both fire and water damaged, often severely.

Given the known costs of salvaging fire and water

damaged documents, staff were instructed to consider only those documents which were still of value to the Council or those which could not be easily replaced for salvage. It was up to records staff to assist officers in making decisions on whether to try to save or dispose of damaged documents.

At the end of the day most of the wet or fire damaged material was set aside for disposal - with the exception of four large pellets of documents which had been earmarked for special treatment.

3.3 Packing and registration of office documents

Documents from individual offices were to go to one of four locations.

Only one box of undamaged documents was to go to the AMP building. All other undamaged documents would go to the Ferry Road warehouse. Damaged documents no longer of any value would go to the disposal container - those to be salvaged were to be taken to a cool store.

Records staff had to ensure all the material was packed and labelled in such a way that documents would end up at their proper destination from where they could be easily retrieved when needed.

Packing and labelling of boxes destined for the AMP building proved relatively easy. After packing in Brambles boxes, labels detailing the owner and destination were recorded. This proved entirely adequate with not a single box lost.

Undamaged material destined for the Ferry Road warehouse was also packed in Brambles boxes - with 20 boxes on average allocated to each officer. Boxes were identified by a label showing the owners name, a sequential number and the destination "Ferry Road." This also proved more than sufficient with all boxes destined for Ferry Road ending up there.

Damaged documents destined for disposal were simply left in the offices for Property staff to collect and deliver to the disposal container. This material was not recorded. At the time it was felt the time it would have taken could be better spent on other things, including the salvage of more valuable documents. The decision caused some problems in the year following the fire with officers on the lookout for missing documents never quite sure whether material was simply mislaid or had been disposed of.

Packing of the material to be salvaged was the most difficult. Staff were instructed to use plastic bags to prevent moisture escaping. Spontaneous drying of documents could easily lead to pages permanently sticking together. A restriction on the amount of material per bag, of 7 cm in thickness, was also

imposed, for ease of freeze drying. After packing the plastic bags, permanent labels were attached on which officers had to write their names with permanent markers. After labelling the damaged material was slacked onto pallets and transported to a cold store. From there it would be sent to the National Library in Wellington for freeze drying.

A more efficient way of packing was suggested by the freeze drying equipment operator on his arrival in Christchurch to coordinate transportation of the documents to Wellington. He felt by distinguishing between the wet and very wet material the Council could make more economical use of the freeze drier. As a result a certain amount of material had to be repacked.

After this was done, all the documents were transported to Wellington to the National Library. Within a couple of weeks it was all returned, dry.



3.4 Replacing fire damaged office documents.

On its return from the National Library, a portion of the material was found to be fire damaged. On close inspection between one to three centimetres of the edges of the documents were found to have been singed by the fire. Luckily, this only affected the typing margins and the actual text of the documents remained readable.

After consulting with the insurance company it was decided to photocopy all the fire damaged documents. Those considered to be of temporary value were copied onto regular paper. Those of ongoing value, such as Council minutes, had to be photocopied onto archival paper.

It took one Records Officer two months to complete the photocopying. Most of the time was spent carefully splitting the individual pages using Teflon spatulas before the documents could be copied.

After photocopying all the fire damaged documents were stored off site. The copies were indexed and absorbed into the centralised records system.

4 Conclusion

The fire at the Canterbury Regional Council Headquarters took everyone by surprise. Thanks to the expertise of the firelighters the potential for direct damage by fire and water to the building and its contents (including documents) was greatly reduced.

Decisions by senior management acting on the advice of their insurance assessors in the days following the blaze meant the Council was up and running again in less than a week.

Records staff played a significant role in the management of undamaged records, the replacement of badly damaged records and the prevention of further damage to wet documents - relying heavily on the freeze drying services of the National Library in respect to the latter.

One of the lessons learnt was the need for a more pro-active role in protecting the Council's premises and belongings from the threat of fire. As a result a sprinkling system was installed in the building and the Records Supervisor was recruited onto the Canterbury Disaster Salvage Team.