

The British Safety Council: a unique record of social history

Dr Mike Esbester and Matthew Holder highlight a journey through 60 years of the British Safety Council's history recorded in a digital archive that was made public this year.

In January 2017, the British Safety Council unveiled a digital archive of its work, featuring momentous events from 60 years of British economic, social and political history. The archive contains unique documents and correspondence, as well as photographs, newspapers, magazines and posters, which were thought to be lost but have now been rescued from oblivion. Matthew Holder, Head of Campaigns and Engagement at the British Safety Council, and Dr Mike Esbester, social historian, look back on the events that led to the discovery of these documents and their preservation.

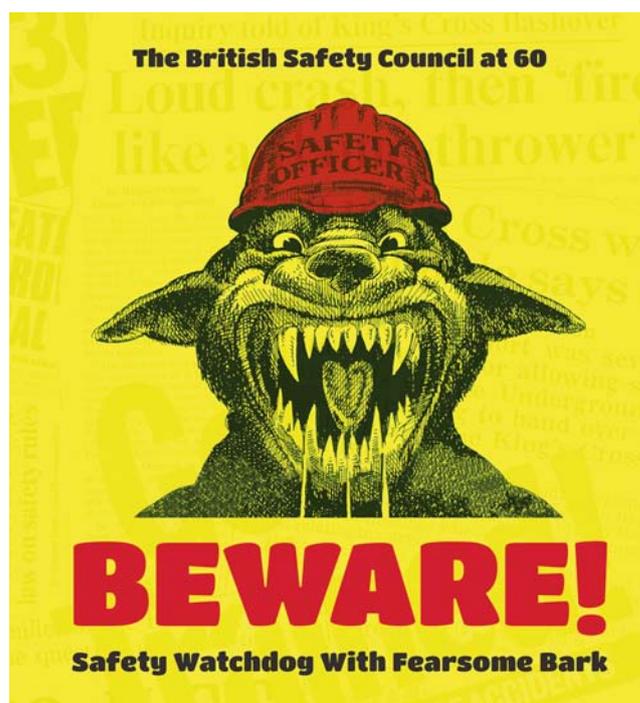
What do seat belts, life jackets and anti-jack knife technology have in common? They were all the subjects of campaigns run by the British Safety Council since its inception in 1957. James Tye, its charismatic founder and leader for nearly 40 years, created the British Safety Council to bring about a transformation in how Great Britain viewed safety and health, particularly occupational safety. In 1957, hundreds, if not thousands, of workers were killed in accidents and James marshalled every conceivable technique to save lives, including PR stunts, training, lobbying for better laws and, crucially, what he called 'propaganda', in the form of posters and other communication tools.

In 2014, a long-lost collection of posters, papers and letters were found gathering dust in a warehouse in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire. The British Safety Council, wanting to mark its 60-year history and its role in reducing deaths at work, used this as an opportunity to preserve the collection and use its contents to promote its 60th anniversary. The documents were digitised and saved as an online digital archive that was launched in January 2017. The British Safety Council has also commissioned historian Mike Esbester to trace the history of health and safety in Britain from the late 1960s through the posters and photographs of the time. The result was the book *Beware! Safety Watchdog with Fearsome Bark*, which was launched at the celebration event held at Regent Street Cinema on 23 March 2017.

Among the treasures in the British Safety Council archive are:



James Tye (right) with the *Safety Sue* magazine from the 1950s.



A book commemorating 60 years of the British Safety Council's campaigning. (A copy of this book can be found in TNA's Library.)

- The first UK report into the need for seat-belt laws, from 1959;
- A comprehensive collection of publications from 1959 to 2010, documenting the British history of this period, including tragedies, eg. the Kings Cross fire and the Hillsborough disaster, changes in politics, industry, fashion and gender;
- Hundreds of unique, hand-drawn posters from the 1970s, 80s and 90s;
- Photographs of celebrities involved in the British Safety Council's campaigns, including Barbara Windsor DBE, Des Lynam OBE and Esther Rantzen DBE;
- An insight into the life and struggles of James Tye;
- The British Safety Council's magazines and newsletters from 1959 to the present day.

Mike Esbester reminisces on how it all began: 'My interest in the history of accidents dates back to the time when I was conducting research funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) on railway worker

accidents in the early 20th century. I discovered that although the idea that accidents might be prevented through education was first developed in the railway sector, it soon spread to other industries and was promoted by organisations such as the British Safety Council.'

Mike approached Neal Stone, Policy & Standards Director at the British Safety Council, with his enquiry about archive materials. Neal's initial response was that there was not anything, as it had all been cleared out before his time. Sadly, this is often the case: if past documents are not immediately relevant to current operations, organisations tend to ditch material which takes up valuable space.

'However, Neal had a great affinity with the past and had not forgotten my enquiry. A few years later, he called me to say that some old documents had been found. Would I go and scope it out with them? Of course, I jumped at the chance. We met in London and took the train up to a warehouse in Mansfield on a grey and damp day. There, we found several pallets, perhaps 15 or so, on the warehouse floor, wrapped in cling film, containing a large number of boxes, but with no indication as to what they contained. After a few hours spent amongst the puddles, we realised that a proper examination of this material was going to take much longer.'

'When I returned to Mansfield, this time with Matthew Holder, Head of Campaigns at the British Safety Council, I was working on a new project at the University of Portsmouth, funded by the Institution of Occupational Safety & Health (IOSH), and looking at perceptions of



Barbara Windsor with safety glasses, 1970s.

health and safety in Britain since 1960. We spent two days going through the material and scoping it for the next stage of our investigation. In Neal and Matthews, the archive had two champions who recommended to the Board of Trustees and the Chief Executive of the British Safety Council that resources should be assigned to this project.'

'By late 2016, all the material had been scanned and catalogued and become available to the public in the format of a digital archive.'

The digital archive is a free resource that reflects the vision of the British Safety Council in making the world of work safer and healthier.

'Through the various materials in the archive, we can see how attitudes to health and safety were changing, as more and more issues crept onto the agenda – particularly in relation to health. We see the introduction of the 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act, which was a game-changer in how we dealt with health and safety, at work and beyond. This period also saw some fundamental changes in the occupational structure of the UK, with an increasing shift away from heavy industry and manufacturing towards an office and service-based economy, again reflected in the British Safety Council's focus and poster output. This included more women in the workforce, so the portrayal of women is something that really dates the material. The Beautiful Eyes competition says it all.'

The real gem of the archive are the historic health and safety posters, designed by Stuart Dorman, who worked for the organisation for some 20 years.

'They may not be high art, but they capture the spirit of the times,' says Mike Esbester. 'The posters reflected the social and political events taking place in the country. Their designs, often funky and flamboyant, featuring the latest fashions, celebrities and ideas, effectively promoted health and safety messages.'

The archive also contains a collection of newspapers and newsletters, which the British Safety Council published on various occasions, often to accompany its campaigns. 'The various newspaper or magazine formats that the British Safety Council published are also revealing. They tell us not only about the charity's priorities, but also how the general public perceived health and safety and what issues were (and weren't) covered,' says Mike.

The archive materials clearly show that James Tye was a larger than life campaigner. 'The Association is established to educate persons, conduct propaganda and carry out research into the causes of accidents and diseases.' With these words, from its 1957 constitution, James Tye launched the British Safety Council, quickly establishing it as one of the largest safety bodies in the



Historic posters of the British Safety Council.
Left poster: 1981, right poster: 1989.

world. In doing so, he made himself a household name as the nation's most energetic and sometimes controversial safety champion.

James Tye was born in London on 21 December 1921. After serving in the RAF during World War II, he became an advertising agent, an experience that undoubtedly shaped his view of the role that communications and campaigns can play in changing behaviours. It is not known for certain why safety became such a passion for James, but it is reported that during the war he witnessed sailors drown as a result of faulty lifejackets after their boat was attacked.

Though the British Safety Council was created as a corporate membership charity, and remains so to this day, James was not confined to discreet conversations about risk management behind closed doors. He wanted to make a noise and drew no false distinctions between public and worker safety. He was the first to publish a report into the need for seat belt laws in 1959. Throughout the 1960s, he campaigned hard for a Royal Commission into the state of safety and health at work and would happily name and shame companies manufacturing products that put lives in danger, including flammable children's nightwear, dangerous drip feed oil heaters, poor smoke masks, inadequate life jackets and buoyancy aids.

As an advocate of the use of publicity to drive safer behaviours, he regularly involved celebrities like Barbara Windsor, Cliff Richard and Stirling Moss. One of his campaigns involved painting white crosses on cars with many dents (as evidence of careless driving). He didn't hesitate to berate the Queen for not wearing a helmet while riding and reprimand Princess Anne and Prince Charles for driving their children without wearing seatbelts. Sometimes, this drive to reach wider audiences led to controversies, such as the 1995 poster featuring the Pope in a hard hat to publicise HIV awareness, one of the most complained about adverts in UK history.

The mandatory wearing of seat belts came into force in 1983, after James Tye had campaigned for driver safety for many years and produced one of the first reports on



James Tye (right) often involved celebrities, like Cliff Richard, in his campaigns.

the need for seat belt laws in 1959. He was equally far-sighted when it came to spotting the significance of well-being, including stress. In the 1980s, he set up the British Wellness Council to produce messages on how to stay physically and mentally healthy. In 1987, he was named World Safety Person of the Year by the World Safety Organisation, and became one of the first Europeans included in the American Safety and Health Hall of Fame International.

'The archive pictures and documents show James Tye as a dogged and energetic man who was unperturbed by others and willing to employ some spectacular stunts to get his message across and raise awareness of health and safety issues,' says Mike.

'We knew that the archive would be a great resource, but we also wanted to make use of this unique material. In view of the 60th anniversary of the British Safety Council in 2017, Neal Stone and Matthew Holder suggested that a commemorative book should be produced to mark the occasion. Given my past work associations with the British Safety Council, I was chosen as the man for the job,' explains Mike Esbester.

'Although the images were important, this wasn't to be a picture book. We needed to convey enough of the past to be able to put the present in context – both in terms of the British Safety Council's activities and wider society's relationships with health and safety. We also wanted to avoid the temptation to adopt a more traditional structure, dealing with occupational issues only. So, the opening section sets the scene and outlines various aspects of the British Safety Council's past and where it fits into the story of health and safety in Britain. The subsequent chapters take those key themes and illustrate them with posters and other material chosen from the British Safety Council's archive.'

'*Beware! Safety watchdog with fearsome bark* also offers a fascinating insight into the social and political realities of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

The book contains a wealth of historical documents, press cuttings, correspondence, photographs and posters (including the most controversial one with the image of the Pope in the condom campaign).

The book portrays James Tye as a passionate man, clearly unafraid of controversy. He proudly said: 'Many of my adversaries have branded me a publicity seeker. Frankly, that's terrific. My job is to prevent accidents, not to worry about preserving a false image of respectability.'

British Safety Council's Archive

The link to the archive: <https://legacy.britsafe.org/the-archive/>

Dr Mike Esbester is Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Portsmouth. His research explores the history of safety, risks and accident prevention in modern Britain, including a focus on why persuasive techniques have been used, what messages they have conveyed and what they say about British society.