

# PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

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Thursday, January 14, 2010

## Belshaw's done his block

The news from Haiti about the impact of the earthquake appears quite dreadful. Hopefully they can get the regional response organised quickly.



My father used to complain that anything named after this family would be closed, renamed or just burnt down!

On Sunday 23 February 1958, my father received a call to say the Belshaw Block was on fire. As we drove towards the University of New England we could see the dark smoke rising.

That same morning Bruce Hoy came out of St Peter's Cathedral with his family to see the dark smoke rising to the north west. This photo by Bruce's father shows the aftermath of the fire.

Just a fire, just a photo, but one with devastating consequences for many.

The Belshaw Block had been the second building constructed at the New England University College. It was briefly the custom to name buildings after the College Wardens. Dad had been acting Warden after Dr Booth left (the first new building was the Booth Block), hence the name.

The Departments of Organic Chemistry, Botany and Geology were virtually wiped out, while Eric Woolmington, then a young geography lecturer, lost all the copies of his newly completed and ready for submission PhD. Rather than trying to re-write, he began again with a new topic, looking at the geographic basis of support for the New England New State Movement.

Among other things, the building's basement housed the Geology Department's entire collection of rocks and minerals, microscopes, card indexes and optical equipment. There was a desperate rush to get things out. Mathew Jordon's *Jubilee History of the University of New England* records:

Dodging the firemen who 'didn't want us to do anything', Voisey (Professor of Geology) recalled, 'I smashed the door in and we managed to get the rock-cutting equipment and then with the help of a few others I managed to rush in and get some of the rocks but very few.' One thing that impressed him greatly was the willingness of Arts lecturers - 'who were not all especially appreciative of geology' - to crawl in under the building and grab as many rocks as 'they could get their hands on.' pp139-140

With the building burning fiercely above them, it does sound like the type of actions that would worry firemen! Help then came to the Geology Department especially from Sydney and Brisbane Universities but also from as far afield as Cambridge and Princeton in the form of microscopes, rock specimens and reprints. With this help, teaching for the new term began a few weeks later on schedule.

Prosh or the Student Procession through the town that year included a sign saying "Belshaw's done his block"!

A few years ago I was invited back to UNE along with others with Belshaw Block connections to the unveiling of a plaque to commemorate the building. It was a social occasion that I greatly enjoyed. I do wish, however, that I had taken a notebook to record the recollections. That was really another missed opportunity.

#### Postscript:

Following this post I had two email responses that I thought I should incorporate.

Phil Emery wrote:

My brother and I were getting ready to go to Sunday School on the morning of the fire when a neighbour came to our front door to tell my dad that he had heard about the fire. He was a truck driver and said he was going to go out to the uni to see if there was anything he could do -- I think he may have had some connection to the fire brigade.

Dad said he would go out too and my brother and I asked if we could tag along, so Sunday School was abandoned for that day.

When we arrived a fair amount of the building was alight and we were told to keep well clear (in hindsight we shouldn't have been allowed to go). I can recall seeing a couple of the firefighters throwing rocks at the windows around the top of the walls trying to break them so that their colleagues could get water into the building from above the fire and onto the spreading flames. No fancy extension ladders etc in those days for a small country fire brigade. Soon some of the kids who had gathered joined in the rock throwing and I remember thinking it must be okay if the fires were doing it.

It was an awful sight to watch the futility of the efforts of the people from all walks of life doing whatever they could to help and I suppose I thought there was an inevitability of what the outcome would be. We were taken home long before the fire was put out (I suspect that dad realised that it wasn't the place for us kids to be). It was certainly meaningful to me because of the name connection.

Paul Barratt wrote:

My father was sitting up in bed in the front bedroom reading the Sunday papers at our house in Handel Sreet, from the front verandah of which you could see the rooftops of Booloominbah emerging from the treetops.

I answered a knock on the door, and a man said, "Excuse me, could I use your phone, the University's on fire". Dad's first thought was of Booloominbah, which for him was a sacred site (he visited it when it was all locked up in the mid-30s when he was a boarder at TAS, and lived in it 1938-40 while he was a student, before he went to Sydney in 1941 to do his honours degree, and had an office in it from 1946 when he came back after the war). I have never seen anyone move so fast as he did on hearing that news. It was quickly obvious that the smoke wasn't emanating from Booloominbah, but we rushed straight up the hill to see what was happening. It was a terrible site, seeing the building ablaze and bits of paper representing years of work drifting out the windows into the early morning air of a sparkling Armidale morning.

There is one amusing anecdote to be told. In 1964-65 I worked in the ionospheric physics group led by Associate Professor Reg Smith. We had a piece of equipment that had been built in the Belshaw Block when Physics was there. It had never worked, and no-one had ever been able to track down the source of the problem. My older room-mate Bob Loch told me that on the day of the fire it had been thrown out a first floor window. From that day on, it worked perfectly. We put it down to a dry solder joint.