

Neighbourhood Watch

INSURANCE

Many people have asked how it is that Brownhill, Morris and West are able to offer such favourable terms to those in Neighbourhood Watch schemes. "Surely", they say, "there must be a snag somewhere because otherwise all the other insurance companies would be offering similar terms." This article by John Brownhill, the managing director of Brownhill, Morris and West (Insurance Services) Limited, may help to explain the Brownhill, Morris and West philosophy.

When I joined the industry in 1956 as a junior insurance clerk, one of my daily duties was to check what was called the blacklist. This list was an exchange of information between insurance companies regarding people who had been involved in fraudulent claims activity.

I was very naive at the time and did not believe that such things happened. However, 36 years later with a wealth of experience gained in virtually every sector of the insurance business, I am sad to say that insurance fraud is rampant.

When Brownhill, Morris and West designed the Neighbourhood Watch Household Insurance Scheme in 1984, apart from security surveying every risk, one of our main objectives was to prevent insurance fraud, as this is a problem that must be tackled at the outset, not after the policy has been issued.

We have now insured thousands of homes under the scheme and, by adopting sound underwriting principles, have dramatically reduced the cost of insurance to our clients. The vast reduction in fraudulent claims we have achieved benefits both the insured and the insurer.

At a recent meeting with a

police superintendent who is actively involved in neighbourhood watch, he told me he had recently conducted an enquiry where the police had arrested a burglar who freely admitted he had burgled 550 homes over a six-month period and wished to wipe the slate clean.

The burglar was gifted with a photographic memory and excellent recall. Not only was he able to take the police to every property he had burgled, but he also knew the time, the date and what the stolen goods were.

On checking his story, the police found the information was correct. When they came to value the amount of property he had stolen, it amounted to £113,000. After contacting the various insurance companies concerned, they discovered that over £1 million has been paid out – a staggering exaggeration of insurance claims which is absolutely fraudulent and only serves to push up the premiums that we all have to pay.

My own first recollection of insurance fraud was about 30 years ago, when we received a claim for a burglary where cash and valuables worth £200 had been stolen. The claim was



processed and settled in the normal way. Some three months later, however, the claim occurred again and a loss adjuster was assigned to investigate. He found that the claimant was also insured with 11 other companies and, if my memory serves me correctly, she served a custodial sentence.

Another case I recall was an insured who had a Rolls Royce. I was having a quiet drink one evening with a friend in a local pub when a man I knew vaguely came into the pub in a very jubilant mood and offered to buy us a drink. He said that he was celebrating the receipt of a cheque for £8,500 – payment for the complete respray of his car.

It appeared that somebody had maliciously scratched the rear side back wing and, as he had a protected no claims bonus with the Co-op he poured brake fluid over the rest of the vehicle and then reported it stolen to the police. The vehicle was found, a claim submitted and settled as stated.

It was around 1965 that the first new for old policy was issued by an insurer. Until then,

claims had been met on an indemnity basis – you did not gain but you did not lose as wear and tear were taken into account. With the advent of the new policy, making a claim could actually become a rewarding experience.

A claim that we now see frequently within the industry is for an accidentally damaged television set or video recorder. When we received the settlement cheques we would often call on the insured to deliver it as part of staff training. The damaged set would then be collected for salvage and sent to a professional television engineer for assessment.

In virtually every case the set was at the end of its life and, in the engineer's opinion, the damage had been inflicted deliberately. On our Neighbourhood Watch Household Insurance Scheme, this type of claim is conspicuous by its absence.

Some years ago during the summer we received a call from an insured who said that he had suffered water damage to his home to the value of £700, quite a substantial amount at the time. We therefore decided to call personally and deliver the claim form to the insured, arriving on his doorstep some 15 minutes later.

There was a look of shock on his face when we explained who we were and requested to see the water damage. He kept us waiting on the doorstep for a full five minutes at which time he showed us into a bedroom that was completely dry.

On asking where the water damage was, he pointed to a hole in the ceiling and said: "This is

where the water came from." The bed, which was directly underneath the hole, was made and completely dry, so we again politely asked where the water damage was.

He then pulled back the covers to reveal a dried urine stain and became very agitated. I informed him that while I would leave the claim form with him, I would be making a full and separate report. We never heard from him again.

Insurance is designed for people in genuine need and has, in my view, become completely abused over the years.

It is estimated that out of 500,000 travel claims that the industry receives each year, 10% of these are fraudulent.

A worrying factor is that before the claimant may pursue a claim, the matter has to be reported to the police, which in turn suggests that crime statistics are artificially inflated by insurance fraud.

Although the vast majority of insurance claims are undoubtedly genuine, the growing fraudulent minority are making us all pay more.

HELP WANTED!

We need more Neighbourhood Watch Wardens to help the Co-ordinator in many of our Watches and, in some, we need a Warden who will understudy and deputise for the Co-ordinator with a view to taking over as Co-ordinator in due course. In a few cases we need a Co-ordinator now to take over and re-vitalise a Watch.

If you would like to have more details, please get in touch either with your Watch Co-ordinator, or with the Area Co-ordinator, Peter Loyd (455 4543), or with the Senior Beat Officer, WPC Linda Bailey (200 2555).

MY SCREAMS WENT UNHEEDED

On March 1, at 6.20pm, at the junction of Crediton Hill and Fawley Road, West Hampstead, I was attacked by a young man who attempted to steal my shoulder bag. From the first moment he grabbed me until he ran away leaving me lying sprawling in the middle of the road, I was screaming. Not muted cries, but full-blooded terrified shrieks.

I observed many lighted windows in the surrounding houses, and there must have been some residents who heard me. Yet during the attack and in the ensuing four or five minutes it took me to pick myself up, try to regain my composure and fetch my belongings from my parked car, not one individual ventured forth either to discover what the commotion was or to assist me. Yet directly across the road from my car was a lamppost bearing a Neighbourhood Watch sign.

My bruised leg will heal, my umbrella can be replaced and, as I was the winner in that struggle, I still have my handbag. What has been lost, however, is the belief that I can walk with safety in my own neighbourhood.

This letter, which appeared in the Ham & High recently, relates to an event that took place in a Neighbourhood Watch area in West Hampstead. Let's hope it could never happen in Hampstead Garden Suburb, because Neighbourhood Watch is not about sticking up Neighbourhood Watch signs and then opting out. It's about being involved and actually caring for our neighbours. It is also about courage – having the courage to go to the assistance of anyone in distress and shouting for help in a case like this.

APPLICATIONS FOR TRUST CONSENT

Some residents are unclear why Planning Applications have to be seen by two separate Authorities: the London Borough of Barnet and the Trust. The answer is that the Suburb was developed as a Leasehold Estate, and the Trust and its predecessors have from the beginning had strict control over all designs, materials, use of buildings and provision of amenities. Even though many properties are now Freehold, the Trust's rights of control have been maintained (by the High Court) to safeguard the standard of alterations to properties.

Conservation Area

In addition, because the Suburb is so important in the history of British domestic architecture and town planning, it was designated in 1968 a Conservation Area – comparatively recently in its history – so that, for the time being at any rate, there is additional protection under planning legislation. But this has already been shown to be affected by the political climate, whereas the Trust works entirely free of any political or profit-making motive, serving only the interests of the residents and the national bodies who are represented on the Council.

A broader view

It was considered that since the Suburb is so important in the history of both British domestic architecture and Town planning a separate organisation was needed for its conservation and

preservation. Other conservation areas are also protected by local organisations, such as the College Estates in Dulwich. By having two separate and independent authorities look at all plans, the Suburb benefits from a higher standard of overall design control. The Trust can take a much broader view and evaluate factors which are outside the remit of the local authority. In most cases the London Borough of Barnet and the Trust will come to similar conclusions on applications, but there are instances when the two authorities diverge. For example in looking at plans, Barnet cannot take purely aesthetic considerations into account.

Not a museum

The objectives of the Trust are not to stop residents from changing their houses but to ensure that changes are done in a harmonious way and in keeping with the spirit of the original design. The Trust recognises that the Suburb is not a museum, but a living community and in modernising their homes residents want larger kitchens, family rooms, more bathrooms,

and utility rooms and would often like to utilise attic space for additional accommodation. In most cases these alterations can be designed within the guidelines laid down by the Trust, and without spoiling the character of either the individual house or the neighbourhood. The Trust is here to serve the community and ideally it would like to approve all applications.

Procedures

The number of refusals can be kept to a minimum if certain simple procedures are followed.

a. Even before employing the services of an architect it is a good idea for the home-owner to have an informal chat with the Trust architect, Mr Wilfred Court. He will outline in general terms the Trust's policies towards the particular kind of alteration required – extensions, loft conversions, garages etc. At the same time he will tell the owner which sort of designs might be suitable in terms of size, materials, detailing etc.

b. If the house-owner decides to go ahead with the alterations, his architect should keep in touch with the Trust while he is

drawing up the plans. Mr Court is willing to attend site meetings with architects to discuss points of detail and help with the choice of materials etc. Through the close involvement of the Trust the chances of a successful application are greatly improved.

Neighbours

When an application has been received an indemnity form is sent out and neighbours are notified. They have two weeks to write back with their objections. Once the relevant fee has been paid the application is considered by the Property and Plans Committee of the Trust which meets in the middle of each month. All decisions have to be ratified by the full Trust Council which also meets monthly.

In evaluating applications the Property and Plans Committee takes into account a number of factors. These include the report of the Trust Architect, the views of the Conservation Area Advisory Committee and the London Borough of Barnet, and letters and neighbours. The whole process from submitting the application to the final

decision of the Trust Council takes around two months. When an application is refused reasons are given and from these the applicant can often deduce the kind of changes that are required to make the plans acceptable.

Too harsh?

The Trust has been criticised for being too harsh and unreasonable and for being completely unrealistic in its conservation policies. To those critics we answer that under the Scheme of Management, the Trust has a legal obligation to uphold certain standards and that if it became too lax it would be accused of not doing its job properly. Obviously the Trust has to strike a delicate balance between these opposing views and while accepting alterations insist on the highest standards.

Design asset

We hope in future that the Trust will move closer to the community and be seen as a definite asset to the Suburb by fostering good designs and workmanship. It is assumed that most people come to live in the Suburb because of the delightful houses, which have remained relatively unspoilt and most residents would be horrified if we allowed indiscriminate 'improvements' to take place. By working closely with the Trust we are confident that the whole community will benefit so that in 100 years there will still be a Suburb of which our grandchildren can be proud.

HAMPSTEAD - GARDEN - SUBURB - TRUST

The New Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust Limited

862 Finchley Road, Hampstead Garden Suburb, London NW11 6AB. Telephone: 081 455 1066 & 458 8085