

Harwell Case Study: Fire recovery at the National Library of Wales.

Harwell works closely with Priority Users to ensure that the lessons learned from incidents of all types – escape of water, flood, fire, major and minor losses, are conveyed back to the sector via seminars, training courses and through our downloadable template plans. The National Library of Wales has been a Priority User of Harwell for over twenty years and had participated in a number of these events.

The effectiveness of these plans was put to the test when a roof fire took hold. Harwell was contacted by conservators at the Library within half an hour of the fire, who asked for advice and requested support for the anticipated recovery operation. A Project Manager and support technician team were immediately deployed with salvage equipment. Both smoke and water damage were anticipated and a potentially hazardous working environment.



When Harwell's Project Manager arrived in Aberystwyth, the fire had been extinguished and the fire service was monitoring, damping down and commencing forensic investigation work. The Library's plan had been invoked very early and rapid action took place to evacuate storage areas at risk and protect stacks with polythene sheeting from the disaster kit. Large numbers of staff had remained onsite to assist with any salvage operation. After a site tour of the accessible spaces late the same evening, the damage in the affected section was found to be mostly water-related, but the situation was stable. A decision was made to reconvene most staff the following morning to execute the salvage operation with the benefit of natural light, with a team remaining onsite overnight to ensure no further water damage in the building.



The following day, a Saturday, the salvage operation began in earnest, with the task to extract crucial documents and volumes suffering from water-damage. That day over two vehicle loads of over 100 crates were removed from the five floors affected in the building and transferred to Harwell's freezers, barely 24 hours after the initial damage.

On the Sunday, the painstaking task of salvage from the most badly affected floor began. Impacts included water damage, scorching, singeing and dry smoke contamination. A further 50 crates of records were packed and labelled ready for collection the following day and stabilisation at Harwell.

Pamela Small, Conservation Support Officer, comments:

"Together with key Library staff, Harwell remained onsite until the early hours of the Saturday morning, working to assist with a swift disaster recovery. They ensured that all practical steps were taken to minimise further damage to the Library's collections. Emma Dadson continued to project manage the salvage and recovery over the whole weekend, ensuring that all salvageable materials were recovered, removed and sorted."

"Having the quick response services of Harwell on site allowed the Library to evaluate and quantify matters such as the nature of the damage - fire, smoke, water; while also identifying, prioritising and recording which collections the conservation section would attend to and which could be dealt with offsite by Harwell."

"They worked with and advised on the Library's salvage and recovery operations in order to successfully recover and salvage a wide range of collection materials. Removal of fire and water-damaged material to HDRS' facilities greatly reduced further deterioration to the paper-based collections by freezing prior to drying."