



Case Study: Excel Forensic Recovery, Copy-Down Overwrite in a Live SharePoint Workbook

Executive Summary

A live operational workbook stored in SharePoint was accidentally overwritten when a user performed a copy-down action across a populated range. Subsequent edits obscured the point of failure, version history timestamps were misleading due to incorrect locale settings, and the workbook contained hidden sheets and protected content that increased the risk of deeper corruption.

This case study shows how a structured, forensic recovery approach restored the workbook safely, preserved legitimate edits, and revealed important lessons about operational resilience and the risks of using Excel as a quasi-database in modern cloud environments.

Situation

A live operational workbook stored in SharePoint was accidentally overwritten when a user performed a copy-down action across a populated range. The overwrite wasn't immediately noticed, and subsequent edits obscured the point of failure. Version History timestamps were misleading due to incorrect regional settings, complicating identification of the correct recovery window.

Complication

SharePoint's version history interface exposed only View / Restore / Delete, with no safe Download option. This required a controlled extraction of historical versions via Excel Desktop, ensuring no accidental restores or autosave events. The workbook also contained hidden sheets and protected content, raising the risk that the overwrite might have affected more than the visible range.

Diagnostic Approach

- Corrected the SharePoint site's locale and timezone to prevent further timestamp confusion.
- Extracted multiple historical versions safely using Excel Desktop's read-only mode.
- Aligned versions side-by-side in a controlled comparison sheet.
- Applied conditional formatting to inspect cell-level differences across the affected range.
- Verified that row counts and structures matched across versions to rule out deeper corruption.
- Inspected hidden sheets and locked areas to confirm no secondary damage.

Findings

The overwrite was isolated to a 23-row range. No structural changes, hidden-sheet corruption, or locked-content damage were detected. The overwritten values were intact in the version two steps prior to the incident.

Resolution

- Recovered the correct 23-row block from the earlier version.
- Reinserted it into the live workbook without restoring the entire file.
- Preserved all legitimate edits made after the incident.

- Validated formulas, dependencies, and hidden content to ensure full integrity.

Outcome

The workbook was restored with no data loss, no downtime, and no disruption to the user's ongoing work. The user regained confidence in the file, and the incident demonstrated the value of a structured, forensic-grade recovery process.

Service Insight

This case illustrates the broader capability of Excel Forensic Recovery, including:

- Extracting historical versions without restoring
- Reconstructing overwritten ranges
- Recovering hidden or very hidden sheets
- Accessing locked or protected content safely
- Identifying structural corruption
- Rebuilding partial data loss without rolling back the entire file

Wider Meaning

The incident exposed fundamental flaws with the use of Excel as an operational data tool, such critical data should ideally be stored in a resilient database, however, many business still use Excel as a key tool even if they are transitioning to more robust solutions.

As the tool had some structure in its design, it made it easier to recover, and this element which was part of a managed Excel solution made outcome a success.

The transition to SharePoint brings both benefits and drawbacks, understanding how the user engagement changes with a new platform is a key part of change management. In this instance the implications were not apparent to the users until things went wrong.

Why This Case Matters for Datum Clients

This project demonstrates how modern cloud platforms change the failure modes of familiar tools:

Operational Resilience	Recovering overwritten data without rolling back the entire file.
Governance and Data Integrity	Correcting locale settings and validating hidden content to prevent repeat incidents.
Structured Diagnosis	Side-by-side version comparison and controlled extraction replaced guesswork.
Risk Reduction	Preserving legitimate edits avoided downtime and disruption to live operations.
Capability Uplift	Highlighting the limits of Excel as an operational data store and the need for more resilient platforms.

For SMEs, this case shows how a disciplined recovery process can prevent data loss, restore confidence, and expose underlying operating-model risks that need addressing as part of wider transformation.