NEWS FROM THE LONDON HAZARDS CENTRE No.17 MAY 1988

THE DAILY HAZARD

Right-to-know law fails again

More than two years after communities should have been told about their local major hazard sites, we expose four more

In March 1986 the Health and Safety Executive released a list of London's most hazardous chemical and gas installations – seven 'top tier' sites covered by the Control of Industrial Major Accident Hazards (CIMAH) Regulations.

Now, thanks to a vigilant community group, the Centre can reveal that there are at least four more previously undeclared CIMAH sites around the capital – in Bexley, Enfield, Barking and Bromley.

The breakthrough into this unpublished list of 'hidden' sites began when BADCAP (Belvedere and District Campaign Against Pollution) picked up rumours that May and Baker's huge chlorine storage (see *DH* Nos 3 and 8) wasn't the only CIMAH site on their doorstep.


EXCLUSIVE
DAILY HAZ
Major hazard secrecy ends – but do the locals know?

Flashback to May 1986.

'Serious danger to persons':

- ★ **Atlas Interlates**, Fraser Road, Erith, Kent. Disulfoton, chlorfenvinphos.

'Serious danger to the environment':

- ★ **Youngs of Orpington**, Sevenoaks Way, St Paul's Cray, Kent. Arsenic pentoxide.
- ★ **Johnson Matthey Chemicals**, Jeffreys Road, Brimsdown, Enfield, Middlesex. Sodium selenite, 20 tonnes.
- ★ **Hickson Timber Products**, Rippleway Wharf, River Road, Barking. Arsenic pentoxide.

The local fire brigade confirmed that they were indeed in the process of contributing to London Fire and Civil Defence Authority (LFCDA) draft emergency plans for Atlas Interlates Ltd in Fraser Road, Erith.

This was news to Erith Ward councillor John Browning who, the week before, had sat on the Bexley Council Planning Committee as it gave permission for new homes on the boundary of the site. 'We just hadn't been given any of this information,' he said. 'The first I heard about it was from BADCAP.'

Atlas have said that they intend to leave the site, but not until at least 1989. New homes could conceivably be built and occupied within a year.

Atlas Interlates mixes the pesticides disulfoton and chlorfenvinphos. Small amounts of these organophosphorus chemicals can poison the nervous system through the skin. A mere 100 kilograms of either is enough to bring a processing site under the CIMAH Regulations: Atlas reportedly handles up to 20 tonnes.

Despite this, it was only last year that the Health and Safety Executive decided that the site falls under the regulations.

Alerted by BADCAP, the Centre started looking for other unannounced sites. Investigations revealed three more (box). They fall under a provision regarding 'serious danger' 'to the environment' and not directly or indirectly to human beings. There appears to be no emergency plan yet for any of these sites.

The HSE has taken no steps to publicise these sites. The now outdated list released in 1986 has not been updated and staff responsible know of no plans to do so. The HSE's only obligation is to maintain local registers of sites, which may not be photocopied or sent out.

Further sites will come under CIMAH when current proposed amendments come into force. A likely site is the Thames Water chlorinating plant in Copper Mills Lane, Walthamstow. Which would bring us up to the elusive dozen originally hinted at by the GLC in 1985.

Hazards 88 CAMPAIGN

Anthony Walker travelled to the launch from his home in Wolverhampton. Until two years ago he was employed as a lorry driver. Now he can't work and can only walk, painfully, with the aid of a stick. His thigh bone was shattered after defective equipment threw him off the side of his lorry. His boss had failed to take out the legally required employer's liability insurance. The DHSS took 13 months to issue him with a benefits claim form.

Victims of industrial accidents and disease joined politicians, trade union officials and labour movement activists to launch the Hazards '88 Campaign at the House of Commons in March.

John Edmonds, General Secretary of the GMB, declared his support for the campaign. 'The government's nine-year attack on individual rights has led to increasing dangers and insecurity at work and left millions of workers exposed and unprotected,' he said. 'The government has given employers a licence to sack, injure and impoverish the working people of Britain'.

Michael Meacher MP, Shadow Employment Secretary, presented evidence that tens of thousands of workers are seriously injured at work every year:

'The latest figures just published show that between 1981–85 the incidence of fatal and major injuries per 100,000 employees rose 42 per cent in construction, 47 per cent in the timber and furniture industry, 46 per cent in the brick, pottery, glass and cement industries, 43 per cent in metal goods, and 54 per cent in textiles.

'What is so reprehensible about this annually mounting toll is that it is almost wholly preventable. The main responsibility lies with management,' said Meacher. 'A few well publicised imprisonments would help concentrate the minds of negligent management.'

'The savage cutbacks in health and safety inspectors allow employers to get away with murder,' said John Edmonds.

INSIDE

We are funded by all the London boroughs

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Action group digs out grave truth

The 30 residents of Eastbrook Drive were shocked to receive a letter from the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham last November. It notified them of the council's decision to extend the neighbouring Eastbrook End cemetery onto land used for recreation.

The locals knew that the site, a former quarry, had been used for almost 20 years as a dump for arsenic, cyanide and other toxic chemicals from the electro plating industry, asbestos, carcases of diseased animals and waste from hospitals.

The horrified residents organised meetings, formed the Eastbrook Drive Residents' Action Group, and got over 300 names on a petition against the plan.

The Action Group contacted the Hazards Centre for advice on the probable toxicity of the site, and discussed ways to build a campaign. The Centre advised them of their rights to information held by the council (see box), and of the possibility of involving 'watchdog' agencies such as the Health and Safety Executive and the London Waste Regulation Authority (LWRA).

By quoting the Access to Information Act 1985 the group obtained a crucial report from consultants hired by the council. It confirmed that the site was contaminated with lead, arsenic, antimony, asbestos and cyanide. There were high levels of coal tar derivatives, phenols, boron, copper and zinc in the soil and groundwater. Rotting organic matter in the tip was generating large amounts of explosive methane gas.

The consultants stress that gravediggers would need protective clothing. 'With present ground conditions and the high groundwater level,' the report says, 'shallow graves would be necessary. In addition there is the aesthetic consideration of the bereaved seeing their relatives buried in what is essentially demolition rubble.'

The report concludes that the land is unsuitable for a cemetery and recommends it be kept as a public open space.

Enraged that the council was ignoring these findings and pressing ahead with its plan, the residents picketed every day for five weeks to prevent contractors starting work.

Meanwhile, they sent deputations to all relevant council meetings and organised extensive local press coverage. Alerted by the action group, the London Waste Regulation Authority did a further site investigation. It allowed the work to continue only after imposing a site licence with strict new conditions.

Mr Peacock, from the Residents' Action Group, was disappointed but philosophical: 'The council was reluctant even to speak to us, but now we go up to the Town Hall and get reports and minutes of meetings. The council keeps us informed of their plans and of what work is to be carried out, and we have the right to inspect the site with the engineer. Thirty people fighting the council don't stand much chance, but we found out our rights and stopped them from going ahead without any consideration for us. We've not given up yet.'

BARKING & DAGENHAM POST

YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW

Under the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

● **Access to documents:**
At least three clear days before a meeting, you have the right to inspect, copy or be supplied with photocopies of:
☐ notice of the time and place of the meeting
☐ the agenda (anything not listed in an agenda made available to the public in advance cannot be considered at the meeting)
☐ reports for the meeting
☐ background papers: the council must supply you with a list of background papers to the reports, and at least one copy of the background papers must be available for inspection.

● **Other information:**
Councils must make available:
☐ a register of names and addresses of councillors and every member of each committee and sub-committee of the council
☐ a list of their delegated powers
☐ a summary of the public's rights.

● **Access to meetings:**
You have the right to attend any meeting of a council or any of its committees or sub-committees. The council can only exclude you from specific items of business and for specific reasons:
☐ if "confidential information" would be disclosed "in breach of obligation of confidence", e.g. disclosure prohibited by law or court order, or information supplied in confidence by a government department
☐ if "exempt information" would be disclosed, e.g. personal information or information about legal and other formal proceedings.

● **After the meeting:**
You have the same rights of access to agendas and reports, plus minutes of the meeting – all of which must be available for inspection for six years after the meeting. Background papers must be available for four years.

Chemical lesson at college

Workers at Birkbeck College were given an unexpected Christmas gift from their bosses when, as part of a major restoration job on old college buildings in Gordon Square, generous quantities of timber treatment chemicals were applied to their workplace.

A NALGO rep on the TU liaison committee contacted the Hazards Centre at the end of January, alarmed that workers were suffering from lightheadedness, headaches, inflammation and sores of the nose and throat, chest pains and serious respiratory problems. The timber treatment firm, Protim Services, had used a cocktail of chemicals including lindane, PCP and TBTO (see *DH* 16).

The reps had already written to the management safety officer, stating their members' concern and seeking written assurance that workers had not been exposed to preventable risk.

United action

NALGO got together with the other safety representatives from ASTMS, AUT, and the EETPU. They distributed hazards information to members and called an emergency joint union meeting. The members, by now more than a little aroused, demanded suspension of the treatments until the contractors met reasonable safety conditions:

○ evacuate the areas for treatment, and seal them off from everyone except the specialist contractors;

○ stop use of chemicals known to be harmful to humans;

○ use chemicals approved for bat roosts by the Nature Conservancy Council, in accordance with recommended work methods.

Workers refused to return to their workplace until a full clean-up operation was carried out. Carpets left in the area of treatment were to be destroyed, and air contamination must be shown to have dropped to a 'safe' level.

Finally, staff affected by any future proposed work should be consulted and given reasonable notice.

At a meeting with the joint safety representatives, management seemed to accept all the demands. The building was evacuated, and cleaned up following Cornwall County Council guidelines. It appeared to be a complete victory for the workers – but management had an Easter surprise in store. During the college holiday they invited Protim back to do further treatment using the same vicious mixture of chemicals.

Birkbeck's workers are still fighting on the issue. They have at least forced management to clean up following this work. It is highly unlikely that management will attempt to use these chemicals now for the other college sites.

○ Cornwall County Council method for wood preservation was devised after school children were poisoned. Summary available from the Centre.

'Complacency, lack of concern, ignorance and often sheer bloody-mindedness are preventing improvements in the construction industry . . . a substantial number of smaller firms in the industry have little regard for their workforce as human beings . . . whenever we encounter flagrant disregard of the safety laws we shall not hesitate to use our considerable enforcement powers to the full. We are now carrying out blitzes in different localities to drive this message home. We started one in London yesterday.' In May 1987 David Eves, the Chief Inspector of Factories, marshalled his troops (just 85 construction inspectors nationally) for a campaign against the escalating numbers of deaths and injuries occurring on building sites. The London 'blitz', in October, produced horrifying results. After visiting 476 sites inspectors issued 102 prohibition notices. 'The safety standards on more than one in five of the sites we visited during the week-long blitz in Central London were so bad that prohibition notices putting an immediate stop to work were issued,' confirmed Frank Swaine, deputy Chief Inspector responsible for construction safety in London. The situation was broadly similar throughout the country.

If the 'blitzed' sites were, as the HSE claims, typical of sites nationally and if site safety was properly enforced, poor standards would warrant about 40,000 prohibition notices on London's estimated 200,000 building sites every year. In fact, London has only a dozen construction inspectors, these managing far fewer than 5,000 site visits in the year beginning April 1987 and issuing under 200 prohibition notices, 102 coming during the one week of the October blitz. Only two prosecutions resulted.

Construction sites injure a worker once every couple of minutes and kill far more than any other industry. In 1987 the number of reported deaths in the capital was up more than 15 per cent on the 1986 figure. 'The provisional death toll for London last year is 38, but could be higher due to delays in reporting,' revealed John Hatto, HSE Principal Construction Inspector for N.E. London. 'In addition the figures don't include deaths from "construction-type" work such as construction work in a factory.'

A second London blitz, covering parts of Islington, Hackney and Tower Hamlets, began on 25 April and continues into May. Just finding the sites could be a problem. 'We've only been notified of 45 sites for the whole of Islington for the period of the blitz,' explained Hatto. 'We'd expect nearer to 300.'

In the event of a building labourer surviving the one in 50 chance of death by 'accident' in a working life on site, other hazards, just as deadly, lie in store. In building and construction, managers have a death rate about half that of the population as a whole, whereas a bricklayer's labourer faces five times the risk of early death. Brickies' labourers run an alarmingly high risk of developing respiratory diseases such as bronchitis, emphysema and asthma and cancers, particularly of the lung and stomach. Plasterers, cement finishers, bricklayers and tile setters have a similarly increased risk of dying from lung cancer and respiratory disease. This cannot be explained away as merely related to their social class and must be at least partly caused by their work.

What all these workers have in common is they work in dusty jobs – and cement dust is one of the most frequent causes of ill-health.

CEMENT HAZARDS

HAZARDS

Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC) is a grey powder containing a mixture of calcium, silica, aluminium and other compounds. Composition varies considerably according to type and manufacturer.

As much as five per cent of the silica content may be in the form of free silicon dioxide – the crystalline material which causes the form of lung scarring called silicosis. The quicklime (calcium oxide) content in cement can cause severe burns to skin in contact with wet mixes. Moist tissues such as the lining of the nose or throat can also be damaged by dry powder. In the short term burns, rashes and cracking of the skin can result; in the long term ulceration of any exposed flesh (eyes, mouth, nose, etc.) and damage to finger nails. Cement powder in the eye can result in permanent damage if not treated immediately.

Wet concrete and mortars: skin burns from as little as an hour's contact with wet cement have been severe enough to require skin grafting. Usually no pain is felt while the damage is being done.

Cement and concrete additives: these may increase the risk of dermatitis (see below). Calcium chloride which is used as a fast setting or frostproofing additive, is known to damage the skin. Organic chemical plasticisers and resins – especially those containing formaldehyde or epoxies – will cause irritation of the skin, nose and mouth. Lime (slaked lime, calcium hydroxide) is also found in cement and plasters. It is extremely irritating and long-term exposure can cause ulceration of the skin, eyes, nose and mouth.

Concrete mould oils: these cause oil acne and dermatitis and are usually the unrefined oils which cause skin cancer.

Skin rashes: Skin rashes, often called dermatitis or eczema, are a risk for all trades whenever cement is made or used. Dermatitis costs building workers over 200,000 lost days of work each year. Plasterers have one of the highest risks, but drivers, painters and plumbers have also been affected. Surveys have shown that the majority of victims get dermatitis from an allergy to chromate found as a trace impurity in all cements. Abrasion or other damage makes the skin more vulnerable.

If you have dermatitis or eczema and come into contact with cement then the best form of diagnosis is to use the standard allergy tests (patch testing). Patch tests should cover chromium, nickel and cobalt. All occur as impurities in cement and all are potent causes of dermatitis. Some people develop allergies quickly; for others it may take years. Recovery from allergic dermatitis is poor. Chromates are found in clay, stone, lime and plaster and many other building materials including paints and corrosion inhibitors.

Cancer: a recent study of 600 cement workers in north Kent found that their death rate from stomach cancer was 75 per cent higher than expected. Chromates are the likely cause.

CONTROL

Dermatitis: the risk of allergic dermatitis from wet cement on the skin can be virtually eliminated by the addition of small quantities of ferrous sulphate at the manufacturing stage or just before mixing with water. The procedure is cheap and effective and doesn't impair the cement.

On site: with or without pre-treatment with ferrous sulphate, exposure to cement should always be tightly controlled:

- ○ Bags and pre-mix concrete delivery notes should carry warning notices about cement burns and dermatitis.
- ○ Dust should be controlled at source. Eye protection is needed when there is a risk of getting raw powder in the eyes, especially when opening bags.
- ○ Boots, overalls and gloves should be adequate to prevent skin contact. Waterproof trousers, worn outside the boots, may be needed for many concrete placing jobs.
- ○ Employers should institute proper clean-up routines, using an industrial vacuum cleaner with high efficiency filters.
- ○ Barrier creams should be used where they are specifically formulated to provide protection from chromates.
- ○ Good facilities for washing, showering and changing clothes are essential. Employers should also provide a cleaning service for overalls.

Control limits: HSE still treats cement as a nuisance dust with an occupational exposure limit of 10mg per cubic metre (mg/m^3) and $5mg/m^3$ for respirable dust (the particles small enough to get deep down into the lungs).

INFORMATION

- ○ *GMB News Service No36: Health Hazards of Cement Dust.*
- ○ *Hazards Magazine No4 (June 1985): Building Up Ill-Health, pp6/7* – useful poster on cement and other dust hazards in construction.
- ○ *London Hazards Centre: Construction Information Pack* – general guide to all construction hazards covering dusts, fumes, gases, chemicals, noise, vibration etc.
- ○ *HSE: Construction Health Hazard Information Sheets* No1: *Cement* and No2: *Skin Hazards.*
- ○ *HSE: Various guidance notes, leaflets, pocket cards.* Details from HSE Information Points.

Asbestos code confuses

New regulations and codes of practice covering all work with asbestos came into force in March. They compel employers to:

- ○ assess work which is liable to lead to exposure
- ○ notify the HSE in advance of the work
- ○ inform and train workers
- ○ minimise exposure
- ○ set up and maintain control measures
- ○ provide protective clothing and washing and cleaning facilities
- ○ monitor asbestos levels
- ○ provide health surveillance
- ○ leave a level of less than 0.01 fibres per millilitre of air (f/ml) after work is finished.

Control limits, the levels of pollution at which respirators must be used, are the same as before, except that there are new – higher – limits for exposures up to ten minutes. There are also 'action levels' which trigger notification and medical surveillance. They introduce a new unit: the 'fibre-hour/ml', calculated by multiplying expected exposure levels (f/ml) by the expected number of hours of exposure. It does not look a very practicable procedure, and these levels still allow workers to breathe unacceptably high levels of asbestos.

In theory the regulations provide better legal protection for everyone involved with work with asbestos. In fact they are hard to interpret and, on the HSE's past performance, unlikely to be effectively enforced.

CONTROL LIMITS
If exceeded, respirators must be worn.

	4 hours	*10 mins*
Blue/Brown	0.2 f/ml	0.6 f/ml
Other types	0.5 f/ml	1.5 f/ml

ACTION LEVELS
Where workers are likely to have this exposure over 12 weeks, employers must notify HSE 28 days before work begins and must arrange medical monitoring.

Blue/Brown	48 fibre-hours/ml
Others	120 fibre-hours/ml

'Fibre-hours/ml' = exposure level (f/ml) × hours of exposure.

Approved code of practice: The control of asbestos at work. Contains the regulations. £4.50 from HMSO, PO Box 276, SW8 5DT.
Approved code of practice: Work with asbestos insulation, asbestos coating and asbestos insulation board. Revised March 1988. £3.60 from HMSO.

Warning: furniture at work

The room at the old people's home had been sealed up soon after the great wood preserving disaster in the autumn when staff and residents became ill, and the home had to be partially evacuated.

Now, weeks later, the room was to be opened for inspection by county council officials and their occupational hygienist, and trade union reps with their hygienist. The air inside was hot and choking. A member of the staff became breathless and collapsed. One of the hygienists went for his respirator. No one could stay in there for more than ten seconds. The room was hastily closed again.

But what was the pollution? The lindane and tributyl tin oxide wood preservatives sprayed on timber and injected into the walls last autumn? The hygienist for the union thought not. He suspected formaldehyde gas and confirmed it next day with a simple detector tube test.

The answer was in front of everyone's watering eyes: furniture. The room had been used to store seven or eight new wardrobes and chests of drawers. Like most 'wooden' furniture today, they were made of chipboard. The resin which bonds the wood chips together is urea formaldehyde.

Inside one of the cupboards the hygienist measured a concentration of five parts per million (ppm).

Formaldehyde is a powerful irritant to eyes, nose and throat at concentrations in air below the official control limit of 1ppm. It is a common cause of allergic skin rashes and asthma, and a suspected human cancer agent.

Somehow this gas gets into most people's lives, at work and at home. It causes untold misery in the textile industry (permanent press clothing), electronics (fume from resin-fluxed solders) and a thousand other occupations.

HAPHAZARD

The smoke detector in the room set off the fire alarm. When the fire brigade rushed to the scene a firefighter was sent in with full breathing apparatus. Finding no fire, he took off his mask and immediately choked as the polluted air hit his lungs. The room was sealed again and a large vacuum pump connected to the window to suck out the room's unbearable atmosphere.

Trabajadores inmigrantes

North Kensington Law Centre is producing a leaflet, *Employment Rights 1988: Health and Work*, for some of the estimated 20 per cent of the borough's population whose first language is not English.

The leaflet, in Spanish, Portuguese, English and Arabic versions, clearly explains basic trade union and health and safety rights. It will be available from North Kensington Law Centre, the London Hazards Centre and the Black Workers and Hazards Conference.

The Law Centre would welcome other groups reproducing the leaflet and adapting the list of useful local agencies.

○ *North Kensington Law Centre, 74 Golborne Road, W10.*

● The next issue of *Hazards Bulletin* (No.18) contains a broadsheet on hazards to cleaners. Subscription details from PO Box 199, Sheffield S1.

● The May issue of *Pesticides Action Bulletin* is out now. Subscription details from Frank Slight, 47 Gaskell Road, London N5.

Information bill blocked

A private member's bill to open an important source of hazards information to the public has been blocked by covert Government opposition.

The Environment and Safety Information Bill, introduced by Chris Smith MP, would have created public registers of improvement and prohibition notices issued under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985 (covering pesticide permits) and the Fire Safety and Safety of Places of Sport Act 1987 (covering fire certificates).

At present the HSE is only obliged to keep public registers of prosecutions, and of special licences issued. Information on prosecutions is too sparse and out-of-date to be much use, but enforcement notices would give valuable current information on a firm's safety performance.

The bill was supported by organisations ranging from the Campaign for Freedom of Information to the Institution of Environmental Health Officers.

This support made it hard for the Government to block the bill openly, but a leaked letter from the junior Employment Minister, Patrick Nicholls, shows that he had been looking for ways to stop this reform without appearing to do so. He succeeded by a procedural tactic on the second reading on 15th April.

Contact: Campaign for Freedom of Information, 3 Endsleigh St, London WC1. Tel. 01-278 9686.

Black Workers and Hazards Conference

***By any means necessary* is a conference for Black workers on organising in the workplace using health hazards, on 25 June at the Camden Centre, Bidborough Street, WC1.**

The conference, sponsored by the London Hazards Centre and Camden Black Workers Group, aims to look at practical ways in which we can organise to overcome the additional hazards we face as a result of racism.

Workshops include Homeworking, Privatisation, New Technology and Racial Harassment.

● More details from the London Hazards Centre.

● We welcome affiliations from individuals and groups committed to the fight against hazards at work and in the community. Affiliation shows support for the centre, brings a year's supply of this newsletter and news of other publications and activities. Rates range from £1.00 to £30.00.

● *The London Group of the Hazards '88 Campaign can be contacted via the Hazards Centre.*

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