

## **NORWICH FIRE - from the ashes grow the shoots**

*Hilary Hammond, former director of arts and libraries at Norfolk County Council, gave a talk to the club in November about the fire which destroyed Norwich library but led to a community-inspired initiative to rebuild a new library from the ashes. MOIRA HOLDEN reports.*



Hilary Hammond was making his usual journey to his workplace on 1st August 1994, slightly concerned that traffic reports on the radio warned of congestion in Norwich. He was about 15 miles from his destination when he spotted a huge plume of smoke on the horizon. The central library was on fire. Norwich library had one of the most important collections of local history due to its strategic location – in its early history it was considered the second city of England. Now those priceless documents, newspaper cuttings and books were at the mercy of the flames. An investigation revealed the fire had started at 7:20. By 8am, the blaze taken completely hold of the library and windows began to explode. Thirty fire engines were in attendance as the flames claimed the popular venue. They had come from as far away as Great Yarmouth and Kings Lynn. Ironically, a fire station was opposite the library but firefighters had been called out on a false alarm at the same time the blaze took hold of the library.

It wasn't long until the fire brigade knew that the library was lost, so it became a fight to rescue its priceless charters and books. Tithe maps which would normally be delicately touched with gloved hands were hastily grabbed in armfuls by fire-fighters and brought out of the building. Luckily, none of the archives were destroyed, but the material was very wet: 'The horror of that day lives with me,' says Hilary. 'We were coping with a major disaster. Staff had trauma counselling. The community felt its soul had gone. 'One of my horror nightmares was looking up on the mezzanine floor and watching as a fireman in full uniform and breathing apparatus was trying to put out a glowing and burning pile of paper. But the community came together. Marks and Spencer lent us shopping trolleys to transport the damaged materials, McDonalds sent down burgers for everyone and a hardware shop supplied us with gloves and overalls. There was no question of payment – it was a real community feeling.'

What had caused the fire? Rubber insulation in a fluorescent light had cracked after many years, and, coupled with 30 years of dust and an air supply from cooling vents, led to the blaze which destroyed the building. All of the music library collection was lost as was the newspaper cuttings section and many of the books from the local collection.

But Out of the Ashes came the revival buoyed by a remarkable community attempt to preserve its cherished history. Damp linen paper was at risk of mould, so the material was transported in a frozen food lorry and stored in a deep freeze. RAF Coltishall proved invaluable in the drying-out process which saved countless documents. Servicemen were serving in Bosnia, so the hangars were empty. Tents were erected and filled with de-humidifiers to air linen papers. Air cadets unwrapped each book individually to preserve as much as they could.

Architect Sir Michael Hopkins designed the new building, which was to become known as the Forum, and houses a new library, the BBC regional offices and several restaurants. The county council received a Millennium Commission grant of 30 million pounds towards the overall cost of 65 million pounds. The Forum was opened in 2001 and welcomes 1.3 million visitors per annum.

Restocking the library in a bid to replace what had been lost began in earnest with the Great Norfolk Book Hunt. The initiative was launched to restock the local history books which had been lost in the fire. The campaign was hugely successful and resulted in many people offering their own books to the library. Hilary retired from the county council in 1998, but continued to work for the Forum's trust and as a consultant. He has now been fully retired for 10 years, but has never forgotten the events in Norfolk. As he finished his talk, he said: 'The emotion still gets me.'