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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

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 18th 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 19th 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.