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Phoenix firm rises up

By CASEY NEILL

FLOORING company QEP Australia hasn't just survived the 12 months since its Dandenong South factory burnt to the ground - it's thrived.

Managing director Bruce Maclaren was in the Dunlopillo Drive factory's office when the flames took hold in the warehouse about 6pm on 19 September last year.

The "orange wall of fire" could have turned deadly had it happened three hours earlier, before the company's 50 staff clocked off.

"The pace that I saw the fire take hold and literally level the place to the ground, I hate to think about what might have happened," Mr Maclaren said.

But long gone are the charred remains and a state-of-the-art factory has taken its place.

"There's a few things that were done differently but, effectively, it's the same space," Mr Maclaren said.

"It's been built to the latest building standards.

"This building wasn't sprinkled when we had the fire because when it was built it wasn't a requirement.

"We've now got the world's biggest water tank out the front."

Construction started in March and was finished by the end of July and the business has staggered its return from a temporary home in Keysborough over 10 weeks.

All but two pre-fire employees remain on board.

"We've just continued trading in the normal manner and business has actually continued to grow and develop, which is good," Mr Maclaren said.

"A significant chunk of our business is in Bunnings, so we've had a



Bruce Maclaren with the rebuilt factory. 127722

Picture: DONNA OATES

whole number of new initiatives with them - which we were working on anyway - come to fruition since the fire.

"Apart from four or five months' worth of serious disruption post the fire - where all the energy was geared around getting the business back on its feet - we really returned to the normal practice of the business, which is how to we grow, how do we sell more, how do we do more?"

The company held a function last Friday to mark the milestone.

"Really, it's just to say 'it was what

it was, but it's part of the past'," Mr Maclaren said.

Site owner Nick Cojo from Cojo Investments said he was pleased to see the business move back in.

"Having a tenant like QEP makes life a lot easier," he said.

"I do love my properties. I treat my properties like I treat my children - as a part of the family."

National operations manager Sam Laverty was in the boardroom with Mr Maclaren on the night of the fire when a cleaner approached them.



Simon Beaver and Scott Jalfron are happy to be back. 127028



Firefighters battle the blaze.

Picture: KEITH PAKENHAM, CFA

"They only work Thursday nights, and came up and said 'the guys out the back said there's a fire and I've got to leave the building'," he said.

"The way she said it was like it was annoying that she had to leave the building, rather than 'fire fire fire!'."

"We walked out and into the racking to see out the back.

"There was no noise. It was all silent.

"There was black smoke billowing over the racking, into the roof."

They called the fire brigade and evacuated.

"It seems like five years ago now," Mr Laverty said.

QEP president Len Gould visited from the US in November.

Mr Gould's father Lewis started the company in his garage in 1979 and remains the CEO today, overseeing more than 900 staff in 33 locations around the world.

"The phoenix has already risen out of the ashes and I see nothing but a great future ahead," he said.

QEP - FLOORING COMPANY.
BACK IN BUSINESS AFTER 2013 FIRE.
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