

THE DAILY HAZARD

Construction Safety Campaign mounts London site protest

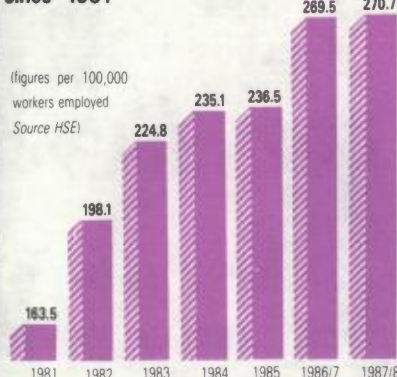
Site death toll goes up



Construction Safety Campaign protests at the Skanska site where Ian Nesbitt was killed.

Fatal and major accidents in construction up by over 65% since 1981

(figures per 100,000 workers employed
Source HSE)



On 22 December 22 year old building worker Ian Nesbitt died on a London construction site. He was killed outright when the dumper truck he was reversing up a rough earth ramp overturned, trapping him underneath. The accident sliced off the top of his head.

Ian was working on the Trinity Tower site, run by the contractor Skanska, on London's docklands. "He was leaning back in his seat to counterbalance the dumper," said a workmate who refused to be named. "The ramp was so steep you couldn't easily walk up it. He'd been down twice before. The third time he didn't



RAY COLLING

make it."

Work on the site stopped whilst colleagues waited for Ian's body to be removed: in the view of Tony O'Brien, of the Construction Safety Campaign, the site should not have been allowed to re-open. "The HSE

should have closed the whole site down completely until proper safety standards were introduced," he said after visiting the site. "It is management's lack of proper organisation of work that has resulted in this tragic death. We know that workers on that site are being forced to work under conditions that are putting their lives at risk."

The government has announced plans to make the wearing of safety helmets compulsory on construction sites. Mr O'Brien is unimpressed. "We want more than safety helmets. We want a guarantee of safety at work."

The number of building site accidents has increased every year this decade. A record number of construction workers suffered fatal or serious injuries last year. Latest official figures show that a construction worker is killed or seriously injured every hour. Less serious accidents occur once every couple of minutes.

But sites are not just unsafe, they are unhealthy. Occupational diseases afflict 20,000 building workers every year. Bronchitis, cancer and other diseases of dust and poor site conditions kill an estimated 4,000 building workers annually.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has attempted to encourage safer sites with high profile publicity campaigns. During the year of "Site Safe '83", the HSE's first campaign, there was an increase in site deaths and injuries. Construction "blitzes" followed in 1987-88 but sites got more, not less hazardous.

London Construction accidents April 1987 - March 1988

Deaths:	36
Major injuries:	413
Prosecutions:	18
Average fine:	£1,050
No action was taken on over half the sites where a death or major injury occurred.	

Tony Linehan, Chief Inspector of Factories, admits the HSE's strategy has met with limited success. "Unfortunately publicity alone does not lead to better conditions on site . . . there has to be an expectation of an inspection." In London there are just 12 inspectors. The chances of them visiting any particular site are remote. 36 workers died on London sites last year, almost a quarter of the national total.

SAFE SITES

The construction union UCATT has produced an excellent health and safety information pack, which contains details of workers' legal rights and of agreements negotiated by the union. The UCATT Safe Site Information Pack is available free to members from their regional office. £2.50 to non-members from UCATT, 177 Abbeville Road, London SW4.



LEGAL RIGHTS

- toilets and washing facilities with hot water
- protective clothing for work in rain, snow, sleet or hail
- supply of clean, fresh drinking water
- training and information on hazards
- heated shelters
- place to dry clothes
- place to heat and eat food

INSIDE

- Asbestos Cement - Factsheet p3
- Wood preservatives - new Hazards Centre book p4

We are funded by all the London boroughs

Homeworkers organise on hazards

100 years ago a House of Lords Select Committee examined the evils of "sweating" or sweated labour – which it defined as work for unduly low rates of pay, excessive hours of labour and in "insanitary" workplaces.

This form of cheap, sub-contracted labour pre-dated the factory system, and was mainly conducted on piecework in small workshops or in the homes of the workers. It persists today. The government's own figures put the numbers of homeworkers in Britain at 400,000. Homework is unregulated, unseen, unsafe.

On paper, the 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act applies to all workers. In 1982, however, a House of Lords Employment Committee on homeworking reported that existing statutory provisions offered inadequate protection. There's no sick pay, insurance, holiday pay . . . no rights.

Homeworkers face chemical hazards from the glues, varnishes and solvents they use. Repetition strain injuries are very common due to the repetitive, awkward jobs they do. Noise, vibration and fire hazards arise from poorly installed and maintained machinery.

Three quarters of homeworkers are women. Lack of provi-

sion for childcare and care for dependents make other jobs impossible. Black workers find themselves concentrated in the most hazardous jobs. Homework is no exception.

The National Homeworking Group aims to:

- Campaign to get regulations added to the HASAW Act 74 to apply specifically to

homeworkers and to confer on them employee status.

- Campaign in Parliament for a Bill on homeworking – several MPs have already pledged their support for a draft Bill.

- Organise a campaign of letter writing to MPs.

- Increase trade union recruitment, and awareness of the issues relating to homeworkers.

● The London-wide homeworkers group are holding a major conference on March 17th for homeworkers and activists who want to help the campaign.

For further details contact: Sophie, Homeworkers Project, 2nd Floor, 17 Bowater Road, Westminster Industrial Estate, SE18. Tel: 854 8012.



As part of the National Homeworking Group, Greenwich homeworkers organised an open day in mid-November. Attended by about 50 women, it gave homeworkers a much needed forum to discuss tackling the problems of isolation and consequent exploitation they face.

HSE has no answer to murder at work

"It has not been a satisfactory year for industrial health and safety . . ." admitted Dr John Cullen, chair of the Health and Safety Commission, introducing the HSE/HSC annual report for 1987/88. Statistics in the report showed it to be the least satisfactory year for some considerable time.

Since 1981 the number of reported deaths and serious injuries has increased by over a third. In construction the increase is over 65 per cent. In fact the true situation is much worse. Dr Cullen believes there is "substantial" under-reporting of both major and three day injuries.

Mr John Rimington, Director General of the Health and Safety Executive, commented that the Executive "... shall be prepared, where responsibility for lack of precaution resulting in injury can be clearly fixed, to prosecute individuals whether

they be directors, managers or workers."

Mr Rimington went on to cite the £750,000 fine imposed on BP after a court found the company guilty of criminal negligence resulting in the deaths of three workers. He described the fine as "... a landmark in the application of safety law."

Mary Naylor of the Hazards 88 Campaign welcomed stiffer penalties on negligent employers, but considered "fines averaging £837 and paid out of the company's purse" an inadequate deterrent. In an alternative annual report, the Campaign called for jailing of company directors with responsibility for safety if their negligence led to a worker being killed or seriously injured. "The BP fine is a drop in the ocean, given the company's 1987 gross profit of £5,919 million," she said. "Now, if BP chairman Sir Peter Walters were held personally

responsible for breaches of safety, he would ensure that health and safety was the top priority."

The HSE acknowledges that the overwhelming majority of deaths and injuries at work are preventable and that responsibility for most lies with management. The Hazards 88 Campaign wants the HSE to reflect this in its prosecution policy. "As long as negligent employers face only small fines and no personal liability, the HSE annual report will continue to catalogue this tragic, needless waste of life," said Naylor.

The Hazards 88 campaign produced an alternative Factory Inspector's report, *Murder at Work 1987-88*, available from the Hazards Centre, price £1. The campaign demands:

- The right of trade union reps to stop a job where there is imminent risk to health or safety.
- Death of a worker arising

from management negligence should be treated as manslaughter or unlawful killing.

- The right to refuse dangerous work.



Asbestos cement is the last building material made with asbestos. While regulations and market resistance have put a stop to other products made from these deadly mineral fibres, there are no restrictions on the sale and purchase of cement-based materials. People still buy it because it is cheap and because they have been conned by the myth that the cement "matrix" somehow locks in the asbestos fibres.

In reality the fibres are easily released (see "Dust levels",

below). This makes it impossible to use asbestos cement safely. Without elaborate precautions the simplest operations produce so much dust that the legal control limits are exceeded. Used with proper safeguards, "cheap" asbestos cement becomes one of the most expensive materials available. Without these safeguards, it endangers the health of those who manufacture, transport, install and maintain it; those who live and work in or near buildings made with it; those who

must eventually demolish and dispose of the millions of tons of it already built into our environment.

Sales of asbestos cement should be banned immediately. Stronger, safer and healthier alternatives exist for every application. South African asbestos miners have urged us to ban it (see *Daily Hazard* No 3). The GMB, one of the unions representing the last workers making it in Britain, has called for a ban so that production can be switched to safer

cement-based products. The ever-shrinking UK market may contribute only a tiny fraction of worldwide profits but a British ban would be a powerful blow against the industry's successful drive to increase production in developing countries.

This factsheet (part 1) explains what asbestos cement is and why it is dangerous. The law controlling it, and the special risks of demolition and disposal, will be covered in part 2 of the factsheet, in our next issue.

The material

Asbestos cement consists of ordinary Portland cement (OPC) reinforced with 10-15 per cent asbestos fibre. All types of asbestos fibres have been used - white (chrysotile), brown (amosite) and blue (crocidolite). Blue asbestos is more likely to have been used in sewer pipes because of its acid-resistance. Sheet products made since the mid-seventies are likely to contain white fibres only but it is impossible to be sure without examining a specimen under a microscope. In practice, anyone planning to work on an old asbestos cement structure must carry out analysis to be sure of complying with the law.

Whatever kind of fibre it contains, asbestos cement always has a greyish cement colour. Typical sheet materials are about one quarter of an inch thick, usually smooth on one side and rough or "textured" on the other. Slates and pipes normally have a black surface finish. Very old slates may be surfaced in red or green. The material is hard and brittle. It shatters easily on impact and when exposed to fire. Clusters of fibres can normally be seen projecting from a broken edge.

The Products

Corrugated sheet roofing; flat sheets for walls (sometimes roofs) of sheds and garages; gutters and downpipes; external and internal wall panels in system-built flats; "slates" for roofing and wall-hanging; weatherboarding; decking tiles for flat roofs; cable ducts (eg for railway signalling); cold water storage tanks; water mains and sewer pipes; boiler flues and fittings; lining and shelves in heating and drying cupboards; sheets behind radiators and gas fires and blocking chimney openings.

One of the most common locations in the home is the sheeting on "fire doors". Cement-based materials give little fire protection: they conduct heat through to the wood and soon shatter.

Labelling

All asbestos products must carry an official warning label showing a red "a" and giving instructions on minimising dust exposure.

The myth of safety dies hard. . .

"Asbestos cement sheeting contains a small amount of white asbestos bound by cement. It is therefore unnecessary to take the precautions with it that should be taken when handling the more harmful forms of brown and blue asbestos in the unbound form."

Letter from Redbridge Environmental Health Officer to community activist complaining about dust from a demolition site.



"Asbestos cement roofs are absolute killers. Across the country we have three or four people killed every year falling through this very fragile material."

Mike Tweddle, HSE Construction Inspector, at a press conference, 12 January 1989.

HAZARDS TO HEALTH

Asbestos cement endangers health at every stage from manufacture to demolition and disposal. The main risk is from inhalation of fibres but contamination of food and water (eg from asbestos cement water supply pipes) may produce cancers in the digestive system.

Workers in asbestos cement factories have an increased risk of death from scarring of the lung (asbestosis), from cancers of the

respiratory and digestive systems, and from mesothelioma - a tumour which grows in the membrane lining the chest or abdominal cavity. Asbestos is virtually the only known cause of mesothelioma. Most victims die within one year of diagnosis. Very small exposures can cause this cancer: there is no "safe dose". Two sisters who wire-brushed the roof of an outhouse both contracted mesothelioma. One died.

DUST LEVELS

Sampling of the air near asbestos cement structures shows that the fibres are far from "locked-in". Prof. K R Spurny and other researchers at the Fraunhofer Institute in Germany have shown that the surfaces of asbestos cement buildings emit fibres all the time. Erosion by acid rain is unlocking fibres at an increasing rate. The surface of the cement matrix is destroyed, leaving a layer of uncemented asbestos between 0.1 and 0.3 mm thick. Of the fibres lost from this layer 80 per cent are washed out, the rest take off into the air. The German researchers found that one square metre of asbestos cement could release a thousand million asbestos fibres an hour.

Without any disturbances apart from the wind, the level of fibres in the air near to weathered asbestos buildings was measured at up to 1,200 per cubic metre (0.001 fibres per millilitre). This is already one tenth of the level of 0.01 fibres/ml which the HSE and other authorities take as the upper limit for non-occupational exposure. Clearly any work on such a structure will immediately yield vastly higher levels.

Process	Dust level (fibres per ml of air)
Machine drilling	Less than 2
Hand sawing	2-4
Machine sawing (no extraction)	
jig saw	2-10
circular saw	10-20
Machine sawing (good extraction)	less than 2

These are the figures as originally published by HSE. They appear in a slightly revised - and less alarming - form in Guidance Note EH 35: *Probable asbestos dust concentrations at construction processes*.

In their annual report for 1976 the Factory Inspectorate reported measurements of dust in and around buildings near a car park where asbestos cement had been used as hard core. They found levels "considerable in excess of the hygiene standard for asbestos dust when there was normal activity on the car park and access areas to the factory". The hygiene standard at the time was 2 fibres/ml. Since then it has been reduced to 0.5 for white asbestos and 0.2 for blue and brown.

Action

On building sites. The construction trade union, UCATT, has banned all asbestos products, including asbestos cement, on organised sites since 1982. The GMB has called for a ban on the material.

On the estates. In Runcorn, tenants blockaded their estate in a successful campaign to stop the council using asbestos cement as a cheap replacement for weatherboarding.

Contacts

Health and Housing Group
189A Old Brompton Road, London SW5 0AR. 01-373 8028.
Independent environmental health officers. Will advise and represent tenants.

London Waste Regulation Authority

01-633 2784/4893
Asbestos waste collection service will collect and dispose of up to 50 kg (about 1 cwt) of asbestos waste. This is about three sheets measuring 8ft by 4ft or five sheets measuring 6ft by 4ft.

Environmental Health Departments.

(Listed under your local authority in the phone book.)
Should identify suspected asbestos and advise on safe handling. Responsible for homes, offices and shops.

Health and Safety Executive

North London: 01-594 5522. South London: 01-407 8911.
Responsible for factories, council offices and construction sites.

London Asbestos Action Campaign

308 Grays Inn Road, London WC1X 8DS. 01-833 2487.
Works with community and trade union groups.

Centre calls for wood chemicals ban



Working with wood preservatives. Process workers at this manufacturing plant (right) are concerned about deaths from leukaemia. Above, building workers handle timber still wet with copper/chrome/arsenic, which is absorbed through the skin. In Hackney, building workers have stopped wet timber being brought on site.

Recent publicity on the hazards of wood preservatives, partly based on the Centre's work, is having an effect.

In Parliament, an early day motion calling for the preservatives lindane and pentachlorophenol to be banned has been signed by over 100 MPs.

The HSE has begun a review of these two chemicals, though results are not expected to appear for at least 18 months.

In its new book on wood preservatives, the Hazards Centre sums up the evidence for an immediate ban.

○ *Toxic treatments*, £5.95 from the Hazards Centre.



Rats race ahead in London

Last issue we reported on the increasing problem of rats in London. A survey by the London Boroughs' Environmental Health Departments, published in January, confirms the worsening situation.

The survey found an average 30 per cent increase in rat infestations above ground across London in the past year – over 50 per cent in some boroughs.

Reasons given for this include the number of demolition sites in London, flytipping, and the cut-backs in pest control. But another factor must be the under-investment in sewers, which the Centre first pointed out over two years ago when

working with council tenants in Peckham.

Where there are rats, there are diseases, including the potentially fatal leptospirosis, commonly known by its most severe form, Weil's disease. Nationally, known cases have risen from 110 (12 deaths) in 1987 to 134 (18 deaths) in 1988. From London's 25 known cases last year, there were two fatalities.

The Association of London Authorities is reported to have written to Environment Secretary Nicholas Ridley, expressing its concern and pointing out that the Water Bill does not make clear who will be responsible for rat control after privatisation of the water industry.

Crumbling sewers threaten health

Our aging, overloaded sewerage system is only kept in operation by crisis maintenance. Backlogs – the flow of raw sewage back into houses – are becoming increasingly frequent and so Londoners could expect far more than an unpleasant smell. London could be faced by the 1986 Dysentery Epidemic, already Bradford, Brixton and Bostle have suffered major outbreaks this decade.

Dysentery in England and Wales	
1982	5,000
1983	5,000
1984	5,544
1988 (provisional)	6,876

Source: Health Department, London Borough of Brixton



A health care unit which took an interest in areas where rats are found. The health care unit is a key to the health of the community.

Daily Hazard, May 1986

‘The Water Bill must address the problem of responsibility for rodent control with the new water companies and require them to fund adequate control measures.’

South East sows seeds of safety

Demands for better health and safety information, education and enforcement came from a recent conference organised by London Hazards Centre, in a four point plan put to Employment Secretary John Cope for local and national policy making.

The conference was organised with the South East Economic Development Strategy (SEEDS) Association, a group of local authorities planning an integrated strategy for the South East. In a series of sectoral reports they are producing over the next three years, health and safety will have a high priority.

Safety representatives, trade

union officers, councillors and council officers participated in four conference workshops on office and manual work hazards, environmental and occupational health. Workshop recommendations, outlined in a letter to the minister, will form the basis of SEEDS health and safety policy.

Aimed at preventing sick workplaces instead of treating sick workers, proposals include efforts to raise public awareness of health and safety issues and the expansion of health and safety training. The conference demanded better enforcement of existing law, stiffer penalties for infringements and the right to stop work that presents an

imminent risk of injury.

Participants also called on the government to implement ILO recommendation 161, giving workers access to proper occupational health services, and on local authorities to initiate local “health profiles” to highlight inequalities, in conjunction with local health authorities.

Conference papers will be available from March 1989.

SEEDS Association, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage, Herts; tel 0438 356177 ext 219

Member Authorities: Cambridge, Crawley, Harlow, Oxford, Stevenage, Thamesdown, Thurrock

Centre news

● Hugh MacGrillen joins the Centre as an Advice Worker this month. Hugh previously worked in scientific journals and is involved in MSF.

Nilou Hawthorne and Roslyn Perkins have recently started their maternity leave.

● 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.

● If you have used our services and found them valuable, you or your organisation may wish to support the Centre by making a donation. Please make payments to the London Hazards Centre Trust.



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