

Improved houses still a high fire risk

ABOUT 230 timber-framed houses will remain serious fire risks... although they are being improved by the council.

These council homes around Karonga Way in Fazakerley are appallingly dangerous.

During the last two years fire has completely destroyed two houses, badly damaged seven and caused some damage to about twenty others.

It has been estimated that these homes can be burnt-out within ten minutes.

After years of stalling, the council agreed as 'a matter of urgency' to spend £4,760 on each house. But this is a cut-price job. The fire risk will only be reduced.

Even the housing department admit their work will give residents

only about another 20 minutes to escape.

These houses would never pass the building regulations, if constructed today.

On the outside is just one layer of brick (instead of the usual two). On the inside is the three-inch timber frame.

In between is a small cavity, and then struck to the timber batons there is a soft fibre board called Celetex.

This celetex is highly flammable, allowing flames to spread rapidly.

In a bid to save about £1,550 a house, the council have decided not to remove the celetex and fire-proof the wooden frames. Instead, half-inch plasterboard is being nailed to

the frames on the inside of the rooms. This will give some fire resistance.

But a qualified architect told the Free Press: "It is a bad principle... and potentially dangerous... to have a flammable material concealed in the structure of the house."

"The houses are being rewired, but you only need a bit of bare cable at some point to start a fire. The flames could still spread quickly along the cavity."

The residents have been fighting for years to have their homes made safe. But they are so angry about the plans that they are forming a new tenants' group. At least one tenant is refusing to allow the builders into his home.

Why those repairs in Knowsley take such a long time

KNOWSLEY COUNCIL have established themselves as the worst landlord on Merseyside.

With hundreds of empty homes rotting, the council have recently taken to throwing families into the street.

Labour councillors apparently see this as the answer to a situation where a majority of their 39,000 tenants own rent.

But even a brief look at just one of Knowsley's duties as a landlord - to carry out repairs - gives some idea of the reason.

- The council have 540 men on housing maintenance. Without adding one man to the workforce, they have made them responsible for the upkeep of all schools and public buildings from last April. This has priority over housing repairs.

- There are so few labourers that tradesmen act as tradesmen's mates. The men say the job can't be organised properly without more labourers. The council refuse to employ them.

- What's more, the men have been told the council have budgetted for only 365 men this year.

- The running of various depots is chaotic. There are no central stores. And in Halewood 30 men are working from what was a doctor's surgery in Torrington Drive. Work on a temporary depot in New Hutte Lane has been abandoned: around £1,500 wasted.

- The department have no large

vehicles for moving materials. Small vans have been hired for two years at a cost of over £100,000.

- The men say that out of £81 per house allowed this year for repairs, no less than £41 goes on administration.

- A new department - the Maintenance Services Department - has suddenly been found necessary. The resulting system for dealing with repairs is insane:

A complaint is made. This is referred to the Maintenance Services Dept. They send an inspector who orders "all necessary work."

This is passed through the Architect's Department to the Direct Works Department. They send a second inspector to find out exactly what's to be done. Only then is the job carried out.

All this sometimes means a delay of several days to deal with minor repairs.

Recently Knowsley council decided without any consultation to end a bonus scheme at the end of the year.

The District Secretary of the building workers' union, UCATT, wrote angrily: "Never in the history of Merseyside has any local authority dealt with this trade union in the manner to which you are apparently dealing with us."

Many of Knowsley council's tenants could justifiably write in very similar terms.

FLAT AGENCIES

PROFITING FROM THE HOMELESS

FLAT AGENCIES are still profiting from the plight of the homeless, despite a court of appeal ruling that it is illegal to charge prospective tenants a commission.

On Merseyside, one agency in particular, City Estates of Bold Street have been very bold in their flouting of the law.

They were recently fined a total of £300 for six offences of charging illegal fees.

They must be making enough to pay the fines, however, for they are still charging fees.

If you look in the Yellow Pages you won't find an entry for City Estates. They appear under the name of City Flats. The office has a plaque outside saying City Flats/City Estates, but inside you will find only a door with a tatty notice saying City Estates.

They charge an illegal fee of £4. For this they promise to supply addresses until suitable accommodation is obtained.

This may well be true if you are persistent enough. But take warning from the experience of one lady.

Among the addresses she was given, one did not exist, at one the landlord said he'd been continually telling City Estates the flat was filled, and another said there had never been any agreement with the agency.

Needless to say the prospective tenant remained a prospective tenant.

Mystery of blood in police jeep

MYSTERIOUS bloodstains in a Liverpool police Landrover have been described by a forensic scientist.

He was giving evidence when a couple who alleged they were beaten up by the police appeared in court, accused of wasting police time.

One Saturday last December, Tommy Satchel and Rita Lindsay had an evening out. They were in a taxi at the corner of Duke Street and Paradise Street when the driver stopped a police van.

The couple were arrested and charged with being drunk and disorderly.

They were taken away in a police Landrover by Sgt Harold Tranter, Constables Brian Jones, Walter Greenway, Stanley Griffiths and Policewoman Lynne Pape.

Taxi driver David Alan Reed told the court the couple were fighting in the back of the taxi.

"They were punching each other and pulling hair and scratching and shoving." He said Tommy Satchel had blood on his face and neck, and down his shirt.

The couple deny fighting and say they were just kissing and cuddling. They maintain that all their injuries were inflicted by the police after their arrest.

Mr Michael Firth, Chief Biologist at the North-West Forensic Science Laboratory, Chorley, took samples of bloodstains from both the Landrover and the taxi.

He said he took three samples from the taxi. Both were of blood group 'B' - the same as both Tommy Satchel and Rita Lindsay.

The third sample was of an entirely different kind - group 'O'. That certainly did not come from either of the accused. And yet the taxi driver swore that no-one had ever been bleeding in his taxi before.

Stranger still is the blood in the Landrover. From Mr Firth's description it sounded like the set for a Hollywood Western:

"There was an area of blood spattering inside the vehicle and several drips of blood on the rear door.

"There were numerous blood

spots on the roof, occasional blood spots on the walls of both sides of the rear compartment.

"There were some spots on the floor and a heavy stain on the back edge of one seat."

Police dog handler Ronald Arthur Greenwood, who made the arrests, suggested the obvious explanation. He told the court Tommy Satchel was bleeding heavily when put into the Landrover.

But curiously neither of the blood samples said to be from the Landrover could have belonged to Tommy Satchel. They were both group 'O'.

So whose blood was it? Perhaps that will become clearer when the Dracula Show re-opens for a season at Liverpool Crown Court.

ALTHOUGH it's a long time ago now, somebody probably saw the arrests of Tommy Satchel and Rita Lindsay. We would be interested to hear from anyone who was at the corner of Duke St and Paradise St about 12.30 a.m. on the night of Sat/Sun December 14/15 last year.

TWO LIVERPOOL men - Frank Keeley and Rick Walker - are among fourteen pacifists now on trial at the Old Bailey.

The fourteen, supporters of the British Withdrawal from Northern Ireland Campaign (BWNIC), are charged with conspiring to incite troops to disaffection. Thirteen are also charged under the 1934 Incitement to Disaffection Act.

The charges arise out of the distribution of a leaflet, "Some Information for Discontented Soldiers" which detailed various ways of leaving the army.

Below, one of the defendants gives some impressions of the trial so far...

THE GENERAL effect of being involved in a long political trial (the prosecution case has now run and run for nearly four weeks and continues) is that an average defendant like me gets very bored, pretty depressed, out of condition and generally pissed off.

I haven't done so much clock watching since I was at school, where I was similarly obliged to pay attention to irrelevant garbage which I have no desire to follow, which doesn't even hold academic interest and which is so tediously presented that any stimulus in terms of cut and thrust debate or humour is totally lost in a thick fog of legal bullshit, technical submissions, powdered wig niceties, and over 1,000 pieces of paper.

The atmosphere as a whole is much like a schoolroom. Every so often the bad boys and girls overstep the mark with their giggling, passing of notes etc, or with raising matters which they didn't oughter, and of course they get threatened with a detention.

As yet the naughty boys and girls have neither overstepped the mark too far nor suffered a detention (except for one who already has a three-year detention for burning down a laboratory which tortured animals).

Much of the credit goes to the senior good boys who consistently dig the irresponsible ones out of trouble.

And the headmaster? Well, we probably have one of the toughest. Our counsel, in all seriousness, has compared him with Melford Stevenson. He is called Neil McKinnon, an Australian by birth.

Unfortunately he has a ready wit and is excellent at handling tricky situations. This means that we have an unsympathetic judge, who nevertheless appears witty and articulate, who is not malicious, but really does

IT'S LIKE BEING BACK AT SCHOOL

not seem to understand political trials.

This is far worse than having (a) a fair judge who regards the whole thing as a charade in which case the defence will be eminently fairly represented; or (b) a really dull bastard who will put the jury's collective back up by obstructing defendants.

I have said that I consider this a political trial. Of course all trials are political. In particular conspiracy charges are political. Almost all the trials in our vicinity are conspiracy trials. No matter what for.

Ironic, is it not, that after the Labour conference came out so strongly against conspiracy laws, we should continue to be prosecuted by a Labour government (through Silkin the Attorney General, Archer the Solicitor General - both political appointments - and the Director of Public Prosecutions) for "conspiracy"; and that after the Labour contingent promised the repeal of the Incitement to Disaffection Act (1934), we should be prosecuted by a Labour government under the said act?

- The Defence Campaign still needs money and support. Contact: Box 1934, 48 Manchester St. L'pool 1



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