

THE WELLCOME TRUST: THE AFFECTS OF A BURST WATER MAIN

At 5.30am on a cold November Sunday morning, a 14 inch water main burst in Eversholt Street, London outside a building in which the Trust leased two upper floors. The explosive force of the bursting pipe threw several paving slabs into the air opposite the main building entrance and the roadway quickly began to fill with water since the storm drains were unable to cope with this volume.

Within the hour the water rose to the level of the building's top step, began to spill over into the entrance lobby and naturally found its way into the basement. The immediate risk to the Trust was to its books and documents, which were stored in a basement room. They would become damp or even waterlogged and would therefore need to be removed for appropriate treatment. Initially, it seemed that this would be inconvenient but not too costly.

However the basement outlet gully was too small allow adequate drainage and the water level continued to rise. Someone at the scene located a manhole and managed to remove its cover to allow the flood to subside. Shortly after this, a loud bang was heard as the electrical sub station, located in a room adjacent to the store, suffered a power short-out.

The net effect of this was all too obvious - none of the electrical equipment would now work including the lifts, central heating and IT equipment. Standby batteries provided current to telephones and emergency lighting in the corridors and stairwells for only two hours. Further difficulties were soon realised:

- all stair wells were internal and had no natural lighting;
- as it was November, and the heating system was now out of action, the internal temperature rapidly dropped below that for reasonable working conditions;
- water supplies for toilet and other facilities were now limited to what remained in the roof tanks.

Repairs to the water main would take several hours. Power would not be reinstated for more than a week. Although the building itself was undamaged above ground, it was unusable on Health and Safety grounds. The Trust's Academic Unit were based here and they needed large rooms for teaching purposes and offices for administrative support staff. Fortunately, the main Wellcome Trust office campus is only a short walk away and as a work-around measure, space was found for essential activities. These included large meeting rooms for lectures and spare offices for clerical staff and managers. Restoration of IT functionality and data was happily a rapid and straightforward process using the undamaged head office network facilities.

What had initially been perceived as little more than a problem of "wet books" had, over the course of several hours, become an inaccessible and potential dangerous environment. Had the head office building been affected, then work around measures would not have sufficed and invocation of the hot site and other contracts would have been necessary.

The building owners rapidly introduced portable lighting and a generator to enable us to remove the damaged books. Other tenants were more seriously affected and found it difficult to relocate at short notice. A salutary lesson in their lack of preparedness!

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