

RISCAuthority at work



Dr Jim Glockling questions why we are so tolerant of large fires that destroy heritage properties, when more effort needs to be made to protect our national treasures

ANYONE WHO checks the BBC News website each morning will be struck by the number of fires being reported and it does make you wonder why this might be. Are fires as a whole on the increase, are they bigger, or are they just more newsworthy?

Recently reported fires include empty hospitals, empty manor houses, seaside piers, power stations, and waste storage and recycling sites to name but a few. While they are reported, it does seem staggering that they are seldom accompanied by outrage. In the case of the Northfield Manor house fire, a historic building and former home of George Cadbury, it was left to Cadbury's family and former occupants to cite the shame of the loss of a beautiful building.

The building was in the care of Birmingham University, having been bequeathed to them by the family. Boarded up, yet locally Grade A listed, who's asking whether they were a safe pair of hand for this historically important building? Shouldn't someone be asking more questions and be a bit more angry about this? Investigations have revealed the cause to be arson, but this must not be treated as a 'get out of jail free' card. Just like every other risk, it can be protected against if there is the will to do so.

In a similar vein is Eastbourne Pier, Grade II listed, a national treasure and key feature in assuring the prosperity and identity of Eastbourne itself. There are countless examples of piers burning, but yet again you could be forgiven for thinking this was the first ever from the way it is being reported by some. For someone who understands the differing requirements and drivers for business and property protection as opposed to life safety, some of the statements are particularly galling. The local fire service quite correctly twice previously advised on the installation of fire sprinklers – even without the benefit of hindsight,

this should be a reasonably easy sell given that it's heritage, it's a business and it's made largely of wood!

The pier owner cited that he had a valid fire risk assessment and had fulfilled his mandatory obligations, which is correct in the context of being an employer and owner of a publicly occupied space. But did it satisfy the business resilience requirements expected from any company's managing director, or the heritage protection requirements of anyone responsible for the management and conservation of our important buildings? Probably not, and shouldn't we all be a little outraged about this? The 'stuff' that we treasure and covet as a UK collective is just not being properly protected by the provisions of current Building Regulations or the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. The protection of heritage is just one area where the government's single-minded, life-safety-only remit fails us. Large waste fires can cripple infrastructure; large school fires disrupt the education of those often in greatest need, and large commercial fires can result in job losses and irreversibly depress whole communities.

Timely it is then that in next month's *FRM* you will have the opportunity to support the FPA's *Safe Futures Campaign* by directly lobbying those in a position to invoke change to do a better job of protecting the things beyond life safety that we covet: our heritage, commercial prosperity, jobs and convenience of supply of the things we need. It will offer a polite way of demonstrating to government that we are angry about this, and expect something to be done. Send in the card that will drop out of October's issue and you should receive a personal response from Stephen Williams MP. If enough people do this, maybe something will be done ■

Jim Glockling is technical director of the FPA and director of RISCAuthority