

# Callington Heritage Centre - Fire Update

## Diary of a Disaster

**Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> March**

At 8.00.am my husband took a phone call from David Lewis, our archivist saying the Heritage Centre was on fire. My hopes of it being a small case of arson by the door fell flat when I saw four fire engines and other appliances and flames leaping out of the roof with the seat of the fire obviously being by the archive store.

As soon as the firemen had got to the scene and determined it was a Heritage Centre they went into the blazing building and covered everything with tarpaulins. When the flames were under control they went in and started to move

everything out, no matter how heavy it was. In torrential rain everything was loaded into trailers [belonging to the Council and St John's Ambulance] and taken down to the Council workshops until the operation was called off due to rising winds and slates falling from the

roof.

**Monday 5<sup>th</sup> March**

The Council workmen cleared remaining items from the chapel before the wind got up again. By a small miracle the fire had almost bypassed the archive store and gone straight up to the roof.

The priority was to get the collection into a dry store and that morning I managed to hire an industrial unit at Kelly Bray at short notice.

Three workmen spent all of Monday and Tuesday transferring everything to the new unit.

**Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> March**

Kate Johnson from the SE Cornwall Museum Forum and Lyndsay Bedogni from Royal Cornwall Museum came out to advise. Drying everything out before mould set in was the top priority and the next day I had two large commercial dehumidifiers in the unit. They recommended that the thicker items such as the old books should be sealed and put into a freezer until they could deal with. A training session on cleaning smoke damaged items was arranged.

**Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> March**

Insurance assessors turn up for



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the chapel and work to get the place safe and a new roof started to get it weather tight will start immediately.

Specifications will include some improvements like moving the electric box that caused the fire out of the heritage area, including additional fireproofing in the mezzanine level as well as completely rewiring to include a smoke alarm in all sections. A working party started to spread all the damp items out so they can dry properly but we are very short of space so an appeal goes out for shelving.

### **Friday 9<sup>th</sup> March**

We are also busy launching an appeal. We had about £600 of disposable funds in the bank at the start of this. Our unit hire charge is £420 per month [now gone down to £320], the dehumidifiers cost £400 per month and I hate to think about the electricity. Our contents insurance is just over £6000. It covers items such as archive materials, new video and computer, repairs to

display units, new display panels, new map drawer as the one in the archive did not get out. Our existing insurance is one third of our expenditure so like many small museums, the artefacts themselves are not insured, after all they are irreplaceable - you cannot go out and buy replacements.

### **Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> March**

Charity Day with Lynda and Sheila manning the stand, we raised about £50.00

### **Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> March**

Another working day spreading things out and checking through soggy boxes for precious items that need drying.

### **Monday 12<sup>th</sup> March**

The contents insurance assessor arrives at last and is very sympathetic. We can now throw out all the soggy and sooty boxes and such items as damaged chairs, this creates a bit more space for spreading items out. The furniture restorer says it will cost £1650 to restore the two big



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Victorian display/store cabinets.

Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> March .

Weatherheads shopfitters came up trumps with 25 metres of shelving. Jamie Dowdall [Callington Lions] collected it from Plymouth and he and David erected it.

Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> March

Another working party and we can at last get everything spread out although there are still some boxes to go through. Start to take things out of the cabinets.

Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> March

The last of the boxes are emptied and everything is drying nicely. The £2000 worth of special archive storage supplies we need to replace that lost has arrived, the Town Council are giving us an interest free loan until the insurance money comes through and are also paying the rental until we can pay for it.

Humidity was originally 90% but is now getting down to the more desirable figure of 50%, I am now only going once a day to empty the five gallon drums from the dehumidifiers.

Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> March

This was the training day when Helena Jaeschlke , curatorial advisor from the Royal Albert Museum in Exeter came down to show us how to clean off smoke damage. U3A are being very supportive with their volunteers coming along. We feel as if we could have done



*Above. The day after the fire,. The storeroom where all the more valuable items were kept.*

with a lot more tuition but I think we have enough knowledge to get started on what is a very daunting task. Helena has offered to come back to give further training sessions. The idea is that each 'trained' person will now lead a small team of volunteers to tackle specific tasks, more volunteers are needed as we have a huge task ahead of us and must be ready to move as soon as the chapel is ready.

*Below. The daunting task! A shed full of over 14,000 items, all damp, smoke damaged and urgently needing unpacking and drying.*



Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> March

The new shelving should arrive, this steel shelving will ultimately go in the archive store but in the interim it will be used at the unit as the 'clean' shelving. As things are cleaned they will go into new storage boxes on the 'clean' shelves.

The major work is only just beginning. There is so much to clean, but what can't be cleaned immediately has to be wrapped in acid free tissue and placed in boxes. Everything in each envelope or box will have to be listed on sheets of paper to check against the catalogue. There is likely to be a problem with accession numbers that may be lost or obliterated by smoke damage. Obviously when items do go back into the chapel there will have to be a complete audit. It is not until then that we will know exactly what we have lost,

however I think it will be more a case of misplaced rather than lost in the fire.

At present the only items we seem to have lost are some typewriters that were on the top shelf and are beyond practical repair. A handful of items of china have been damaged but can be professionally repaired when we have the money to pay for this or have had a further training session. Persons who have donated or loaned items to the Centre can be assured that every effort is going into returning these items to as near the original condition as possible. It will require many hours of work and more volunteers are always welcome, but all in all we have been exceedingly lucky, it could have been so much worse!

*Trying to spread everything out to dry*



I would like to conclude by thanking Pam and Lucy, especially Lucy Thomas for all her support during these difficult weeks and also to Sheila Lightbody and Ann and Arthur Eade for turning out to virtually every working session. No one could have predicted, when I took over the Chair in November, quite what a challenge lay ahead!

*Once the shelving is up we become a bit more organised and items start to dry out before mould sets in*



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***Volunteering to help?  
Please phone the numbers  
above or ring Lucy on 01579  
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[www.callington.uk.net/heritage](http://www.callington.uk.net/heritage)