

Kew Cottage Fire 1996

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Kew Cottages Fire Context 1: Disability & Society

- Kew deemed temporary for 4 decades - stigma
- Least powerful thus few resources
- The politics of shame
- Few advocates:
 - Journalists from Day 1
 - Parents from 1940s

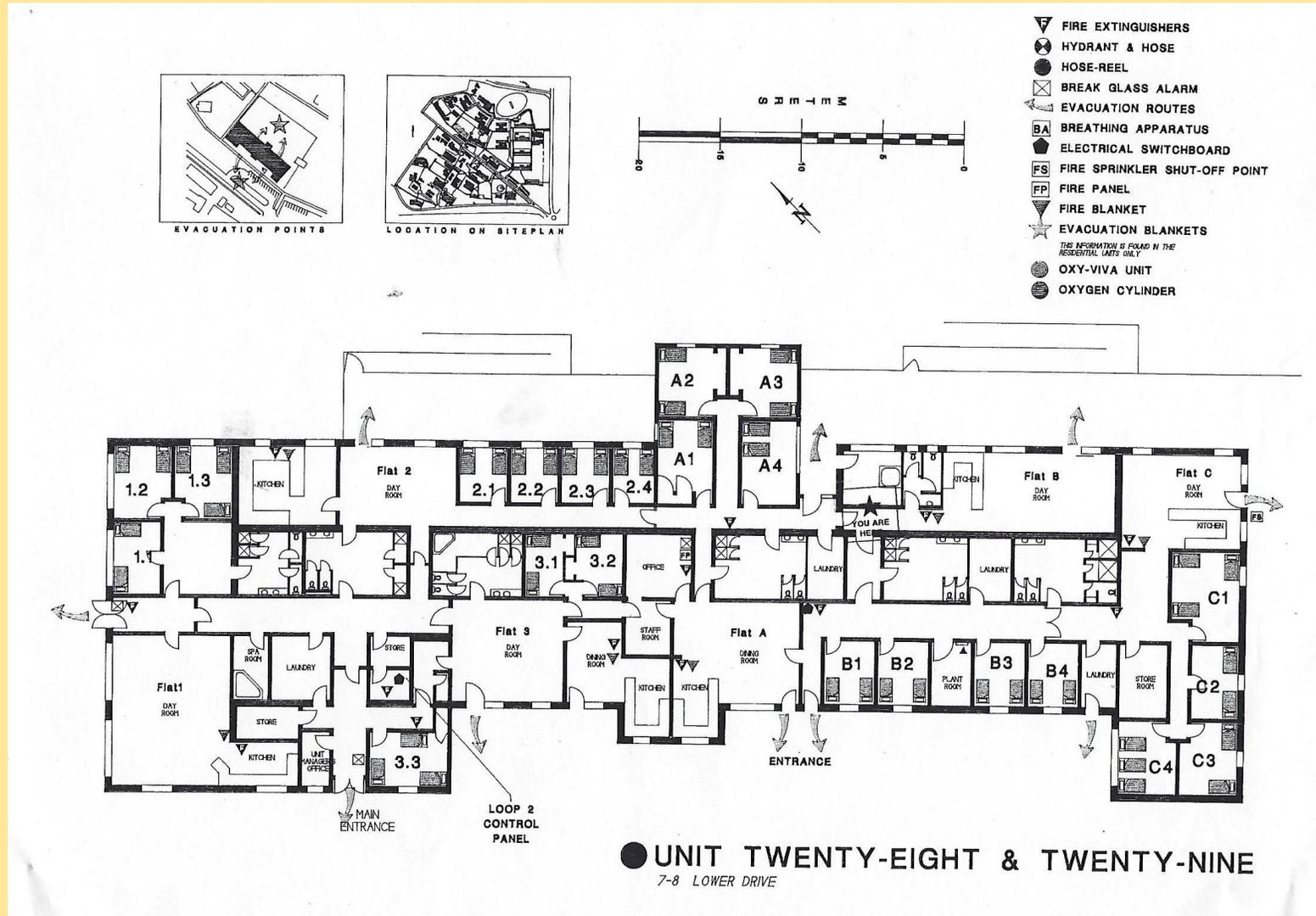


Kew Cottages Fire Context 2: Changing Ideas of Intellectual Disabilities

- 1887 - the promise of education
- 1920s - Eugenics & social threat
- 1950s - renewed hope, new emphasis on programs
- 1970s – ‘benevolent segregation’ attacked:  normalisation & deinstitutionalisation in 1976+

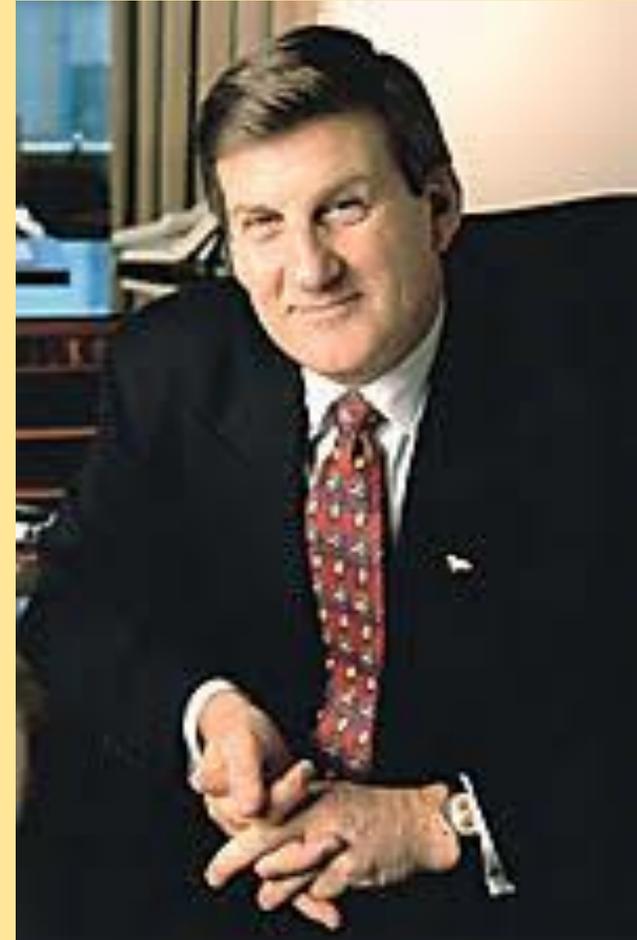


Kew Cottages Fire Context 3: Costs of Normalisation & Deinstitutionalisation

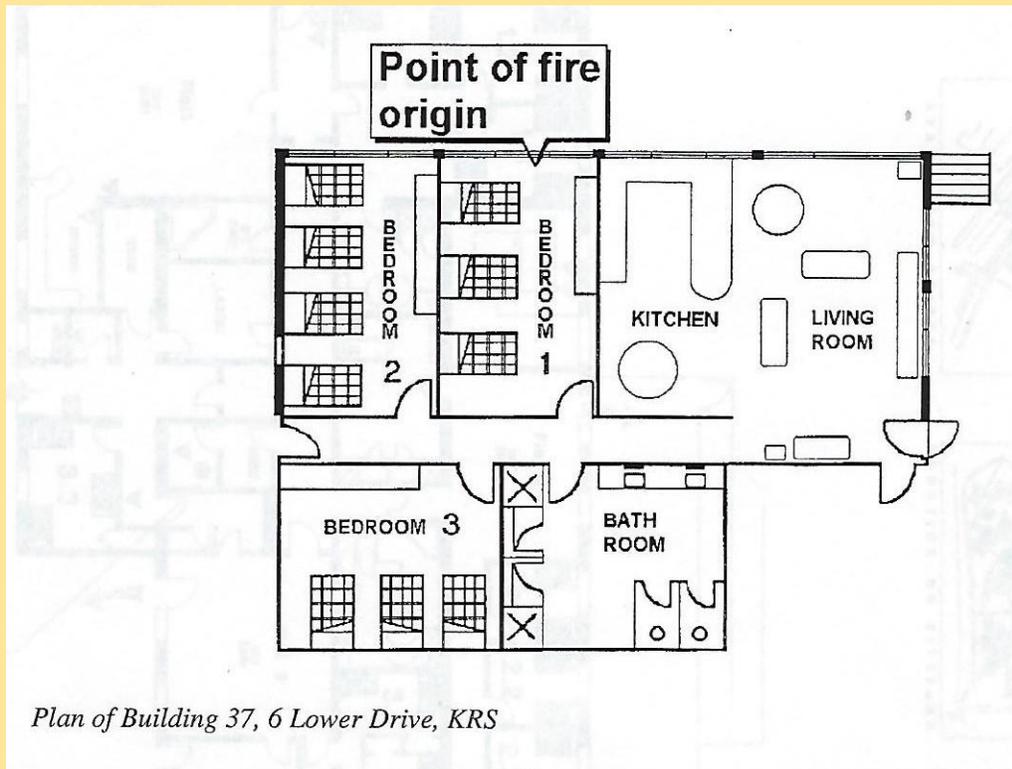


Kew Cottages Fire Context 4: Recession of the 1990s & Neo-liberalism

- 1987 stock market crash 40% ↓
- Recession: 10% jobless
- 1990 Pyramid collapse
- State Bank > CBA
- 1992 Kennett Govt elected
- Small govt, privatisation of utilities, spending cuts, council amalgamations. Pentridge closed!

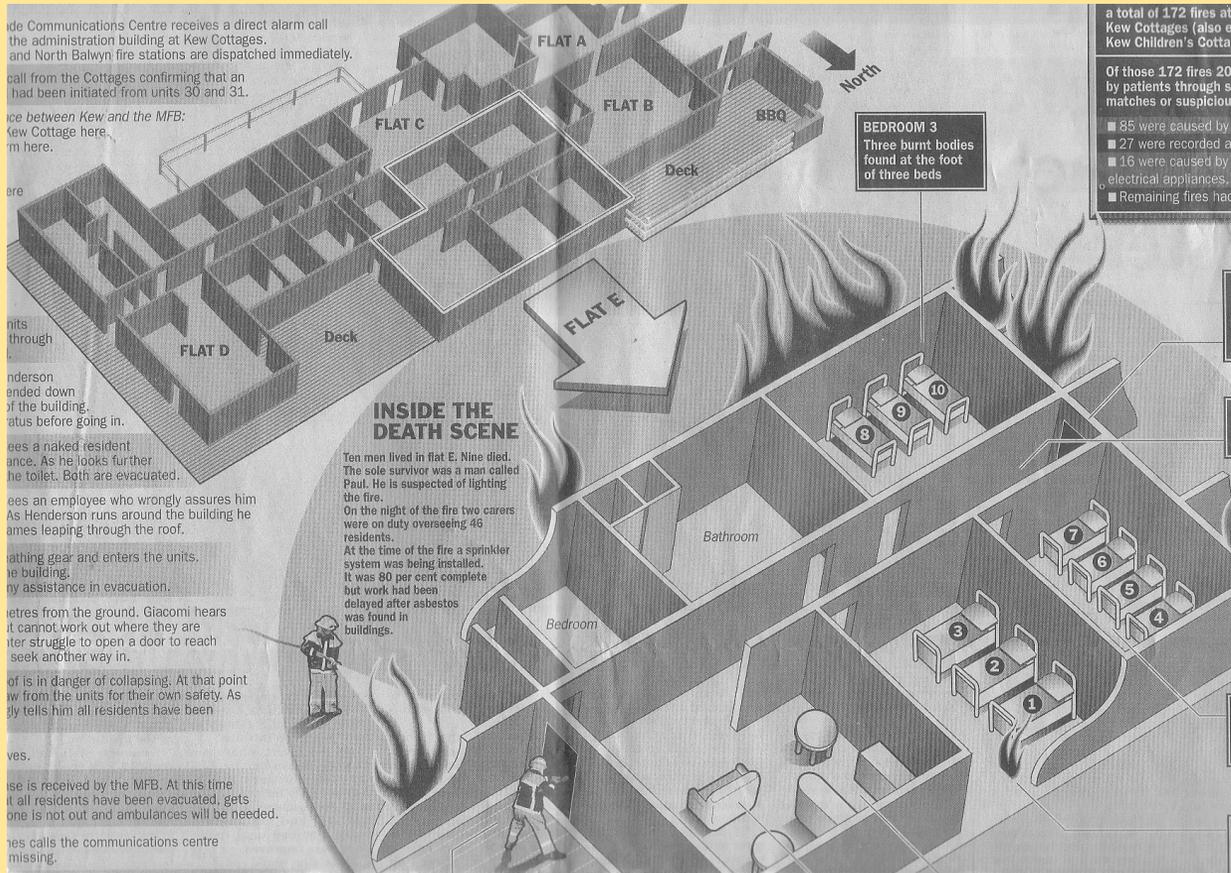


Fire in Building 37: Units 31-32 (similar layout to 28-29)



- 60% more residents 1960-1993
- 1996 normalisation: > 5 flats
- 10.49 pm 8 April 1996 fire begins
- 10.56 MFB rang KRS
- Initial confusion
- Staff on duty alerted
- Bedroom Flat E origin of the fire
- MFB arrived 11.01- 3 appliances

Building 37 Graphic- Reveals Problems



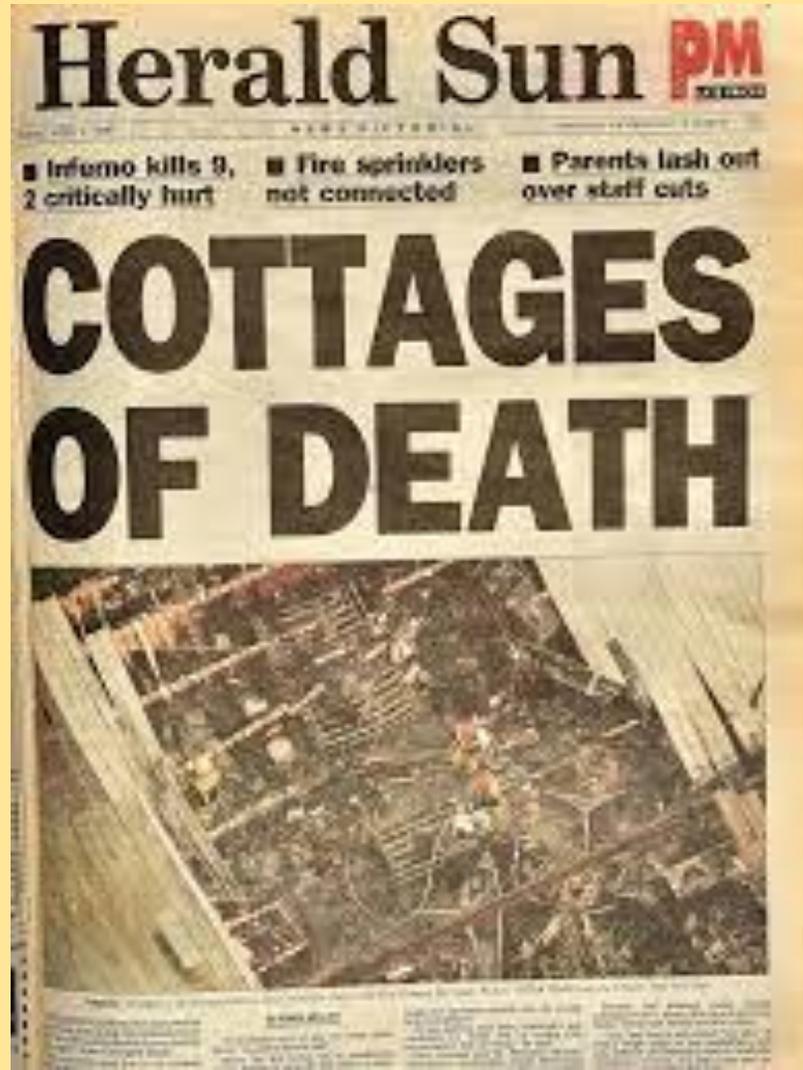
- Two staff for 46
- Residents locked in
- Unfinished building- no sprinkler system due to asbestos
- Cause of: 'Paul'?



Aerial View Day1

- The intensity- 600 degrees
- The chaos inside
- Evident still in 2005
- The difficulties of evacuation
- MFB magnificent
- Staff courageous Peng & Bartful
- Death toll: 9/10
- Mean of 30 years in care

The Initial Reactions



- The Press: immediate & beyond
- The Public: close or reform
- Advocates budgets ie VALID
- The Kew Parents: trauma
- Themes: tragedy of sprinklers, budget cuts, Govt to blame
- Elizab'th Hastings (HREOC) equality

- Services KRS Rose Garden; Sacred Heart Kew; S Paul's Bishop Grant

Investigations Begin



- Underfunding: Riddiford's letter morning after the fire
 - *Age* 4 week investigation – Victoria's Forgotten People'
- 1 System: in crisis
 - 2 IDPS Act (1986): breached
 - 3 drugs/chemical restraints: excess
- Kennett plays hard ball

The Inquiry

- Calls for RC – rejected: why?
- G. Johnstone's Coronial Inquiry
- 81 sitting days - meticulous
- Geoff Welchman attends
- 496 page Report findings – failure of duty of care
 - Warnings 10 years
 - Commended staff, MFB consultants



Conclusions

- New ideas of N & D create more costs and temporary state
- 1990s economic context + neo-liberal philosophy > spending cuts
- In 1996 those at Kew lowest priority + duty of care breached
- Liminal moment of change leaves Kew vulnerable
- Outcomes:
- Short: DHS spends \$75m across institutions
- Longer: Norm & Deinstitut. Revitalised
- New traumas but over to David

For More Detail see:

- Richard Broome, ‘They Had Little Chance’. The Kew Cottages Fire of 1996’, *Victorian Historical Journal*, vol 91, no. 2, December 2020, pp. 245-266.