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## NSCG Newsletter

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Planning throughout NMGM has taken many forms, both practical and theoretical, examining many aspects of risk management. This is viewed as a long term activity with all plans and resources being regularly reviewed and updated.

For staff evacuation and organisation during an emergency, the Personnel Department has prepared a 'Major Incident Plan'. Further to this, examples of action taken by Conservation in order to care for the collections themselves include:

- ◆ Purchase of equipment, materials and protective clothing for emergency use only
- ◆ Formulation of basic training in emergency object handling for all staff
- ◆ Provision for key personnel to be contacted on a 24 hour basis
- ◆ Planning roles for key personnel during an emergency
- ◆ Sourcing back up resources, for instance transport and freezer companies
- ◆ Liaison with the Merseyside Fire Brigade



Framed art nouveau poster designated for moving by Fire Brigade. PAP 4029

Contact with the Merseyside Fire Brigade has been rewarding with two major training exercises undertaken to date, the first concentrating on the Walker Art Gallery in 1995, then the Liverpool Museum in 1996 and this year the Merseyside Fire Brigade.

The aim is to examine the response of both the Fire Brigade and our own staff if a fire, smoke or the means of extinguishing (i.e. water), were to endanger the collection material.

Although the Fire Brigade's primary objective is to save life and put out the fire, they also consider damage limitation as a high priority, and NMGM is very grateful to them for their assistance with the project.

The exercises follow a series of training sessions given by the NMGM staff for the Fire Brigade crews. These give basic information on the types of object held in the building and how they are stored and displayed. Information is also given on their vulnerability along with basic guidelines for protection and handling if the objects are thought to be in serious danger.

For the exercises themselves (held on Sunday mornings to avoid disturbance to the public) we decide where the fire(s) are to be and position pretend objects nearby. The alarm is raised and the Fire Brigade utilise their crews to find the fire, fight it and also protect or remove objects in immediate danger. Each exercise is followed by a debriefing.

We can thereby evaluate the effectiveness of our training and raise the awareness and knowledge of all involved as to what problems might be encountered in a real situation. It is also an important means of examining our own emergency planning procedures and identifying the gaps in such areas as communication and use of resources for salvage activities.

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## Fire and Wet Collections in Alcohol

Fire officers can get very worried at large volumes of alcohol. However, Velson Horie and Rob Waller reported seeing the wet collection at a museum in Dresden that had been fire bombed during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, some specimens were gently cooked but still wet.

Has anyone else anything to add to this topic?

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## Fire at Bewdley Museum Stores

Bewdley Museum store is referred to in Bordass (1996) as an example of an unheated store in a fairly new block of industrial units with an air-conditioned plaster board container kept at 16°C and de-humidified if necessary. Large scale industrial, agricultural, household and building items are housed in the main part of the store with sensitive items in the inner container which is made of insulated timber studwork and plasterboard. The door to this inner container is fitted with brush dust seals.

In early 1995, as a result of a paint spray explosion, a serious fire broke out in the adjacent unit that was being used at the time to make flock wallpaper. Within about thirty minutes, this unit was completely gutted and the metal roof girders

reduced to twisted remains. Fortunately the block work and plasterboard party wall contained the fire long enough for it to be put out by the fire brigade, although it was close to collapse and a few blocks were dislodged, showering the unit with dust.

Items in the main area suffered severe smoke damage but the flames did not spread into the museum's unit. Material inside the plasterboard container was completely unaffected by either the fire or the smoke, although had the fire been in the unit against which the box was constructed, this might have been a different story.

The rebuilt unit is currently used by another company for storage, but as Bordass says 'this experience draws attention to some of the hazards of neighbours on industrial sites which need to be considered very carefully when selecting appropriate buildings'.

Information supplied by Carol Bowsher, Museum Officer, Bewdley Museum and from the following reference:

Bordass, B. 'Museum Collections in Industrial Buildings - a selection and adaptation guide' ed. Cassar, M., Museum and Galleries Commission, 1996

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## Fire at Maidstone Museum - June 1977

An arsonist started a fire in the west wing of Maidstone Museum, a listed historic building one Saturday lunch time in June 1977 using cotton wool soaked in white spirit. The fire was started on a staircase and the chimney effect drew flames up into the attics in which natural history offices were located and collections, mainly taxidermy and entomology were stored. The staircase wall was shared with the Kent Archaeological Society Room, and books on shelves backing onto the wall suffered spilt bindings and damaged leaves from the heat. The fire also burned into a gallery on a lower floor, much of the building suffered smoke damage and water damage was severe in the rooms adjoining the site of the fire, but the fire was contained within the west wing.

Since the museum was open to the public at the time the fire was started, the fire brigade were called quickly. A large number of fire engines attended the fire by which time, smoke was pouring out of the Natural History attic windows. The Museum Attendants cleared the building of visitors calmly and efficiently, some curatorial staff were already on site, others were called in by telephone. Once the site of the fire was located, although it looked for a while as if the flames would

win, the firemen plied the effected area of the building with hoses and the fire was extinguished. Staff were later allowed in to salvage what they could.

The amount of water used to extinguish the fire in turn caused flooding in the ground floor area beneath the site of the fire (almost deep enough to swim in at points) this then drained into the cellars. Fortunately archaeological collections in the cellars were stored on shelves so were higher than the several inches of water that accumulated, however some costume collections were damaged.

Lack of a disaster plan meant that emergency salvage was done instinctively with little organisation, with all available staff doing the best they could using common sense. Charred, waterlogged and singed specimens and cased objects were moved out of the danger area, water was poured out of glass-topped insect drawers.

After the fire, damage was assessed and staff continued to help with the salvage operation. Smoke had damaged 18<sup>th</sup> century portraits (fortunately glazed), furnishings and carpets in galleries adjacent to the fire were water logged, a large oriental carpet had to be written off after attempts to dry and clean it failed. Drawers from storage cabinets containing natural history collections were removed from the attic, examined for potential salvage and then either disposed of or kept. Although the exterior of many of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cases were charred, the varnish had been melted by the heat of the fire and had formed an effective seal against smoke and water, many parts of the collection were saved, but some parts of the entomological collection were lost entirely. The books in the Archaeological and Natural History libraries were removed by Attendant staff, sorted and stacked in other parts of the museum, although some of the natural history reference books were lost in the blaze, many less badly damaged book were later conserved. Extensive insurance cover held by the museum allowed for amongst other salvage costs, purchase of new collections furniture and more easily replaced items such as books.

Although undoubtedly a disaster, the fire led to major building repairs being carried out, floor loading and structural problems being addressed and displays unchanged since the 1940s being replaced. The

Kent Archaeological library had a superb refit. The constant building work over several years did however make a stressful time for staff.

Information supplied to K.J. Andrew by V. Tonge and G. Sheppard of Maidstone Museum.