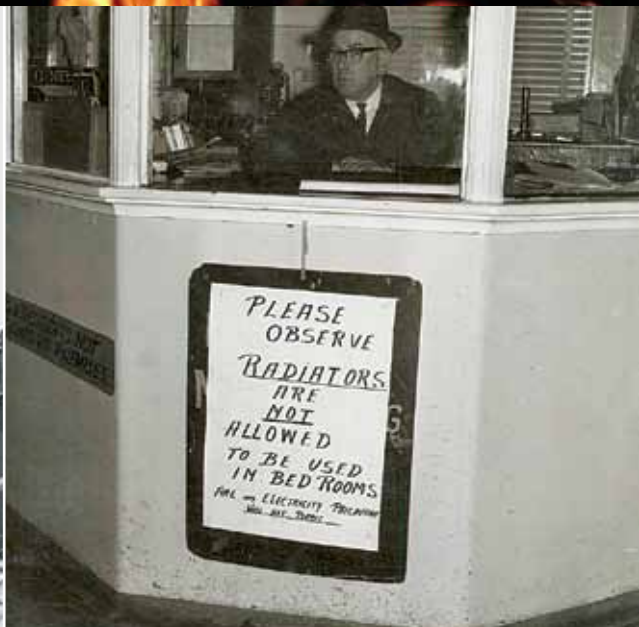
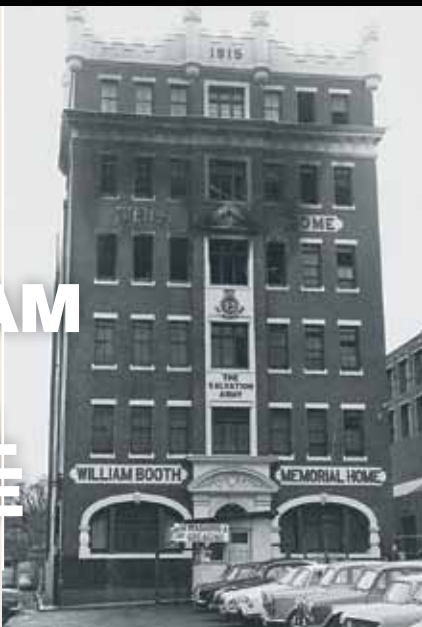


THE WILLIAM BOOTH MEMORIAL HOME FIRE

1966



Australia's deadliest building fire is also one of its least well remembered. On 13 August 1966 a resident of Melbourne's William Booth Memorial Home for Destitute and Alcoholic Men in Melbourne knocked over a heater in his room on the third floor. The fire smouldered for several hours and exploded after another resident opened the room's door. Fire and smoke engulfed the third and fourth floors. Salvation Army staff delayed their call to the Metropolitan Fire Brigade in the mistaken belief they could control the fire. Thirty men were killed. Geoff Plunkett has chronicled the shocking story in his new book *Let the Burns Burn*, available now from online booksellers and selected good book stores. A condensed extract from the book's introduction follows.

Opium dens, prostitution, slums, crime, poverty and larrikinism—this neighbourhood was in desperate need for the hand of God.¹ Spiritual enlightenment came to the Little Lon district of Melbourne in 1916 in the form of a Salvation Army home for destitute men: society's rejects, those pitied but ignored, those described at their funeral as 'nobodies'.²

Was this an attempt to proselytise, to bring God's word to a heathen cesspit, a notorious slum and red light precinct?

There is a simpler reason—the soldiers of God simply cared. It was—and is—in the Salvation Army's ('the Salvos') DNA to give practical social service and this group of men needed a home, if only for a day. The home was located with the residents in mind—handy to the train station, close to the docks and not too far from the markets. Originally, they charged a penny for soup and bread, butter or cakes and scones; threepence for a meal including meat and vegetables. Fifty years later, the cost of a room was still less than a dollar a day.

The building was erected as a memorial to William Booth, the founder and first General of the Salvation Army. It was thus named the William Booth Memorial Home but to the residents it was simply the William Booth. A few of the men worked but most were pensioners, some invalids. The penniless were not forgotten either. In the early decades up to 200 meals and 30 beds were made available for free.³ Some stayed a day, others for more than 50 years. All were troubled. Fifty years of continuous service was shattered on 13 August 1966 by a catastrophic fire. The William Booth never fully recovered and closed its doors to lodgers on 16 December 1967.

At the time of the great fire half of the lodgers were 'heavy' drinkers and another one-quarter drank. Two-thirds

of those who died had alcohol in their systems, up to a death-defying blood alcohol level of 0.433. The residents reflected the general populace in that alcoholism was a symptom of greater problems, not the cause itself.

A staggering variety of personalities passed through its doors, from the World War I diggers down on their luck to the tragic victims of the depression years, the unemployed men (mainly young) who would doss down for the night, after another fruitless day looking for work.⁴

Ask any Australian which building fire was Australia's deadliest and they may mention the Whiskey Au Go Go Nightclub or one of the several backpackers fires but none will have heard of the 30 deaths in the William Booth in 1966. A search of Google reveals little and it would appear that the reason is that the death of a group of alcoholic rejects is neither noteworthy nor memorable.⁵ The fire made the headlines briefly but quickly faded from consciousness to the point where the only ones who remember are the firefighters who attended the tragedy.

They do not forget the makeshift morgue in the ground floor dining room, the terrified, mainly elderly men wandering like zombies throughout the building. They remember the death stares, eyes and mouths open, faces blackened by soot. They cannot forget. ■

References

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/little_Lon_district, quoting Justin McCarthy, *The Commonwealth Block, Melbourne*, Archaeological Investigation Report, Volume 1; Historical and Archaeological Report, Australian Construction Services prepared for The Department of Administrative Services and Telecom Australia, 1989, p 55.
2. 'Nobodies', *The Age*, 24 August 1966.
3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. For example it is not mentioned in *The Australian Book of Disasters* by Larry Writer, Murdoch Books, 2011.