



Crumbling buildings are a lethal danger



Danger to life: Broken masonry lies on the pavement outside the community police office and outside another premises on the opposite side of the High Road after recent falls and, right, the huge block that fell off the roof of Amazing Grates in 2023

By Julia Lawrence

Bouts of extreme weather over the winter have led to a worrying and potentially lethal spate of incidents in the High Road, N2, where chunks of masonry and roof tiles have fallen from buildings, and smashed onto the pavement below.

Most recently after a cold snap in January, early morning commuters walking to East Finchley station noticed the pavement outside the Metropolitan Police office littered with lumps of crumbled plaster and concrete. Dr Claire Phipps, who lives in Bedford Road, chanced upon the damage, on her way to work. "I don't know how someone hasn't been killed,"

she told The Archer. "I make a point now of walking away from the shop fronts, and near the kerb. I appreciate it is up to individual owners to make sure their buildings are safe, but I think a collective process is needed, which is in the interests of everyone." About a year earlier, a similar thing happened on the opposite side of the High Road.

On this occasion, several large and heavy pieces of cornicing had come loose from a façade, thankfully overnight.

Who's responsible?

Incidents of falling masonry often follow bouts of extreme weather: heavy rain seeps into cracks, freezes and expands, leaving concrete and plaster loose when the ice thaws. Structural work can also lead to damage.

On 10 January 10, the UK had one of its coldest nights in 15 years, with temperatures plunging in some areas to minus 19C. On 11 January, Heath Street, in Hampstead, was closed off following reports of rubble falling from a roof.

Many of the buildings on the High Road in N2 were built around the turn of the last century, and property law states that it is the responsibility of the freeholder, not individual leaseholders in flats or shops, to ensure that the building's edifice and roof is of a safe and acceptable standard.

Surveyors from Barnet Council carry out site inspections when incidents are reported, but identifying who is the freeholder is not always straightforward, as a management company can often be responsible.

Regular calls

In November 2023, as reported in The Archer, the owners of the Amazing Grates fireplace shop, which dates back to 1905, had



Emergency service: Firemen check the safety of the Amazing Grates rooftop following the incident there last winter. Photo Mike Coles

a similar incident when a large section of one of the 'corbels', or decorative supportive structures, sheered off its frontage and landed on the High Road pavement.

Freeholder and owner, Liz Tew told us: "I immediately sectioned it off, so that people couldn't walk under it and rang the fire brigade who came and removed the rest of it. When the council surveyor came he said they get a call once a fortnight around the area, as a lot of these buildings are so old."

The building was declared safe by the surveyor, but Liz says she's still very anxious about it. "I would like the other corbel removed. We have had such extremes of wind and rain, if it has happened once, it strikes me as reasonable that it could happen again, which is a horrible thought."

Report concerns

Kate Brown, chair of the East

Finchley Town Team group, which promotes the use of local shops and businesses in the High Road, said: "The legal position is clear. The responsibility for maintaining properties rests with the freeholder. It is vital for everyone's safety that they do so."

"It is excellent that The Archer is raising this issue and as a Town Team we would encourage anyone who has a concern about a building to use the proper reporting process."

How to raise the alarm

Reports can be made by going to www.barnet.gov.uk and searching 'dangerous building'. Alternatively, email via: building.control@barnet.gov.uk. Otherwise, call the Building Control department on 020 8359 4500, Monday to Friday between 9am and 5pm and out of hours on: 020 8359 2000 or in an emergency dial 999.

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Friends join forces in anti-nuclear protest

Three East Finchley residents have set up a new branch of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Kate, Ruth and Sally met by chance on the bus to a national demonstration outside the US Air Force base at Lakenheath in Suffolk to protest against the siting of US nuclear warheads in Britain for the first time in 15 years.

"We discovered a shared concern about the increasing threat of war in Europe," said

Sally. "We were surprised to see each other on the coach. After chatting, we realised that if three of us are this concerned about having nuclear warheads sited within 80 miles of our home, there are probably other people equally disturbed, or maybe they just don't realise yet this is happening."

An initial meeting to see if

there was an appetite for forming a new branch led to others joining, including two friends and campaigners from the former days of CND. If you are concerned about these issues or would like to know more email info@londoncnd.org and write Finchley in the subject bar.