



Library Safe

Enhancing Curiosity

When we wanted a display stand to advertise new book purchases we also thought of one of our school's values, that of curiosity. Was there a way to display books while also enhancing our students' curiosity?



Carter's Fire and Thief Proof Safe, England, circa 1860.

The Library Safe provides both a place to display new books at the entrance to our library and in an innovative way enhances curiosity. What new treasures does the safe hold this week?



History of the Safe

We purchased the safe from The Depot, an Antique shop in Paeroa, in 2013. The shop owner told us that she had obtained it in Waihi but knew nothing of its past.

Carter Safes were advertised in New Zealand in the Marlborough Express 25 June 1887, 'Carter's Safe Newly arrived' and in England in The Manchester Courier, and Lancaster General Advertiser, on July 10, 1858 where the advertisement says, 'Carter's (late with Milner and Son) fire and thief-proof safes. Depot. 32, lower King-Street.'

We sent a photo of the safe to a safe expert in the United Kingdom and received this reply.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's there was an explosion of safe making in the UK with scores of small manufacturers springing up; mostly in the British Industrial Midlands or 'Black Country'. Although Tann was the earliest and Chubb the most best known name, Milner's were the most prolific so it is understandable that Mr Carter wished this association to be known.

Your Carter's safe is a perfect example of what we refer to as a 'square cornered safe'. It is constructed from mild steel plates riveted to an angle-iron frame. The space between the outer and inner bodies would probably be filled with sand and sawdust and possibly some alum crystals. This acted as primitive fire proofing, but Milner's had begun adding alum which converts much of its bulk to water when heated and this would damp down the sand and sawdust to preserve valuable ledgers from loss by fire. Over the years this loose fill compacts and

leaks so it is probable that most of it is now at the bottom leaving large voids at the top so it no longer protects its contents from fire.

The lock and bolt-work mechanism was assembled in a rectangular box which was then fixed in place by the large screws. This form of door construction is known as 'lock case fixing' and was particularly vulnerable to gunpowder. A relatively small charge would strip the threads from the bolts and the safe would be open.

The principal purpose of these early safes was to protect ledgers, it was only later that they became associated with the protection of cash and valuables.

The back and sides were easily attacked by inserting a chisel and popping the rivets. The sand and sawdust is quickly removed and the thin inner lining breached. By 1890 this type of safe was already considered obsolete and safe makers had taken to wrapping heavy steel bands around the front and rear edges in an attempt to prevent the plates being ripped and alternative methods of door construction were developed.

Your safe seems to be in very good condition. The original paintwork would probably been traced with fancy line-work, possibly in gold. The Royal Coat of Arms is certainly spurious. Chubb was the first holder of a Royal Warrant and therefore entitled to legally display the coat of arms. Other manufacturers thought this was just a smart idea and followed suit.



These Victorian safes really scrub up well and if carefully refurbished, sell at a good price. Yours has the advantage of being made by a little known company and this is likely to attract collectors, particularly in New Zealand where any safe of this period would be uncommon. It would have been shipped out on a sailing ship and delivered by horse and cart as petrol engines were not yet in common use.