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Newsletter

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COTAC's suite of learning materials explained. Plus, the reissue of COST Action C17: Fire Loss to Historic Buildings



WW2 bunker at Horsey

© Barry J Bridgwood



Norwich Britons Arms Rethatched July 2026: © Barry J Bridgwood

COTAC's Digital Learning Approach

New digital approaches to understanding and managing information present challenges to the built heritage sector. COTAC is helping to address these challenges through accessible, structured self-learning resources freely available on the COTAC website [here](#).

To help explain the structure and approach of these resources, Barry Bridgwood MCIAT has authored an article originally published by CIAT titled *Connecting knowledge, technology and conservation: Building competence for the future of built heritage* which can be found in the Resource library section

The article describes how the programme is based on the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) 14-point Education and Training Guidelines, and allows learners to begin with an understanding of why heritage matters, develop awareness of conservation challenges and progress toward more informed professional engagement.



Lathallan House Fire August 2006. Image: © Mike Coull

Fire Loss to Historic Buildings COST Action C17: Reissue of Action Documentation

Between 2002 and 2006, COST Action C17, Built Heritage: Fire Loss to Historic Buildings, established the first and, to date, only European-level COST network dedicated specifically to the problem of fire in historic buildings. At a time when heritage was generally treated as a sub-topic within wider fire-safety research, C17 recognised that Europe's built heritage constitutes a distinctive risk class requiring tailored data, analytical methods, technologies and management strategies. Its starting point was stark: accidental fires were estimated to destroy "one important historic building per day" across Europe, yet few countries possessed systematic mechanisms for recording or comparing such losses.

C17 was therefore conceived not simply as a research programme, but as an infrastructure-building exercise, bringing together fire engineers, conservation professionals, fire services, insurers, owners and public administrators. Its particular significance lies in the breadth of its approach. Rather than concentrating on a single technology or regulatory solution, the Action addressed the complete chain of heritage fire risk: from incident data and risk evaluation through detection and suppression, cultural and financial valuation, insurance, property management and post-fire recovery.

WG1 – Data, Loss Statistics and Risk Evaluation addressed the fundamental lack of reliable information on fires affecting historic buildings. It collected and collated incident case studies and partial national statistics for 2000–2006, identifying recurrent scenarios including roof and tower fires, churches and large assembly spaces, museums and archives, and complex historic urban sites. These buildings frequently present difficult access, limited compartmentation and rapid fire spread. C17 highlighted that national fire databases rarely identified whether a building was historic or listed, making meaningful European comparison impossible. It consequently proposed the introduction of mandatory heritage-status fields and key building characteristics within national incident databases.

WG2 – Available and Developing Technology examined fire-detection, alarm, suppression and passive-protection technologies in relation to the particular constraints of historic fabric and contents. Automatic detection in complex spaces such as naves, domes and attics was considered alongside issues of detector positioning, cabling and environmental resilience. Suppression technologies, including conventional sprinklers, early-suppression fast-response systems and water mist, were assessed in terms of water damage, hydraulic requirements, installation constraints and conservation acceptance. The Group also explored hypoxic-air and inerting systems for archives and storage areas, while considering operational costs, occupancy and long-term material effects. Passive measures, including fire-resistant doors, limited compartmentation and discreet structural protection, were considered where they could improve fire resistance without unacceptable intervention in significant fabric.

WG3 – Cultural and Financial Value broadened the discussion beyond technical protection. It examined the relationship between cultural significance, financial valuation, insurance and decisions concerning risk reduction. C17 identified widespread under-insurance and the difficulty of assigning monetary values to irreplaceable historic fabric, particularly where specialist materials, techniques and craftsmanship are required. It stressed that financial compensation cannot restore authenticity once it has been lost, reinforcing prevention as the primary strategy. The Group also addressed the ethical questions surrounding reconstruction and the extent to which destroyed historic fabric can or should be replicated.

WG4 – Property Management Strategies placed organisational and human factors at the centre of fire protection. It advocated individual fire performance

limitation teams, stronger liaison between property managers and fire services, improved guidance for owners, and clearer regulatory responsibilities for listed buildings. These measures demonstrated C17's systems-based understanding that effective heritage fire safety depends as much on planning, training and management as on physical protection.

From today's perspective, C17 retains a distinctive status. It remains, on the available evidence, the only COST Action whose entire mandate concerned fire loss to the built heritage, and the only European initiative to integrate incident data, technology, valuation and property management within a single framework. Subsequent research has advanced individual aspects of the field, including sprinkler and water-mist applications, vulnerability indicators and multi-criteria risk assessment, but such work has generally remained national, fragmented or topic-specific.

Recent reviews continue to identify C17 as a key milestone, drawing on its diagnosis of the data gap, categorisation of vulnerabilities and emphasis on integrated risk management. International guidance, including UNESCO's work on fire-risk management, reflects many of the same principles.

Recognition of C17's continuing relevance has also re-emerged. In January 2026, Fire Risk Heritage published the influential online article "Why COST Action C17 Still Defines the Agenda for Fire Safety in Historic Buildings," observing that nearly two decades later, C17's frameworks continue to shape professional approaches to heritage fire risk.

Originally released online by COTAC in 2008, this renewed recognition provides a timely opportunity to relaunch the COST Action C17 Research Reports, Conference Proceedings and related Studies, making this important body of European research accessible once again to today's heritage, fire-safety and conservation communities. Alongside these volumes, Action members also contributed a significant number of publications to the wider European debate. Four of these studies from Riksantikvaren, the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage, are reissued on the cotac.global website along with the C17 material at <https://cotac.global/links/>

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The Final Report Parts 1 - 2 + Conference Proceedings Parts 1 - 4 can all be found freely available on the COTAC website under the [International Conservation Links](#) page.



Appreciating Conservation of the Built Heritage - Online Course Update

The online course *Appreciating Conservation of the Built Heritage* has completed development and is now undergoing a pilot phase before its formal release, expected early in 2027. Stay tuned for a related launch event.



St Pancras Chambers from Euston Road

Blast from the Past!

From the COTAC Archives - [Issue 9](#), June 1996

The COTAC International Conference was advertised to take place 15-16 July 1996 at St Pancras Chambers, the former Midland Grand Hotel. The agenda was to focus on opportunities for conservation training through urban regeneration and with particular reference to the King's Cross Single Regeneration Budget projects.



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