

CORRUPT DEAL PUT LIVES AT RISK

THE CORRUPT dealings of a council leader almost cost the lives of a Birkenhead family.

The man involved is Jack Roberts, deputy chairman of Merseyside County Council.

While leader of Birkenhead council in 1972, Roberts unscrupulously influenced a council decision — with the result that potentially lethal heaters were installed in 58 council homes.

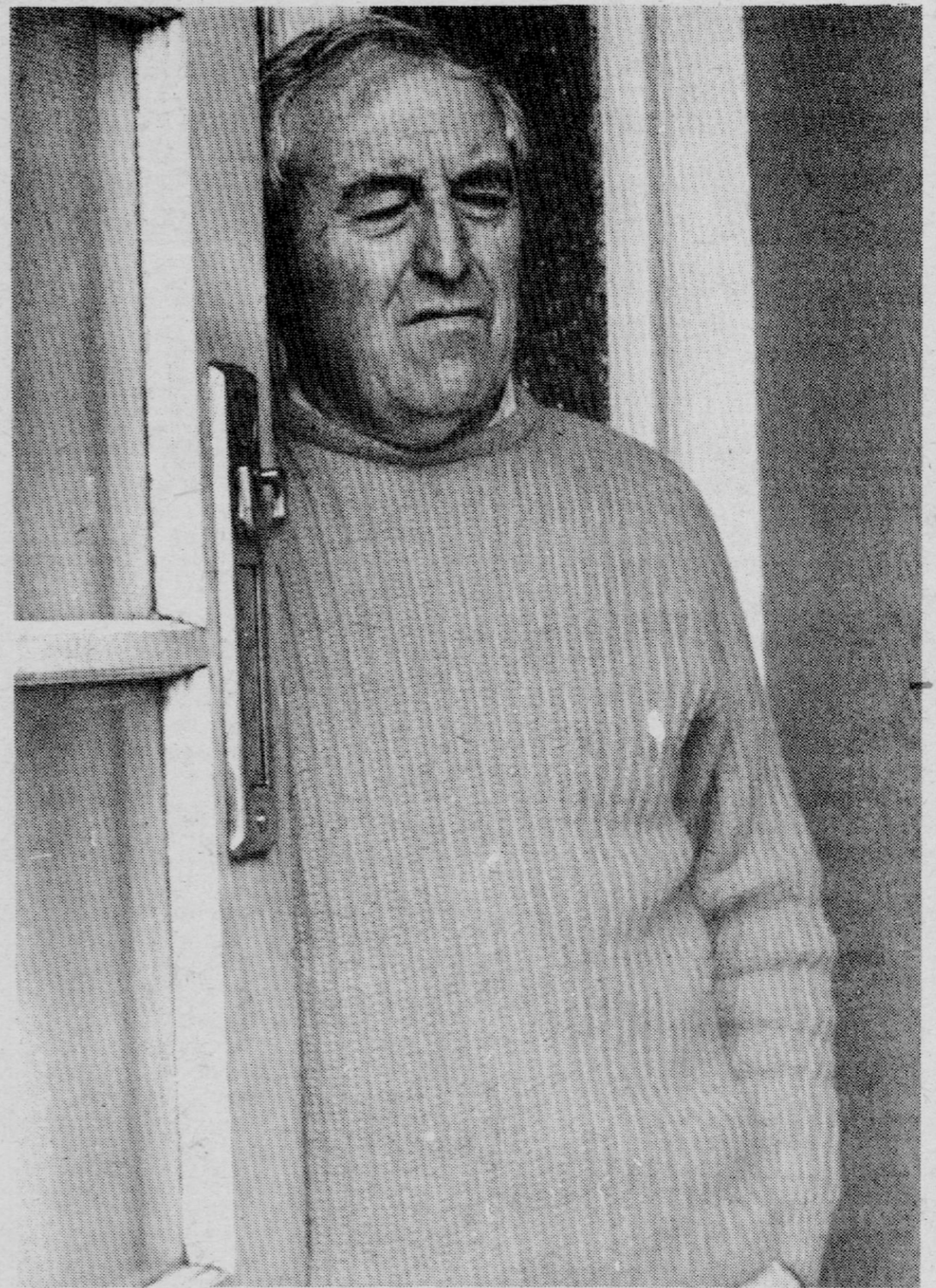
Roberts had a secret motive — secret, that is, until now. He was a partner in the firm that sold and fitted the heaters.

First he attempted to influence a senior council official. Then he concealed his business interests from the council. Finally Roberts — a magistrate — lied to Birkenhead County Court to try and avoid meeting his business debts.

The story of Roberts' Slenderad heaters came close to tragedy when fire swept a house on the Woodward Road estate and the family inside narrowly escaped death.

The cause of the fire was a Slenderad heater, put there at Councillor Roberts' instigation, bought by the council from Roberts' own firm.

Slenderad heaters had never been tested or approved by any British safety authority, and the council had been warned of the danger.



Councillor J.H. Roberts, J.P.

A CURIOUS CHOICE...

THE SLENDERAD saga began in 1972. Birkenhead Council were to improve 58 council houses at Woodward Road, Rock Ferry. One of the improvements was to be central heating.

Birkenhead Housing Committee's desire to choose the Slenderad heating panel was a curious one. At that time there was growing concern about the hazards of electric heating panels, and by March 1973 the Home Office had asked local fire brigades to notify them of any fires involving Slenderad.

On the preliminary plans for the house improvements the architect had indicated that officially approved electric storage heaters were to be used.

But then Slenderad came on the scene.

Not surprisingly the council officials were unenthusiastic about Slenderad. In their report they pointed out that it was still in the prototype stage, and recommended that the council embark only on a pilot scheme.

But before that report had been prepared Jack Roberts mentioned Slenderad to Mr Peter Foode, Birkenhead's assistant director of hous-

ing, responsible for architecture.

And as far as Mr Foode is concerned, Roberts made a clear attempt to influence him in favour of Slenderad.

HURRIED APPROVAL

SLENDERAD did not have the approval of MANWEB, nor the British Electro-Technical Approvals Board. The B.E.A.B., in fact, notified Birkenhead council on October 25, 1972 that Slenderad was "not approved".

But by that time Birkenhead housing committee, acting with some haste, had already decided to have Slenderad installed, and dismissed any idea of a pilot scheme.

The council officials were still uneasy. They pointed out that if objects were pushed against the heaters hot-spots occurred which caused short-circuits — a clear fire hazard.

The housing committee were not to be put off. An amazing solution to that little problem was soon found.

The heating panels would be put out of everyone's reach. In disbelief council tenants watched as their heaters were stuck unceremoniously on to the ceilings.

On October 3 Mr Foode visited the manufacturers to give the ceiling panels a final inspection. The housing committee's only representative on that inspection was Coun-

cillor Jack Roberts.

So the £11,000 Slenderad contract went through smoothly, without a whisper from Jack Roberts about his business interests.

Slenderad were manufactured by the now defunct Dryden Electronics of Preston.

The Merseyside franchise, however, was eventually awarded to a company called Merseyside Electronic Products (MEP), whose main director on paper was Jack Scarisbrick, Roberts' partner in a building firm, Meadway Developments.

Both these companies — Meadway and MEP — operated from the same small offices at 1a Hamilton Square, a few yards from Birkenhead Town Hall.

INTO THE OPEN

BY APRIL 1973 MEP had begun installing the Slenderad panels in the Woodward Road houses. And that was when the Jack Roberts connection began to emerge into the open.

MEP advertised for a contracts manager. The successful applicant was a Mr James Knox and he received a letter from Scarisbrick inviting him for a final interview.

The letter said: "If you are interested perhaps you could attend for a further meeting at this office on Saturday 14 April 1973 at 11.30 a.m. in conjunction with my partner, J.H. Roberts, J.P."

Mr Knox attended the interview

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The fire at 6 Power Road, Rock Ferry.