

Foul smells, obnoxious fumes, bronchial troubles, stinging faces... these are just a few of the complaints from residents in the streets surrounding Leather's sulphuric acid factory in St Helens. In this FREE PRESS inquiry we examine the way the factory came to be built in the town and the reasons why the council now find it so difficult to combat the pollution it causes...

IT WAS A TERRIFYING moment for a mother and her baby when a huge cloud of fumes from a sulphuric acid factory suddenly engulfed them.

Mrs Brenda Kay, of St Helens, was so worried about her 9-month-old son that she took him to hospital. "He was coughing and spluttering and his eyes were watering," she said.

By chance, the doctor on duty in the casualty ward was Councillor Andrews, chairman of the public health committee, and one of the men responsible for controlling pollution in St Helens.

Surprisingly he did not introduce himself, nor did he offer to pursue the matter in the council.

Mrs Kay is just one of several hundred people who have complained about Leather's chemical factory in Lancotts Lane, close to council houses.

The history of the factory is a story of deception and obstruction by the company, growing anger among residents, and half-hearted efforts by the council to use what few powers they have in dealing with pollution.

Leathers, who opened in St Helens in 1970, employ about 20 people making sulphuric acid. Their factory is said to be one of the most up-to-date in Britain.

The firm came from Bradford, where they had been a major contributor to pollution. Bradford got rid of them by compulsory purchase.

The town heaved a sigh of relief and a special council minute recorded the Medical Officer's pleasure in seeing the firm go over the Yorkshire border "to a site in Lancashire."

In their search for a new site Leathers tried Widnes and Warrington. Both towns turned them down. Finally the sleepy St Helens council let them in. Curiously, the planning application was not made by Leathers. It was in the name of British Sidac, the neighbouring cellulose firm, who now buy acid from Leathers.

Whether or not this was deliberate deception, it was both effective and perfectly legal.

The council then fell for another trick... a claim that the factory would actually reduce pollution. Steam from the new factory would be used by British Sidac, so reducing Sidac's use of a boiler which gives off sulphur dioxide. In return, waste from British Sidac would be used in the acid making process instead of polluting Sutton Brook (known locally as Stinky Brook).

But overall, the effect has been very different. The smell and fumes are obnoxious. At times some people have been left gasping for breath, while others have complained of sickness, smarting eyes and stinging faces.

And four head teachers in the area say there has been more asthma and bronchial trouble amongst pupils since Leathers came.

The council did place some restric-



# ACID FACTORY MENACE

tions on the factory. One of the conditions of planning permission was that waste gases must not contain more than 2% sulphur dioxide.

For several months that caused Leathers no problem. They simply evaded it... by not equipping the factory with gauges to measure the sulphur dioxide level. That way no-one knew whether they were breaking the regulation or not.

However, the pollution was so obvious that eventually the council served an enforcement order and monitoring gauges were installed.

From Leathers' point of view the gauges could not have been better designed. For they only give readings below 2%. So when Leathers go over the limit no-one knows by how much.

On two days last year there were serious discharges from the factory. In the first case fumes from Leathers travelled more than a mile to another factory and made workers ill. In the second, discharges of sulphur dioxide enveloped shoppers in Sutton three times in one day.

St Helens council sent Leathers two enforcement orders claiming the firm had broken the regulations. The notices would have allowed the council to take Leathers to court, and at last it looked as though they had Leathers cornered.

But Leathers appealed and a public inquiry was called. Although Leathers were given two months' notice of the inquiry, they got it

delayed for three weeks, claiming the date chosen was inconvenient to their legal advisers.

Leathers challenged on a technicality. Another of the planning conditions said that if sulphur dioxide levels did go over the limit the factory must stop production within half an hour.

Leathers argued that the two regulations should be taken together. In other words it was all right to go over the 2% limit occasionally, provided remedial action was taken within thirty minutes. The inquiry was to decide which interpretation was correct.

The course taken by St Helens corporation is a lengthy one and at best is only partially effective. It is now more than a year since the first incident covered by the enforcement notices. The inquiry was last December and the result has still not been announced.

If the Department of the Environment decides the notices are valid the corporation will be able to prosecute. Both incidents - and any future ones - then have to be proved in court. The maximum fine is only £400 which for a firm like Leathers (who are owned by the huge Occidental Petroleum Corporation of America) is nothing more than a light rap over the knuckles.

The notices only deal with excessive discharges from the factory chimney (Leathers have been altering their cooling system to reduce this anyway). The notices do not deal with accidents like the one which affected Mrs Kay and her baby.

An investigation by the Department of the Environment blamed this incident on an "inexperienced" tanker driver who was trying to fill his tanker with oleum (an extremely concentrated form of sulphuric acid) through pipes which did not connect properly.

The man carried on for about ten minutes, apparently ignoring the dense cloud of sulphur trioxide fumes which belched out into the surrounding streets.

There have been several other accidents. So far this year, residents have reported cases of a passer-by and a car being sprayed with acid.

There are two other - more drastic - steps the council could possibly take.

One is prosecution for nuisance under public health laws. But this type of prosecution can only be brought by the Attorney General, who has so far been unco-operative. Apparently a nuisance is not legally speaking a nuisance unless it is very severe and continues almost 24 hours a day.

The other possibility is to issue a discontinuance notice. This is a very drastic procedure, rarely used. If successful it would result in the factory closing down.

In that case, Leathers could well get the last laugh. For St Helens would have to pay them compensation.

Crazy, isn't it... that the cost of pollution must be borne - not by those who cause it but - by those who suffer from it.



SIGNS OF CONFUSION in Lewis's.

## LEWIS'S

(Continued from page one)

In addition, the Chief Fire Officer called for:

- Improvements in the maintenance of unobstructed exit routes (he says there has now been "a marked improvement").
- Prominent signs on all emergency exits and fire doors (most of this has now been done).
- Greater care in the display of all goods in the store.

The meeting of March 1972 (reported in Free Press No 14) was by no means the beginning of the Lewis's affair.

As long ago as the mid-1960s the corporation told them they would have to build a new staircase to comply with the Act.

A month after the March 1972 meeting the Chief Building Surveyor (who was then responsible for fire precautions) again tackled Lewis's. Mr Greensmith made a promise: either he would tell the corporation within six months what the company's plans for the store were, or work would start by January 1973 on enclosing some of the staircases.

January came and despite several reminders Lewis's neither announced their plans nor started work on the staircases.

The following month the store became the responsibility of the Chief Fire Officer. He went to a few meetings but made little headway.

The whole business looked like

Mr. Greensmith explained that the proposals for their building would involve a minimum expenditure of £514,000 plus certain later auxiliary expenditure bringing the total cost to over £600,000. The Board of the Company felt they just could not face this expenditure on the existing Store and if there were no way out they really would have to close the Store. In this connection he made the point that the Store was in fact on the fringe of the shopping area of the City as it exists to-day and was not the pulling power it used to be.

Part of the Town Clerk's confidential report on the meeting with Lewis's in March 1972. Mr Greensmith, Lewis's managing director has since denied that he threatened to close the store, though it is hard to see why the corporation would invent the story. The threat seems to have been intended to frighten the corporation into moderating their demands.

## LETTERS TO THE FREE PRESS

### BETTER HOUSING?

I WISH to give you the truth about the housing problem in this city because I am a victim of this.

The Health Department, Planning Department and Corporation must have gone soft to think they can re-house at the same rate as they are pulling down.

The Health Department say their reason for clearance orders is that the majority of old houses are affected by damp, inadequate natural light, sanitation etc, and I refer to the 1957 Housing Act and the notices on compulsory purchase.

A first class waste of money was Sir Thomas White Gardens. It was supposed to be modernised. Each flat cost over £1,000 and there are about 450 dwellings. It was modernised as follows:

1. A fire hazard.
2. Sculleries too small with inadequate light.
3. Only one living room (with inadequate light).
4. Bedrooms with inadequate light.
5. Ventilation very poor, especially gas fires, cooking etc.
6. Living conditions very poor generally.

I refer to the faults because the Health Department have made their statements about old houses, as we are living with worse health hazards. It is wrong when we have to live with problems which are supposed to be cleared away when we modernise.

As it is, we end up with a modern-

ised slum, and Liverpool Corporation are allowed to carry on wasting the public's money.

I had to leave an old house under a compulsory purchase order, which was supposed to be unfit, although I don't think so because it was not a fire hazard. Living accommodation, bedrooms and scullery (large) had plenty of light, there was also plenty of ventilation. Living conditions all round were very good.

All that the old houses needed was sanitation and a bathroom. But they would not spend money to do good in this city. They are wasting our money on stupid plans.

If each householder under a compulsory purchase order were granted £500 to improve, they would have done so. They don't want to leave houses they have spent all their lives in, just because some red tape says they have to be pulled down. It's so easy to pull down, but a lot harder to rebuild in this city.

The truth of this is, Liverpool Corporation don't want to save money when they are stealing land, and paying washers out to the owners who have no say in this matter.

We are not progressing in this city, we are going back over a hundred years, to make it a dead city with modern plans which are no benefit to the people living here.

WILLIAM SAUNDERSON  
20 Sir Thomas White Gardens,  
Liverpool 5.

**ALDERMAN Joe Morgan, Liverpool's Labour housing boss, is flat-hunting.....for himself. And he's causing nothing but embarrassment.**

**Alderman Morgan isn't homeless. It's just that he seems to fancy a move from his comfortable council flat near the Queen's Drive, Walton.**

The story in Free Press No 14. See letter below, "Come here, Joe!"

### COME HERE, JOE!

DO YOU THINK the Labour housing boss, Alderman Joe Morgan would care to swap with me? It's a good district and a nice two bedroomed flat. One snag, we are part-time stewards. My husband does a 40-hour week at work and 20 hours here. I do 30 hours at work and 10 here.

We have been 21 years on Liverpool Corporation's housing list and have been offered ONE letting - multi storey. A few weeks ago we attended the Housing Department, received another form, presumably to wait another 20 years.

Throughout our lives we have taken part-time caretaker jobs to give our family a good home. Our own fault, I know, but please how do we obtain a home of our own? We are too old to buy one and getting too old to work

so many hours each week.

Not your problem, but it's off my chest. I have high hopes of a fairer housing system under the Liberal council, or am I a fool?

N. GRAY (Mrs)  
Flat 10, Field House,  
Haymans Green, West Derby.

### MODERNISATION...

I HAVE JUST returned from a meeting over the problems arising from the modernisation of houses in Speke.

I own a 1963 Ford Anglia which I used for transport to work in Aintree. I had a few days off last April and decided I would do some maintaining of my car. The engine had to be lifted up 2½ inches and supported on jacks to do this.

While I was out with my wife the workmen from the company who did the tiling of the roofs decided to move my car without my permission, having had a fortnight to get this. They took it on their own bat to move it. Results: Engine came off jacks and crashed down on cross-member (chassis) and damaged the crankshaft.

The matter is in the hands of solicitors who seem reluctant to push it very far as I am being offered £20 for repairs.

I lost over £60 in bus fares and wages between April 26 and July 6, the date when I left my job through health and transport problems (rather

than be sacked for bad timekeeping through having to use buses and relying on lifts to and from work).

I've told my solicitor to tell the company concerned what they can do with their £20.

My second story is about the two men who did the loft insulation. They left two rolls in the loft.

On enquiring why, I was told "They are for you to finish off" - a little job of lagging the cistern and loft pipes to prevent freezing.

How nice! Perhaps the £20 compensation was wages as well for finishing off the roof insulation.

F. GRIFFIN  
8 Speke Church Road,  
Speke, Liverpool 24.

