

Beckett Hall, 1986

J.S. Town, Librarian

This article is by way of a sequel to "Beckett Hall, 1960" which appeared in the 1959-1960 issue of the College Journal by "J.W.H.", who remains sensibly semi-anonymous. The final paragraph ran thus: 'As these pages go to press the work is already in hand. When it is finished the roof of Beckett Hall will ... keep out the weather once more, with no further danger when the wind blows hard of a fall of stone upon the heads of those below.' Quarter of a century has passed since the expression of this pious hope, during the last two years of which we have experienced all too clearly the results of the failure of the former prediction, although mercifully not the latter.

Beckett's problems resurfaced in a dramatic manner with the appearance in 1984 of a large fungus growing out of the cornice in the Library Reports Section (Room 34), much to the horror and disgust of the staff. This was followed, completely without warning, by workmen appearing one morning and demolishing half the room, failing to confine the environmental effects of their action by erecting a plywood wall, with a door marked with uncanny prescience "Librarian's Office."

The reason for this disturbing activity was the discovery that the fungus was *Serpula lacrymans*, known to the layman as Dry Rot. The full extent of the infestation was investigated in October 1984 and January 1985 by Rentokil surveyors. Their report led to a contract being placed by the DOE/PSA with Rentokil Ltd to treat the problem, with a starting date of July, 1985.

The roof, theoretically repaired in 1960, had continued to leak. The longest serving members of the library staff remember periodically reporting water entering the building throughout the late 70s. On some occasions these were more like floods than leaks, leading to emergency movement of the stock in ground floor rooms. Under appropriate conditions wood sodden in this way may become infested with *Coniophora puteana*, the wet rot fungus, and when this dries the dry rot fungus often takes over. The latter decays the timbers, which become brittle and lose their strength, with often disastrous effects on the structure which the beams support. Dry rot may spread rapidly in a suitable environment; experimental evidence has shown rates of a metre a day. Both types of fungus were found in Beckett, in quantities which led to Rentokil requesting that the BBC be permitted to film certain portions for a wildlife programme.

The process involved in treating dry rot consists of exposing the full extent of the infestation, then going a further metre, total removal and replacement of all infected timber, spraying with pentachlorophenol fungicide, then making good; and in Beckett's case replacing or repairing guttering and retiling sections of the roof to prevent future recurrence. Because the problem arose from roof and gutter leakage, the roof beams were seriously affected, and the rot had spread down the walls to the attic floors, and in some cases as far as ground floor ceiling beams.

To coordinate this massive repair operation, and minimise disruption to the occupiers, progress was planned and monitored at monthly site meetings. These consisted of representatives not only of the many varied elements which today make up RMCS, but also of a disparate collection of outside agencies, all theoretically working

towards the common aim of restoring a 150 year old neo-Tudor ex-stately home. These meetings were sometimes depressing and many times the real decisions were made in corridors, as they usually are; but not often in ones without ceilings or floor boards.

The coffee supplied by the Bookshop was of unfailing high quality, and in the Chairman, Brian Roberts, of the PSA Area Works Office at Abingdon, we were fortunate in having a project leader who had clearly had a feeling for the building and its inhabitants and a determination to ensure a thorough and effective job.

The first site meeting of this new contract took place on Monday 8th July, 1985, aiming at a completion date for the apparent work of January 22nd, 1986. The QM, Col. Mike Down, an unswerving ally in our attempts to get the job done as quickly and painlessly as possible, correctly predicted the reality: the thirteenth and final meeting took place on the 7th August, 1986, which asked Rentokil to clear the snags by 29th for painting and recarpeting work to start. As I write in October, a solitary carpetlayer is still scraping away in the corridor outside my office. During this period only the North-West quadrant of the work, plus one room (in floorspace terms) of the South-East quadrant, has been completed, meaning further work in South-West, South Front, East Front and North-East quadrants remains to be done. Exposure work has been started on the East front, but these rooms (25-29) presently stand idle, meaning Report Section space has been cut by half. The stock removed currently resides in two portacabins, one of which has been appropriately nicknamed "the graveyard". These are a continuing eyesore on the West Front.

The removal of these reports was one of the first tasks performed to get work under way, and involved the library staff and two heroic subcontractors hired through Crown Suppliers in the horrifying task of shifting three hundred feet of box-filed reports and their cabinets (which would not fit in the lift) down to their temporary accommodation. At least some good came of this, with a truckload of unused or out-of-date army code publications and EMERs departing to Donnington or the furnace. Many were personally selected for destruction by the then Deputy Commandant, Brigadier Ted Willmott, to whom we remain much indebted.

The reasons for the expansion and delays in the work were two-fold. Firstly, the contract was based on a survey which did not involve investigation by removal. This invariably led to extensions of time because the rot was always more widespread than anticipated. This then led to a substantial increase in cost, which on some occasions meant a decision higher up the ladder in PSA and therefore further delay. I can only speculate on the final cost of this section of the work, but the initial contract sum was £82,000, and this probably trebled through the extras. Secondly, the ROF occupation of the attic floor led to postponements in starting several times while temporary accommodation was prepared to their satisfaction.

While the work was in progress, the library staff tried to keep the effect on users to a minimum. Fortunately, the nightmare of ground floor rooms becoming involved did not become a reality, except in Journal Stack 2 and part of the textbook area. The staff, however, were themselves heavily inconvenienced. I lost my office for almost an entire year, and was forced into a nomadic existence which at least led to increased contact with library users. The library staff room and kitchen were also lost, and the dust and spraying associated with

the work led to several respiratory complaints amongst the staff and to a drop in the morale of the cleaning force.

The Rentokil workers became honorary members of the library staff: Bill, Big Andy, Little Andy and Jem will be long remembered. The Barrington Arms no doubt also mourn their passing as cider sales return to normal. Several highlights of the year stand out. The removal, piece by piece, of the huge, original water tank designed for the needs of aristocratic house parties with attendant servants was one of the greatest technical problems faced. Other incidents were almost farcical, as when the skip caught fire. One Sunday I was roused by the MOD Police to spend the morning paddling round the Enquiries Room trying to separate piles of soggy book orders, assisted by my wife. A workman had dropped a hammer on the radiator in the room above, which had fractured and leaked its contents through the ceiling.

The saddest loss during the work was the Blue Room's (Room 30) wedgewood-style cornice, the most attractive in the building. This was a greater pity as the room itself has now been substantially improved by the opening up of a previously blank window on the East front, creating a light spacious area which we shall develop as a reading room for the Reports Section.

The crucial question is what next? A new contract for the further stages will be set up by the PSA taking into account the amount of building work involved, but this has slipped from a start date of January 1987 to May 1987. Whilst this leaves the Library with almost a full academic year's respite, it moves the tentative completion date to January 1988.

Many lessons have been learnt during the first section of the work.

Several times the library staff involved themselves in heavy activity to free rooms urgently for treatment, only to see them stand empty and unworked on for many months. Pulling together many different groups of people to finally bring rooms back into commission has been a particular problem as the main contract did not include floor coverings, painting and electrical work.

On the positive side we have several redecorated rooms with the antique fireplaces opened, but one feels there must be quicker and easier ways of painting a room. We probably know more about the insides of old buildings than many librarians, and we have used the opportunity to reassess the use of certain areas. This has led to the development of a small, but well-appointed, seminar room for library education in Room 38. I hope we have also kept the work as far as possible from any of the senses of the library users, and if we have been successful in that then it is largely due to the efforts of the long-suffering library staff and the understanding of and sensitivity to library requirements of Rentokil's workforce. I should like to take this opportunity of thanking all those associated with the work for their efforts and their co-operation during the year.

[No. 3]

Beckett with alternative headgear

[No. 5]

West Front with portable buildings

[No. 52/47]

The culprit: *Serpula lacrymans*

[No. 50]

Beam removal in progress under temporary roof