



Harrow Court: 5

**Inquest into
Harrow Court
- Findings**

**Rule 43
Tea lights letter**





**CORONER'S OFFICE
DISTRICT OF HERTFORDSHIRE**

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08 March 2007

The Chief Executive
British Standards Institute
Unit 6, Woodland Way
Failand
Bristol
BS8 3UD

Our Ref: 00342-2005

Dear Sir / Madam,

Re: **TEA LIGHTS**
Michael Miller, Jeffrey Wornham, Natalie Close

On the 2nd March 2007 I completed inquests, with the assistance of a jury, into the tragic deaths of Michael Miller and Jeffrey Wornham, firefighters employed by the Hertfordshire Fire & Rescue Service, and Natalie Close an occupant of Flat 85, 14th Floor, Harrow Court, Stevenage. Narrative Verdicts were brought in by the jury in respect of the deaths of Michael Miller and Jeffrey Wornham, and an Accidental Death verdict in respect of Natalie Close an occupant of the flat. Having successfully rescued one occupant of the flat Michael and Jeffrey died in the course of attempting to rescue Natalie.

Michael Miller and Jeffrey Wornham died of Acute Thermal Injury believed to have been caused when the temperature in the flat rose suddenly to an estimate by experts of 600° C or possibly 1000° C depending on one's estimation of the windspeed.

Natalie Close died as a result of Inhalation of Fire Fumes and it was felt that she may well have been dead by the time the firefighters attempted to rescue her. The other occupant was covered in soot and was, through the actions of the firefighters, able to escape to a place of safety in the corridor and lobby of the 14th Floor.

As announced at the conclusion of the inquest I am writing to you under the provisions of Rule 43 which reads as follows "a Coroner who believes that action should be taken to prevent the recurrence of fatalities similar to that in respect of which the inquest is being held, may announce at the inquest that he is reporting the matter in writing to the person or authority who may have power to take such action and he may report the matter accordingly."

The unanimous conclusion of the expert investigators was that the cause of the fire was the placing of tea lights on a television which led to the ignition of the television producing a fire and smoke. The smoke detector in the flat, installed by Stevenage Borough Council, was

powered by electricity. There was a back-up facility for a battery in case the electricity failed. As is tragically not uncommon there was no battery in the smoke detector and therefore when the electricity failed, because the occupant had run out of credit, in addition to there being no light in the premises there was no effective smoke detector device.

The occupant was given 5 tea lights by a neighbour who had purchased them from a supermarket. There were warnings on the packaging but none on the tea lights themselves. I understand that there is quite a variety in respect of the Safety Labelling on packaging. Some appear to be reasonable in terms of font size and surface area, whereas some are very small. There are however no warnings on the casings of the individual tea lights, whether they are metal or plastic. There is also no fire resistance material at the base of the wax.

The occupants had had quite a lot to drink and they retired to bed with two tea lights placed upon a television that had a plastic covering. There was no fire resistant material between the top of the television and the tea lights.

After the occupants went to sleep one of them woke up to a "popping" sound and found the left hand tea light burning abnormally. The expert evidence was that most probably this was caused by a secondary wick which was enough to ignite the molten wax and heat the casing. The tea lights had not been placed upon a suitable container.

In such circumstances I was informed that, once alight, a tea light could reach a heat sufficient to melt the plastic covering of the television and then ignite the television causing the further fire. The matter was demonstrated vividly by a reconstruction produced by the British Research Establishment in Middlesbrough in October 2005. A DVD of that reconstruction was released to the press on my instruction.

I was also informed that the Alliance for Consumer Fire Safety in Europe has been urging the television industry in Europe to address the risk presented by accidental ignition by night lights/ tea lights and other small ignition sources. All organizations seem to suggest that this problem is maybe increasing in view of the fact that tea lights and candles are now both fashionable and cheap. Certainly there is anecdotal evidence that members of the public are often not aware of these dangers.

I am therefore drawing your attention to the tragic consequences of this incident to see whether your Institute might be able to consider:

(a) Promoting standards for candles and tea lights so that there is a minimum product standard and packaging warning in place for them

(b) That consumers are made aware of the dangers associated with burning tea lights. The Rescue Services recommendation is for a government driven safety campaign in the media or leaflets at point of sale produced by the manufacturer.

(c) Whether it might be possible for the tea light to have its own warning message printed on the container. This would educate and remind the consumer about the dangers associated with burning tea lights at all times. Experimentation on types of container is under discussion between Hertfordshire Trading Standards and Hertfordshire Fire & Rescue Services.

(d) Whether there can be changes of design of the tea lights themselves and televisions with the provision of fire resistance material.

I hope that is helpful and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully

Edward G Thomas
H M Coroner