

The Telegraph Magazine

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FEELING RUFFLED

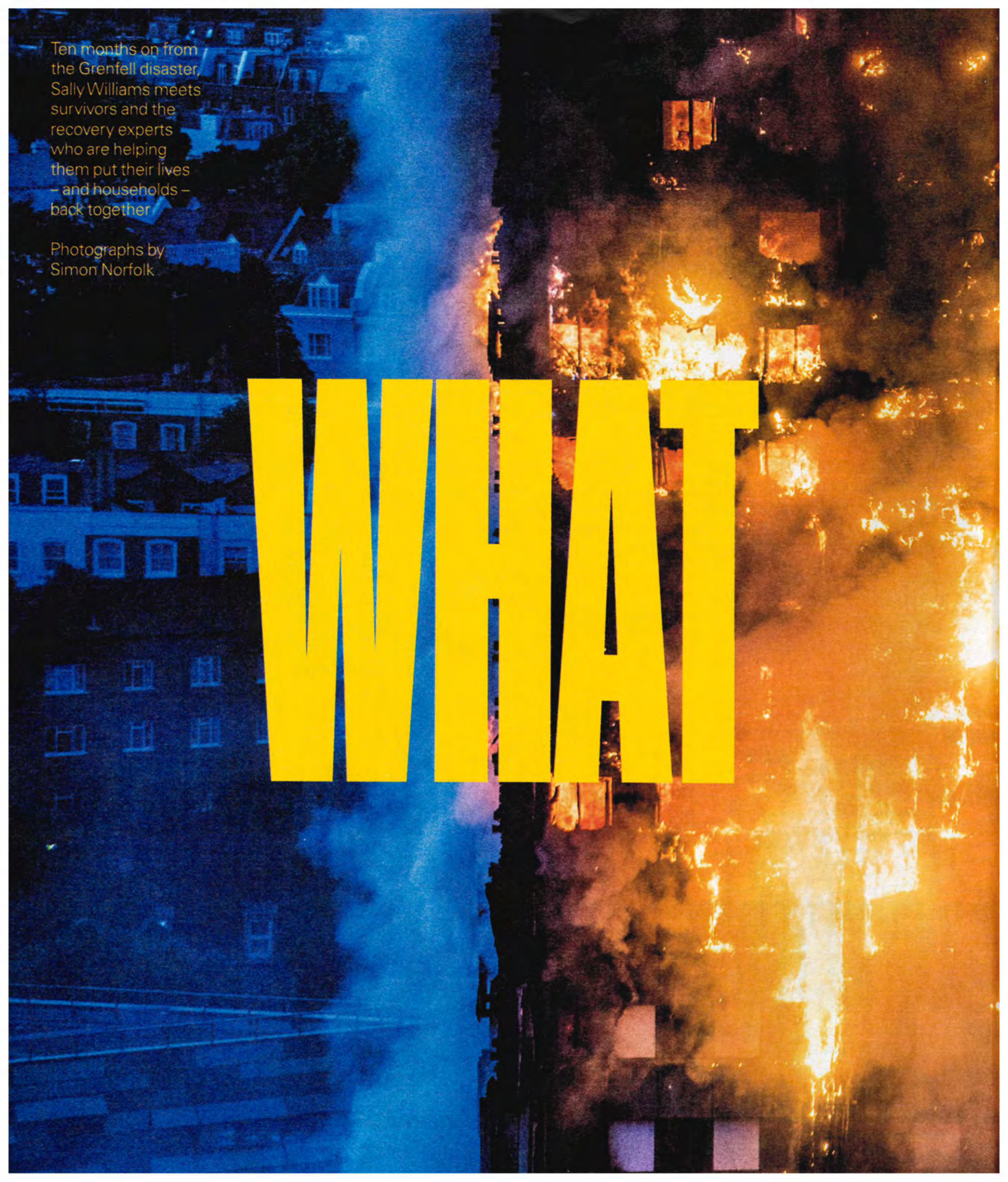
Spring fashion makes waves

AFTER THE FIRE
Grenfell: 10 months on

Plus
ARE YOU A
GROWN-UP YET?
19 infallible signs

OH, THE GAUL OF IT
Meet the Americans
teaching the French
to cook





Ten months on from
the Grenfell disaster,
Sally Williams meets
survivors and the
recovery experts
who are helping
them put their lives
– and households –
back together

Photographs by
Simon Norfolk

WHAT

A dramatic night scene of a city fire. On the left, a tall building is engulfed in bright orange and yellow flames, with thick black smoke billowing upwards. The fire is intense, with visible sparks and a large plume of smoke. To the right, the dark silhouettes of other city buildings are visible against the night sky. A large, bold, yellow text "NEXT?" is superimposed over the center of the image, partially obscuring the smoke and the building on the left. The text is in a sans-serif font, with the question mark being particularly large and prominent. The overall mood is one of urgency and crisis.

NEXT?

November 10, 2017: a nondescript building on an industrial estate in Bracknell, Berkshire, a dozen or so people dressed in white zip-up protective suits and whose mouths and noses are covered with masks, are busy washing, brushing and sorting in a brightly lit warehouse. The room normally feels cavernous, but today is filled with towering metal shelves stacked with large brown cardboard boxes. Each box holds the contents of a home in Grenfell Tower, in west London, which was gutted during the fire of 14 June 2017, killing 72 people, including an unborn child, and leaving hundreds of others homeless. Each object can be traced back to the flat in which it once belonged – active, lively households.

There are toy sports cars, balls of wool still in their wrappers, a school certificate – ‘Sam* has received 12 commendations in the summer term. Congratulations!’ (*a pseudonym: a condition of me being here is that I reveal no personal information); as well as more generic items: wet wipes and felt-tip pens. Larger possessions – ladders, carpets, crutches, car seats, nesting tables, bicycles, paintings, bouquets of plas-

tic flowers – are organised in clusters. One wall consists almost entirely of flat-screen TVs, all carefully stored in bubble wrap. There is the smell of smoke in the air.

In the centre of the warehouse is a table with a handful of items, each carefully displayed on a piece of kitchen towel: an Oyster card; a gold bangle; the remains of a belt. These belonged to someone who died and have recently been returned from the coroner’s office. It is shocking and deeply unsettling as they only tell one story: the final one.

Kenyon International Emergency Service is a company that specialises in the grim aftermath of a mass fatality: recovering and identifying human remains; returning bodies to families; retrieving personal belongings gathered from the debris. Founded more than a century ago by Harold and Herbert Kenyon, the company has a long record of clearing up after worldwide horrors. The Munich air disaster in 1958; Zeebrugge in 1987; and Germanwings flight 9525, when 150 were killed after a suicidal pilot crashed into the French Alps in 2015, to name just three.

Robert Jensen, the 52-year-old American-born CEO who bought the company in 2007, is tall and solidly built. He dresses like a businessman but uses the language of therapy. ‘I don’t know how they feel,’ he says of the Grenfell families, ‘but I think I understand how they feel.’

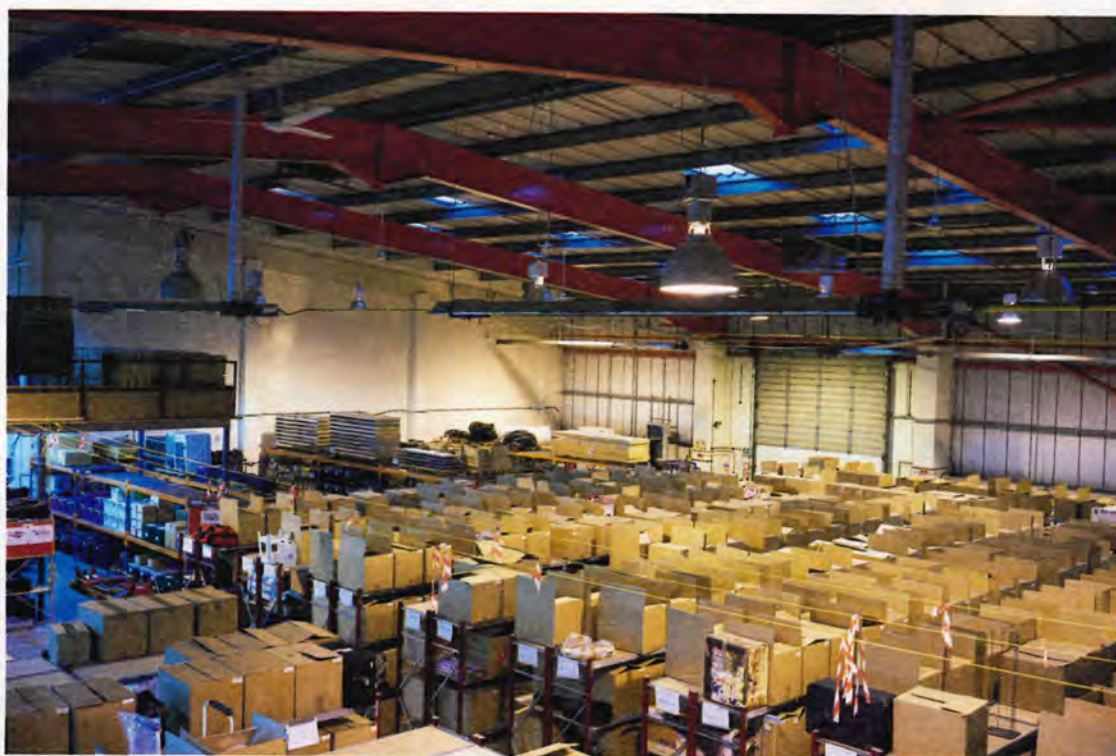
At Kenyon, managing a disaster is a clear, unsentimental process. The discussion is technical, close to a military operation. Jensen’s ability to lead was honed in the US army, where he was a captain who went on to command the mortuary affairs unit. Ultimately unsuited to the military – ‘I am not a “yes” man’ – he joined Kenyon in 1999 (and now owns 75 per cent with Brandon Jones, Kenyon COO and Jensen’s husband). They have houses in London, Florida Keys and Houston, all situated strategically near airports with good international links – and a bag packed in each home.

Over 600 companies, from airlines to travel and oil companies, and about 80 per cent of UK local councils have Kenyon on a retainer – at a cost of anything from \$2,000 to \$100,000 a year. ‘If you don’t have a contract with us and something happens, we won’t respond,’ says

Jensen, although he adds that Kenyon will provide governments with basic services ‘at need’. The cost of managing a disaster can reach millions and is recouped by insurance. Whenever a new client signs up, Jensen shakes the hand of the senior executive and says he hopes he’ll never see them again.

At 12.50am on 14 June, soon after a faulty fridge caught fire on the fourth floor of Grenfell Tower, resulting in the biggest loss of life in a residential fire in Britain since the Second World War, Munira Murad, 33, was at her front door on the floor above after sending her father-in-law back to bed. He has dementia and had been trying to get out of the flat. The rattling of the door had woken her up.

‘Baba, go back to bed,’ she said. As he walked back to his bedroom she heard footsteps outside. She thought it might be her husband returning from the mosque, where special prayers were being held during Ramadan. But she found him asleep on the sofa. Then she heard a tremendous commotion outside. ‘People were screaming, shouting, “Get out! Get out!”’ she recalls. ‘And



Emergency-response firm Kenyon’s Bracknell warehouse, where domestic items recovered from the Grenfell fire are stored

that's when the flames came into our bedroom window.'

At around the same time, Antonio Roncolato, a hotel restaurant manager, was fast asleep in his flat on the 10th floor. He had flown back from seeing his mother in Padova, Italy, that afternoon and had gone to bed at 10pm and fallen asleep at once.

The sound of his mobile phone jarred him awake at around 1.40am. It was his son Christopher, 27, who lived in the flat but was outside. He worked in the same hotel as his father and had just finished his night shift. 'He said, "Pappy, get out of there, the tower, it's burning heavily."' Disorientated, Roncolato got up, drew the curtains and saw people outside screaming, 'Get out! Get out!' He went to the living room and switched on the light. Black, silent smoke circled around him.

At around 1am, Murad woke her husband, who said they should stay put and wait to be rescued, as the evacuation plan had told them. A security guard with a large collection of books, including antiquarian Islamic texts, her husband had lived in the tower all his life. His father, who emigrated from Egypt over four decades before, moved into Grenfell soon after it was built in 1974. Murad, Ugandan-born and brought up in Birmingham, moved in with her in-laws after she got married nine years ago. The couple have a son, six, and a daughter, two.

Opening the front door, Murad was startled by the sight of two firefighters standing in the doorway. They told her she and her family had to leave. The reflex of a mother set her in motion to fetch the buggy for her daughter. 'He said, "Madam, you have no time for the buggy. You must leave now."'

Ten minutes later Murad was standing outside the tower with her children, who were dressed only in their underwear. Her husband appeared about half an hour later after coaxing his father down the stairwell. She saw her home burning in front of her: not just a section of Grenfell, as she'd expected, but as much of the tower as she could see through the thick, clouded night. She was dressed in pyjamas and sandals and carried a nappy-changing bag. She left everything else behind.

At around 1.45am Christopher passed his phone to a firefighter. 'He said, "Mate, stay put. We're coming to get you,"' Roncolato recalls. Two

firefighters reached him over four hours later.

Roncolato had lived in Grenfell since 1990. He'd met his Colombian wife soon after he moved to London in 1984. When she became pregnant with Christopher they applied and were approved for a council flat. 'It was about 70 square metres, maybe a bit more, with a very nice kitchen, very big living room and two bedrooms,' he says. 'We had a lovely flat and a beautiful, amazing view.' From the kitchen he could pick out the Gherkin and the Shard, around seven miles away.

The marriage ended after 12 years, but the couple remained on good terms. At 57, Roncolato was healthy and convivial, happy to spend evenings cooking and drinking with friends. Waiting for the firefighters, he had time to turn off the fridge and cooker at the mains, charge his phone and, because he had a long

habit of doing the right thing, call his boss to say he wouldn't be in for the morning shift at 6am.

He had time to see smoke seeping through the newly refurbished windows of his flat and wonder how that was possible when the double glazing was supposed to be airtight. 'I thought, "Somebody is trying to kill me here!"' He jammed wet towels around the edges of the windows and doors, packed a rucksack, ate some porridge to sustain him and put on Christopher's swimming goggles to protect his eyes. At around 5am he leaned his head out the window, looked up and saw the flames getting closer – the fire was ripping down through the building.

Finally, at 6.30am, Roncolato was standing outside the building after being led down the stairwell by two firefighters, with Grenfell falling around him in a dreadful assault of heat, screams, choking smoke and rubble. He was given a blanket and a bottle of water. In his rucksack were his insurance documents, Christopher's savings book, their passports, his laptop, his collection of 10 Swatch watches and a large ceramic money box in the shape of a red pillar box, which he'd bought soon

after moving to London over three decades earlier.

Murad and Roncolato are among the 223 survivors of the Grenfell fire.

Both feel grateful for being spared but they know that despite surviving they left behind an inferno that took over their entire lives and then reordered everything else that followed.

In July 2017 Jensen got a call from Kensington and Chelsea council. They were hoping he could help deal with the personal effects still in the tower. (At the time Kenyon was still working on returning the belongings of those killed and injured in the Manchester Arena bombing in May.)

The funding for hiring Kenyon came from Kensington and Chelsea but as the council is currently under investigation by the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, the contract was managed by Michael Lockwood, the chief executive of Harrow Council, who was drafted in as site manager (and since the end of December by Doug Patterson, chief executive of Bromley Council).

Jensen met with Lockwood on 31 July. The plan was that Kenyon



Above, from left Kenyon CEO Robert Jensen; Grenfell survivor Antonio Roncolato

'We look out for anything that could be of value, not saleable value, but sentimental value'



The devastation inside Grenfell flats after the fire

would start the next day. The job of packing couldn't be done by the families as they were not allowed back into the tower after the fire. Other residents – 123 of 364 households in the 'Walkway' blocks next to Grenfell Tower – were also forced to vacate their homes.

'It was an active crime scene and also at that point the stability of the building was compromised because of the fire,' Jensen explains. Teams were brought in to stabilise the inside of the building with a network of steel poles, which ran through the flats from floor to ceiling, as well as to rig up lights and build an external lift to transport heavy equipment, police and sub-

contractors. In the meantime, the residents' belongings were being subjected to what Jensen describes as 'post-incident damage'.

'Something like 600,000 litres of water were used to extinguish the fire and it goes down elevator shafts, ventilation shafts and mixes with the ash and the soot and makes a kind of paste that becomes quite hard as it cools and dries. Heat of course cracks windows, falling debris breaks windows, and then it rains and more water gets in. You have no heating, or ventilation so the mould grows.'

The fact that it took six weeks before the council started clearing the building was also, says Jensen,

down to the system. 'I do find that here in the UK there tends to be more committee work in how decisions are made – we like to have our tea and discuss things.'

Kenyon has offices around the world – in Bracknell, Houston, and Beirut – plus a call centre in the Dominican Republic and a warehouse in Sydney. The company employs 25 full-time staff, six part-timers, 40 associates, and has around 1,700 freelance 'team members' on standby, from forensic pathologists and archeologists to civil engineers and mental-health experts, who are paid a daily rate and agree, at short notice, to put their lives on hold.

On 1 August, three six-member teams, many of whom were policemen and firemen (both serving and retired) wearing disposable protective suits and respirators, went into the tower and the Walkways to pack things up. The initial focus was the flats on the first 12 floors as they were the least damaged; police and DNA experts were still working on the upper floors, finding fragments, human remains, sieving smoky ashes and deciphering a family's final moments. Kenyon would then collect any remaining possessions. 'They might find what amounted to a box of personal belongings,' says John*, an archeologist on Kenyon's team. 'It was a cross between a disaster scene and a construction site. There was heavy machinery, scaffolding, investigative teams as well as us. So quite complex.'

'Some flats had so much soot on the walls, you didn't realise there were photographs on them'

He explains the logistics. Items were logged and then photographed in situ – an 'after' record of every flat – before being stored in boxes. These were then transported back to the warehouse in Bracknell.

Unlike people who plan to move, Grenfell residents left in a great hurry. John went into one flat and found plates of food still on the table. 'People just got up and ran.' He makes a whooshing noise. 'We didn't move the food. Things that were mouldy, food or liquids were sealed in bags and left in the flat. Probably still there.'

The team carried all the portable things down the stairwell, but left bulky furniture. 'We tell people to look out for anything that could be of value, not saleable value, but sentimental value. You don't judge what that is. You just bring it all out,' says Jensen.

The state of the 'undamaged' flats startled John. 'Some of the flats had so much soot on the walls, you didn't realise there were photographs on them,' he says. The fire also seemed to him to be capricious. 'It was odd because some of the flats were completely burned, but one room would be intact.'

'Hot gasses move around a building in quite a complicated way,'

explains Dave Sibert, national safety adviser to the Fire Brigades Union, and an adviser on the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety ordered by the Government after the Grenfell fire. He says that the temperature of the flames would have been 1,200C – enough to burn most things in your home. Enough too to liquefy jewellery. And plastic. ‘One type melts and turns into liquid-running plastic, which catches fire and burns like petrol; the other kind doesn’t melt, it just catches fire and burns like wood. Both those effects happened with the cladding on the tower,’ he adds. It both melted and caught fire.

The devastation in some of the flats was also likely down to a phenomenon known as a ‘flashover’. ‘If you have a fire in the corner of your room, hot smoke builds at ceiling level and that smoke gets hotter and hotter as the fire puts more energy into it and that hot smoke radiates back down on to everything else in the room and when it reaches a certain temperature, suddenly everything in the room bursts into flames,’ says Sibert.

‘What survived in most flats were teacups,’ says John.

It is five months since the fire when I first visit the warehouse in Bracknell, and lorries are still reversing into the warehouse, unloading boxes from the tower. So far some 200,000 items have been processed; the final figure will be over 750,000. The last items were brought out of Grenfell on 4 January. Between 1 August and 30 March, administrators at Kenyon ordered 5,277 cardboard boxes, 652 rolls of brown packing tape, 14,700 metres of bubble wrap and 1,300 sheets of tissue paper for the ‘search and recovery’ and ‘PE operations’ – retrieving and packing personal effects – combined.

The process involves detective work – finding the items that families would especially want to keep, such as cuddly toys, jewellery, cacti, even cash nest eggs – as well as archiving and cleaning. Objects are photographed, logged and then sent to families on a CD or USB stick. Families may also visit the warehouse. They then tell Kenyon what they want to keep.

I find a forensic archeologist examining a blackened lump of metal, which turns out to be a wash-

bag fused to the bottom of a wheelie case. He points to a bottle of nail polish, a burnt pearl and, like a fossil in a lump of petrified rock, the ghostly impression of a necklace chain.

‘Look! Can you imagine the strength of the smoke, of the poison that was in the air?’ says Roncolato, showing me a euro coin that was on his kitchen table in Grenfell. It is black with caked-on soot that is impossible to remove despite intensive scrubbing. ‘So powerful!’

It is early March and in the nine or so months since the fire, Roncolato has had ups and downs. He has spent a total of eight months in hotel rooms and, as of last month, has his own flat, but it is still temporary. It is spacious and clean but ‘it is not my taste’, he says. His belongings are still in 60 or so boxes in the warehouse in Bracknell. Even his spare car keys (returned by Kenyon) smell of smoke. He is more alert to danger and the whereabouts of fire exits. He’s lost the home where he lived for 27 years, and there is no sign of a new one any time soon. According to council figures from 1 March, of the 209 households that needed rehousing, 60 have moved into permanent homes; a further 68 have accepted permanent housing offers but have not moved in yet and are currently still in emergency housing. He has been offered three flats by the council but rejected them all. ‘I am not going to let my standard go down and be depressed and unhappy,’ he says. Life will never be the same.

Even so, Roncolato is proud of taking only two days off work since the disaster. Clothes and other essentials came in a flood of charity. Though the new flat is on the ground floor, with only one bedroom, it is at least in Kensington, near his family and work. As soon as he moved in, he asked Kenyon to deliver a few things invested with special meaning: an antique vase given to him by a friend over 30 years ago and a framed Totti Roma football strip and scarf. ‘They [Kenyon] washed the shirt and fixed the glass. My God! The work that goes on after a disaster. Unbelievable!’ And, there is a pride in the way he and his fellow survivors have stood up to a dreadful ordeal.

Meanwhile, Munira Murad and her family are still in a hotel – their third since the fire. ‘We refuse to go into temporary accommodation because every time we make a

change it’s confusing for my father-in-law. It’s not fair on him.’ For the first three months, Murad had to drag a suitcase of laundry two miles from where she lived because the hotel didn’t have a washing machine and the nearest laundrette was too expensive. Before the fire she cooked every meal at home; now she goes to the local mosque where she cooks in bulk twice a week for the Grenfell community of survivors and takes the rest back to the hotel. ‘The children can’t handle take-aways any more. It’s expensive too – £60 to £70 for one meal!’

What most upsets her is the loss of her phone. She left it behind when she ran out with the children. ‘I told my husband to bring it out but he didn’t hear me.’ She took heart when the police showed her drone footage of her flat after the fire, and saw her phone in the living room.

In October more than 50 survivors from the lower floors were allowed to return to retrieve precious things, including jewellery and photos, accompanied by Kenyon, the police, an ambulance crew and an NHS psychologist. ‘We had masks, overalls and boots,’ says Murad. She looked everywhere for

her phone, but it had gone. ‘Someone must have taken it.’ Police are also investigating claims that cash was taken from flats in the days after the fire was put out.

She feels sick when she thinks of her phone because it had photos of a friend and her two daughters, aged four and three, who lived on the 23rd floor and died in the blaze. ‘We spent day and night together, breakfast, lunch, dinner, birthday parties, walks in the park, cooking – everything was on my phone, pictures, videos, everything.’ She wanted to give the pictures to her friend’s husband who was in Egypt the night of the fire, looking after his sick brother. ‘I have the memories in my head and heart, but I wanted to give him those memories.’

I ask if she misses anything else. ‘My kitchen, my living room, small things,’ she says with a look of infinite weariness. ‘My special kitchen knife that I used to hide in case it got lost.’ She talks of her wedding dress, her son’s scooter and the pregnancy scans of her babies. ‘But you know, possessions are nothing,’ she says. ‘People’s lives are gone. The possessions will come back but the people will never be here any more.’ ♦



Volunteers sort through donations for Grenfell survivors