

THE DAILY HAZARD



Vauban Estate's unsavoury neighbour: sacks of animal debris and asbestos (top) can't convey the smell

Tenants fight for clean-up of rat-infested toxic site

Tenants on the Vauban Estate in Southwark have enlisted the Hazards Centre in their fight to clean up the derelict, heavily polluted site of a former gelatin factory.

For decades, the Croda Gelatin site processed the hooves, bones and hides of animals. The process produced a vile stench and thousands of gallons of hazardous chemicals.

After demolition, the site's suitability for housing development was assessed. The tenants' association was refused access to the analysis, and turned to the London Hazards Centre. We received copies of the technical reports in March, and carried out a site inspection early in April. Results were alarming.

Chemicals Mercury, lead, chromium, zinc, copper and arsenic levels were in excess of GLC guidelines. Decaying chemical drums littered the site.

Animal remains Gaping sacks of beetle-infested animal debris were exposed about the site, although Southwark's En-

vironmental Health Department had served an abatement notice on Croda demanding that the offending material be removed.

Pesticides Hide beetles in the animal debris had been treated with methyl bromide. Children who had contact with the material complained of skin irritation – typical of exposure to this chemical. More disturbing, recent work suggests methyl bromide may cause cancer.

Vermin and disease Residents had long complained of rats coming off the site onto the estate. Weil's disease, anthrax and tetanus are obvious risks.

Asbestos Broken asbestos cement was scattered about.

A representative of Southwark's Pollution Protection Department said: "I'm disgusted that materials that would be described as 'special wastes' had been left on site."

Southwark's Environmental Health Department estimates that up to a metre of soil will

have to be stripped from the site to make it safe for housing development – and presumably for children to play on. However, the Department cannot authorise the site improvement unless the area is to be developed.

The Health and Safety Executive has no power to act, even though Croda International owns the site and is responsible for the contamination. The authorities can only demand adequate fencing. "Adequate fencing" was provided, but promptly demolished by fly-tippers and carted off by scrap merchants.

Nigel Lough, secretary of the Vauban Estate TA, summed up the tenants' feelings: 'Rats come onto our estate . . . our children suffer skin irritation. It's not right that a firm can up and go like that, leaving our kids at risk. We will not stand by and allow this to happen.'

Earlier this year Croda announced profits of £20 million.

Bad asbestos strip endangers children

The penalties of not having a properly worked-out council policy on asbestos have been well illustrated by the London Borough of Islington.

The council allowed the Building Works Department to let a contract for removing asbestos from Barnard Park Nursery without involving the Environmental Health Department.

The result was gross contamination of the building when ceiling tiles were stripped out. The tenting erected by Passey Ltd did not seal the whole area. Dust and debris settled in the cupboard

where all the toys were stored.

After the contamination was discovered by the nursery worker, notices were put on the doors by the nearby Thornhill Neighbourhood Project until the council had agreed to get the contractor to clean the building for a second time.

But when the nursery worker returned, she found asbestos still lying on shelves and on the floor. She and her child and others who entered the nursery before it was finally decontaminated suffered two needless exposures to asbestos dust.

Local people, including the Bemerton Tenants' Association and the Thornhill Neighbourhood Project, have sent a report to the Health and Safety Executive and to Islington's environmental health department. It is unlikely that Passey will lose its asbestos removal licence.

Not all bad

Islington's performance on the Bemerton Estate itself has been quite different. Under pressure from the very active Bemerton TA, the council set up a joint tenant/officer committee to deal with the asbestos problem.

Tenants and officers have met regularly to decide what asbestos should be removed, how the work should be done, and what

contractors should be used. As technical adviser to the TA, the Hazards Centre has attended several meetings, including one at which tenants vetted the contractors as they presented their specifications and work methods.

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SPOT NEWS

New GLC service

● The GLC has set up a free service to collect small quantities of asbestos and other hazardous substances from people's homes and from the premises of registered charities.

The idea is to try to stop people throwing dangerous substances into their rubbish. The service can be contacted on 01-633 4398 or 633 4066.

Acceptable risk?

● Every year, people who have never worked with asbestos die because of environmental exposure to asbestos fibres. Yet the Health and Safety Commission published a report in April which aimed to convince people that they shouldn't be concerned about the risk of cancer from asbestos in schools, homes, estates and other public places.

While the HSE considers the risk acceptable for the majority of the population, the same does not apparently apply to the royal family. In March, it was reported that the Department of Transport was to spend £7.5 million on a new royal train – because the existing one was “out of date” and insulated with asbestos.

Safe stripping

● A useful leaflet for anyone faced with asbestos in their workplace or home is now available from the People's Asbestos Action Campaign (PAAC). The leaflet outlines steps you can take to control what goes on in the asbestos removal or sealing job that you're concerned with. For copies contact PAAC, c/o SCAT, 31 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1 or the London Hazards Centre. Enclose s.a.e.

STOP PRESS

Conference

29 June 1985

Londoners Against Asbestos

- trade unionists
- tenants
- community groups

Call: 01-761 7536

Unions signal end of road for asbestos in brakes

One of the last strongholds of the asbestos industry is under attack from the London Fire Brigade. Long after getting rid of suits, gloves, hoods and blankets made of the “miracle fibre” it has turned its attention to the brake-pads and shoes on the vehicle fleet.

Acting on proposals from the London Region of the Fire Brigades Union, it fitted non-asbestos brake-pads to its 20 Ford Cortinas. After a year on trial, the substitute materials have consistently doubled the mileage from a set of brake-pads. Longer life and reduced servicing more than pays for the extra cost of the safer materials.

Ken Hunt, the assistant brigade engineer, told the *Daily Hazard* that the Cortina fleet would now be routinely fitted with non-asbestos pads and shoes. The Maestros which will soon join the fleet are factory-fitted with non-asbestos brakes. The union is determined that all the vehicles will have asbestos-free brake-pads and shoes. The Brigade is now actively seeking a satisfactory replacement for asbestos products in its heavy vehicles.

“We instigated this as part of our asbestos campaign,” said Mick Gilbey, the union's London Region health and safety adviser. “If it can be shown to pay off economically as well as on health grounds, the whole of the GLC and then every other



Blowing out brakes produces a cloud of dangerous asbestos dust

council will be obliged to follow.”

Other unions might take up the FBU's lead and so counter the industry's twin myths that we still need asbestos in brakes and that there is no demand for substitutes. Big fleet users such as the bus operators and public utilities would be obvious targets for a campaign.

Already South Yorkshire Public Works Department has gone over from asbestos-based friction materials to a ceramic alternative. Shop stewards in the county's Passenger Transport Executive are also inquir-

ing into suitable replacement materials

Making and servicing asbestos brake linings has claimed many lives, including that of a 12-year-old boy who watched his father at work and a man whose only exposure to asbestos was re-lining brakes and clutches for a hobby.

The problem spreads beyond the workplace. Every street in London is polluted with asbestos fibres from vehicle brakes and clutches. Stopping asbestos friction materials at source will protect everyone, in the workplace and the community.

Hard to get there . . . tricky getting back

Two workers from the Hazards Centre were among nearly 200 people exchanging information on asbestos at the second national conference of the People's Asbestos Action Campaign (PAAC) in Glasgow last month.

Among them was Mbulelo Rakwena, deputy president of the Black African Mining and Construction Workers Union, who asked the delegates to back his union's call for a total ban on asbestos. He said the 45,000 members represented by the union would rather starve than trade their lives for a pittance.

Among those who couldn't

get to the PAAC conference was the President of the union. Both men applied for travel documents from South Africa in October. Only Rakwena's came through, after months of uncertainty, at the last minute.

No reasons were given.

Among those returning from the conference, only four had any difficulty getting home. Frank Gillan, Francis McCann, Terry Harkin and Paul Little were delayed for 48 hours when they tried to get on a ferry at Cairnryan in Scotland.

Six other members of the tenants' association from the Divis Flats in Belfast returned safely to



Mbulelo Rakwena: allowed out asbestos-riddled homes.

The four were detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. They were not charged with any crime.

No reasons were given.

Gamma zapping of food

"Coming soon . . . atom rays that keep food fresh." That was how one of the popular tabloids recently headlined an article on the wonders of food irradiation.

Food irradiation involves bombarding packaged or fresh food with gamma-rays – to kill germs and slow the natural deterioration of foods. Irradiation extends the shelf-life of fresh fruit, vegetables and refriger-

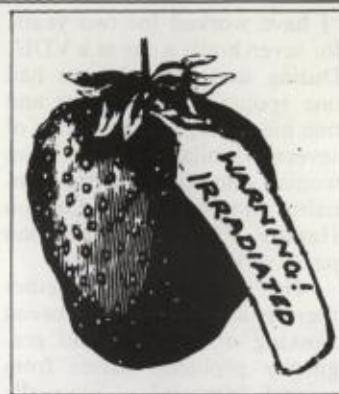
ated food, and prevents stored grain from sprouting – an advantage to wholesalers, retailers and the food-processing industry. To consumers, irradiation of food is being presented as a safe alternative to some harmful chemical preservatives.

But is the process of food irradiation clean and safe? The type of radiation used means that the food itself will not be radioactive, so we won't find radioactive goods in the supermarket. But people working in new food irradiation plants will be exposed to unnecessary doses of radiation: there is no safe level of exposure to radiation.

There are also problems for people eating irradiated food. Bombarding food with radiation creates some unique chemical substances, called radiolytic products. While some of these chemicals have been tested for safety, many have not.

Also, radiation greatly increases the loss of vitamins in fresh food such as apples or potatoes. This vitamin loss has clear health implications for people living on low incomes.

At present, irradiation of food in Britain is banned. But some industrialists have been pressing for a removal of the ban, and a government advisory committee that has been look-



ing into the issue is likely to recommend removal. However, the committee's report has been considerably delayed by pressure from various trade union, consumer and environmental groups.

The London Hazards Centre has helped set up a working group involving trade unions, MPs, MEPs, environmental and consumer groups concerned about food irradiation. This group has produced a ten-point briefing document outlining the problems and calling for:

- a full and open public debate about the risks and benefits
- public inquiries on the siting of irradiation plants
- a safe environment for people working in irradiation plants
- stringent testing of all radiolytic products
- clear labelling on irradiated foods.

Shop bosses steal seats

London's 300,000 shopworkers are threatened by wage cuts and longer working hours if the Government gets away with plans to axe wage councils and open up Sunday trading.

But many shopworkers already suffer from their employers' failure to provide safe and healthy working conditions. Some effects, such as cuts and bruises from trips and falls, are obvious. Others are harder to identify but no less painful or damaging.

One study of 541 shopworkers who stood most of the time found that 26 per cent suffered

from pains in their legs and were more likely to have varicose veins. Nine per cent complained of pains in their feet, and eight per cent had backache.

These problems are often aggravated by employers' insistence that workers remain standing, even when it is not necessary for their work. This "unwritten law" of shopwork actually breaks the written law.

The Offices, Shops and Railway Premises Act says that employers must allow their workers "reasonable opportunities" to sit down in the course of their work. To make

this possible, the Act also requires the employer to provide one seat for every three workers employed in the shop.

However, a recent survey has shown that the vast majority of employers ignore this legal requirement completely. And Kensington & Chelsea Trade Union Support Unit has recently been involved with several cases where employers have actually removed chairs that had previously been provided.

The Hazards Centre is preparing a booklet on health and safety in shops. Watch the *Daily Hazard* for further details.

Pesticides Action Conference

More and more people in London are concerned about pesticides. The Hazards Centre has had inquiries from tenants worried about infestation treatments in their homes; from workers and residents alarmed about the dangers of spraying by local councils; and about the effects of spray drift from British Rail trains.

A growing worry is the increasing use of growth retardants on grass by local authorities. The chemicals used can cause skin rashes, and are suspected of having cancer-causing effects. Council workers are afraid that their employers are using the growth retardants as a way of cutting jobs instead of cutting the grass.

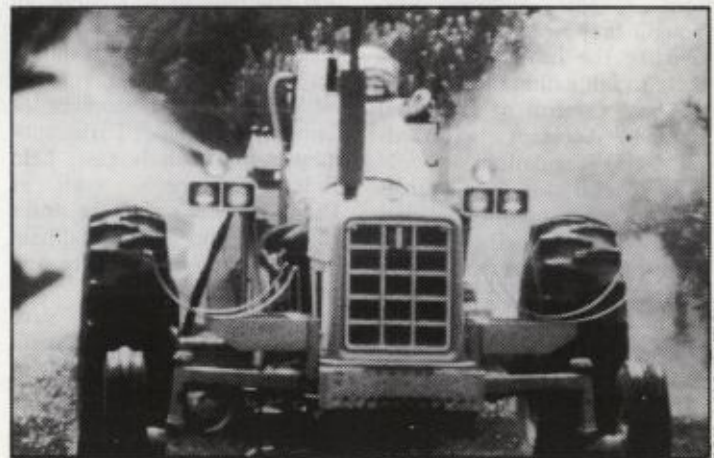
All too often different groups of people who are affected by pesticides are separated from each other, and sometimes even see their interests as being in conflict.

The London Hazards Centre, in association with the

Trade Union Pesticides Group, is organising a *Pesticides Action Conference*. The conference aims to bring together the different groups of people concerned about the hazards from pesticides, both at work and in the home and the community, to share their experiences, look at the alternatives, and work out more effective strategies for or-

ganising and campaigning on the issue. There will be workshops on a wide variety of topics.

The conference is on Saturday June 1st at the Polytechnic of the South Bank, London SE1. The cost is £3 or £1 unwaged. If you are interested, phone or write to Andy Roberts at the London Hazards Centre.



Spraying is used to cut jobs instead of cutting grass



We're pleased to be able to report that the London Hazards Centre has received further funding from the GLC for 1985/6. There are now seven Centre workers who can give advice and help to trade unions, tenants' associations and other community groups who are organising to fight hazards in their environment.

Affiliation to the Centre keeps you in touch with our activities. For 1985 affiliation rates or more information on the Centre, please contact us:

London Hazards Centre
at the Polytechnic of the
South Bank
103 Borough Road
London SE1
Tel: 01-261 9558

"I have worked for two years, for seven hours a day at a VDU. During that time, I have had one spontaneous abortion and one miscarriage." This is one of several similar quotes from women who filled in a questionnaire attached to the London Hazards Centre's information pack on VDU hazards.

The question of whether there is an association between working on a VDU and pregnancy problems arises from several "clusters" of unusually high miscarriage rates and/or birth defects reported in women who worked as VDU operators in North America, the UK, Australia and Denmark. But because the average miscarriage rate in the general population is about 15 per cent, it is impossible to know whether or not these "clusters" occurred by chance.

Many women who contact the Hazards Centre are rightly concerned about this state of affairs: what should they do if they intend to get pregnant or are pregnant, yet spend most of their working day in front of a VDU screen?

Last autumn, a Scottish industrial tribunal held that Highland Regional Council had acted unreasonably in sacking Hazel Johnston, a librarian who had refused to work on a VDU during pregnancy because of fears that her baby might be damaged.

Does VDU work cause problems in pregnancy?

"We were satisfied that the applicant's apprehension was by no means ill-founded", the judgement stated.

Mrs Johnston was particularly concerned about the effects of the low-level radiation of various types that is emitted

from VDUs. But radiation is not the only hazard associated with VDU work.

Other problems include stress caused by noisy printers and bad equipment design, work practices, pressure of work, long hours on the VDU,



VDU operators: high stress level is one of the hazards

and lack of adequate rest breaks; *posture problems* resulting from badly designed workstations; *heat* emitted by the units which is not removed by adequate ventilation; and *chemicals* from the insulating materials in the VDUs.

These problems apply to all VDU operators – male and female – whose working conditions are not adequately covered by comprehensive trade union agreements with their employers.

While individuals, perhaps using the tribunal case mentioned above, may manage to persuade their employers that they should be moved to non-VDU work during pregnancy, several unions have now negotiated local agreements which allow VDU operators the **right to transfer to alternative work for the duration of their pregnancy without loss of pay or seniority**. And in some cases these agreements also include the right of transfer for women *intending* to become pregnant.

The Hazards Centre supports the efforts of unions negotiating to reduce the exposure of *all* workers to VDU hazards, not just pregnant ones.

● An information pack on VDU hazards is available from the London Hazards Centre, 103 Borough Road, London SE1, and costs £1.

CIMAH sites stay secret, but GLC could tell all

In February, we wrote about the secrecy surrounding London's 12 major accident hazard installations (*Daily Hazard* No.2). It seems that we seriously underestimated the extent of official and public ignorance.

The list we produced in February was based on information from reliable sources who thought they were in a position to name the installations most likely to fall within the scope of the new Control of Industrial Major Accident Hazards (CIMAH) Regulations.

In several cases our sources got it wrong, identifying sites which, for all their size, fell short of the enormous inventories of toxic, explosive or flammable materials needed to come within the CIMAH Regulations.

We owe apologies to British Petroleum, whose Clayton Oils depot at Park Avenue, Southall is not nearly big enough to be in

the CIMAH class, and to Petrofina whose storage at Carnwath Road, Fulham is also well below the threshold.

This leaves the problem of identifying the real major accident hazard sites in Southall and Fulham. The Hazards Centre will welcome reliable information enabling us to compile an accurate list of London's 12 sites. CIMAH spotters should not look only for obvious chemical factories and storages of flammable liquid. Toxic substances, particularly gases held under pressure – such as Thames Water's chlorine stores in Richmond and Waltham Forest – are more likely and usually less obvious.

The GLC could save everyone a lot of trouble by releasing its list of the dozen installations. This would enable local communities to monitor the process of disclosure which is due to begin in January next

year. Labour MPs who tried to get the Regulations improved before they were rubber-stamped by Parliament expressed grave doubts about the quality of information likely to reach the public (*Hansard* 11 February 1985).

But the GLC says that identification of the CIMAH sites is forbidden under Section 28 of the Health & Safety at Work Act. Cleveland County Council does not agree with this interpretation of the law. In 1983, it released the names of 36 installations covered by the 1982 Notification of Installations Handling Hazardous Substances Regulations. There was no prosecution by the Health and Safety Executive.

Cleveland's emergency planning officer, Peter Taylor, told the *Daily Hazard* that the CIMAH list would also be released. "It's no secret", he said. "To name the firms does not breach Section 28."

Meanwhile, secrecy and ignorance rule in London. One local councillor was surprised to

find we had listed his area as host to a CIMAH site. He phoned the local environmental health department and was told that there were no such sites in the borough. Actually there are two.

Chemical alert

A group of chemicals widely used in industry have been identified as substances that may cause cancer in humans. The monohalomethanes (methyl bromide, methyl chloride and methyl iodide) are used in a variety of chemical processes and appear in many products including anaesthetics, degreasers, aerosol propellants and pesticides.

The American National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) recommends that all exposures to these chemicals should be minimised. The report also warns that methyl chloride may cause birth defects.