

PARENTS BLAME COLD, DAMP FLATS

Mysterious baby deaths hit Belle Vale estate



Some of the Belle Vale flats.

IN JUST OVER two months four babies — all from the same housing estate — have died. All died of “acute pneumonitis”. Three died within 25 days of each other.

The babies all lived in the same kind of maisonette flats at Belle Vale.

On the estate there are about 600 of these maisonettes, which are built in long, barrack-like blocks.

Naturally the tenants are anxious to know whether the deaths are a coincidence, or whether they are linked in some way to the damp, unhealthy conditions in the maisonettes.

Statistically, the deaths are strange. Only about 20 babies from the Liverpool area die of ‘acute pneumonitis’ each year. These deaths are more commonly known as cot deaths.

The trouble is that ‘cot death’ is a wide term used to cover a number of causes of death, most of which are unknown.

The reason for the deaths of the four babies is liable to remain a mystery. Almost certainly they caught a virus and had some inflammation of the lungs. The pathologist has taken samples but doesn’t expect the tests to reveal anything.

One of Britain’s leading authorities on cot deaths, Dr Ian Forest-Haye

said this clustering of deaths is “uncommon” and “very interesting”... “that’s all I can say with confidence.”

Cot deaths can happen in well-off families, but there is a higher rate amongst poor families. And environmental conditions could play a part in the sudden deaths.

Certainly the three-storey maisonettes are far from ideal for adults, let alone young children.

Although they were completed only last year, they are already firmly in the ‘hard-to-let’ category.

There is no central heating in the ground-floor and top-floor bedrooms, and these rooms are like ice-boxes at night. And it is the bedrooms which tend to be the dampest rooms with fungus often growing around the windows and pools of water collecting on the floors.

Housing officials tell the tenants the damp is just condensation. Their advice is laughable. Tenants are told to “open the windows and keep heaters on all day.”

But as the Free Press reported [issue 17] the Council knows these

flats are a disaster. The architects, Shankland-Cox and the builders, Unit, have overspent by about £1½ million. The council officers have accused them of failing to design and build to building regulation standards.

A confidential report by officers said: “Although it is accepted that there are problems with condensation, particularly when gas warm air heating is used, the officers are of the opinion that if more consideration had been given to this matter in the design stage many of the problems would have been overcome.”

“One of the major problems of damp penetration arises between the coping and the asphalt upstand to the roof...”

Local doctors are convinced they have to deal with an extraordinary

high number of patients from these flat blocks who have respiratory problems such as asthma and bronchitis.

The first Belle Vale baby to die was Paul Blain, aged 13 months, of Devizes Mews. Paul was seen a number of times by a local doctor when suffering from colds and bronchitis. He slept in the damp, ground-floor bedroom. He died on September 21.

John McClone, aged 8 months, of 27e Devizes Walk, died on November 1. John was never well, and had a number of bad colds. He was taken to the doctor about once a week.

“I don’t think living in this place helped at all,” said his mother. Mrs McClone, who has four children, said “My children have never been well since we came here.”

Michael Parry, aged three months, of 34 Damerham Walk, died on November 17. His parents say he was a ‘healthy’ baby.

Jennifer Kewin, aged three months, of 44 Dauntsey Mews, died on November 25. When she died, her 19-month-old brother, Kevin, was in hospital suffering from Croop disease, which can be caused by dampness. Kevin and the eldest child, Edward, have had a number of very bad colds while living in this maisonette.

Mrs Andrea Kewin doesn’t use the ground floor bedroom because pools of water collect around the windows and on the floor.

“It’s like a fridge in there. I wouldn’t let a dog sleep there,” she said.

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THE BUILDING WORKERS’ CHARTER SAYS:

KILL THE LUMP

Some of the charter’s demands...

- £1.50 per hour craftsmen — £1.45 per hour labourers. Guaranteed minimum bonus and Joint Board Supplement to be put onto basic rate. Threshold agreements that fully compensate for loss of earnings to be reviewed on monthly basis. Settlements of no more than 12 months duration. All wage negotiations to be referred back to members before acceptance.
- Reduction of the working week from 40 to 35 hours without loss of earnings.
- An end to the Lump. No labour-only or bona fide sub-contractors clause. All councils to have clause in contract forbidding use of sub-contracting. Government legislation — to include a manpower board for dealing with the Lump and de-casualisation of the industry.
- Policy: Democratised the trade unions by (a) making delegate conferences policy-making bodies; (b) making all TU officials submit themselves for election every three years and branch officials every year; (c) the disbanding of selection boards. Full protection and recognition for shop stewards, with provision for regular meetings.

Read and sell the Building Workers’ Charter. Copies from Eddie Nash, 11 Broad View, Lorenzo Drive, Liverpool L11 1BL.

Police offer deal to woman picket

JUSTICE is having some difficulty taking its course over a Fazakerley woman arrested while picketing an off-licence.

Mrs Gladys Weaver had been the manageress of an Ashe and Nephew shop in Scargreen Avenue, Fazakerley. But she was sacked in October for refusing to play dirty tricks on her staff to test their honesty [see Free Press No 21].

Mrs Weaver and the staff were immediately joined on the picket line by friends and neighbours to effect a total boycott of the shop. Their success led, naturally, to the intervention of the police.

Mrs Weaver and her son, Tony, were picked out and charged with obstruction. When they appeared before Liverpool magistrates at the end of November they were deter-

mined to plead ‘Not Guilty’.

But before the case started, says Mrs Weaver, they were approached by the prosecuting solicitor. “He said it was a political thing which could go on all day.”

He offered a deal: In return for ‘Guilty’ pleas the police would offer no evidence and all that would happen would be that they would be bound over to keep the peace. Mrs Weaver refused.

As a result, the magistrates adjourned the case until April. This should give them enough time to work out another scheme to ensure that “justice” is done.

● Liverpool Trades Council have taken up Mrs Weaver’s case with the Chief Constable, the Home Office and the TUC.

FREE PRESS

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Free Press meeting

Have you any stories or ideas for our next issue (or comments on this one)? If so, come for an informal chat at the Vines (‘The Big House’), Lime Street on Sunday January 18 at 8 p.m. This is particularly for anyone who can’t call at our office during the daytime.

BILL MARSHALL

Will the person who phoned the Free Press following our article about Bill Marshall please contact us again.

Who can he serve?

POOR ERIC OGDEN. Suddenly everything’s going wrong for him. Now even his fellow MPs have told him to get lost.

Ogden, the Labour member for West Derby, Liverpool, brought the latest trouble on himself by complaining that an article in the Free Press about his business connections was a breach of Parliamentary Privilege.

As often happens when Ogden opens his mouth — he put his foot in it. “I seek not the protection of this House,” he moaned, “but its judgement as to the truth or falsehood of this article.”

Ogden should have known better. The House of Commons Privileges Committee, who deal with MPs’ complaints, do not pass judgement on the truth or otherwise of newspaper articles — and never have done.

Naturally the committee refused to consider the complaint.

The whole ludicrous affair has cost the public several hundred pounds (the committee’s report alone cost £142.50 to print) and has made Ogden appear more ridiculous than before.

Constituents will no doubt ask whether — if he can’t look after his own interest in Parliament properly — he can do any better looking after theirs.

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Eric Ogden MP

P.S. We understand that Free Press readers with a humorous turn of mind have been pestering Mr Ogden to give them tobacco. This is not at all funny and has got to stop.

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