



FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE COLONIES

C. O. Ref: SSB 84/127/01

SAVINGRAM

CIRCULAR 578/60

26th May, 1960

DRIP-FEED RADIANT OIL HEATERS

2 I enclose for information a copy of a circular addressed to Local Authorities in England by the Home Office, following on a report by the Joint Fire Research Organisation of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research and the Fire Offices' Committee on the effect of draughts on the burning of portable drip-feed radiant oil heaters, and also a copy of a statement on the subject made by the Secretary of State for the Home Department in Parliament.

3 2. If required, copies of the Report referred to in the Home Secretary's statement can be ordered through the Crown Agents for Oversea Governments and Administrations from Her Majesty's Stationery Office, price 1s. 3d., S. O. Code No. 47-222.

3. In the interval since the Secretary of State for the Home Department made his statement in Parliament, certain safety standards have been laid down for the future production of drip-feed radiant oil heaters. Copies of the publication laying down these standards may be obtained through the Crown Agents from The British Standards Institution, 2, Park Street, London, W. 1., price 10/- reference number B. S. 3,300.

8/11 4. This circular has been addressed to the Governors-General of the Federation of Nigeria and The West Indies; all Governors (except the Governors of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland); United Kingdom Commissioner, Singapore; High Commissioners; Administrators; Resident Commissioners; the British Commissioner and Consul, Tonga; the British Resident, Zanzibar, and the Administrator, West African Research Office. Copies have been sent to the United Kingdom Information Officers.

SE C E R.

PA

(Copy)

Any communication on the subject of
this letter should be addressed to:
THE UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE
and the following number quoted:

H.O. 56/60
D.1 and D3.

HOME OFFICE,
CHILDREN'S DEPARTMENT,
HORSEFERRY HOUSE,
THORNEY STREET,
LONDON, S.W.1.

4th April, 1960.

Sir,

HOME OFFICE CIRCULAR NO. 56/1960

Drip-Feed Radiant Oil Heaters

I am directed by the Secretary of State to say that, as he announced recently in the House of Commons, it has been found that portable oil heaters of the drip-feed radiant type are capable of starting a fire very quickly if exposed to a draught. He thinks it proper to send a copy of his announcement, as enclosed, to the administering authorities of all children's homes, remand homes, and approved schools, as he understands that some homes and schools may possess heaters of this type.

I am, Sir,
Your obedient Servant,

(Signed) G. H. McConnell

The Clerk of the County Council
The Town Clerk
The Correspondent
The Secretary

CHN 414/3/6

CO/3534/60

3

SECRETARY OF STATE'S STATEMENT OF 7th MARCH, 1960.

Extract from Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)
House of Commons Official Report dated 7th March, 1960.

OIL HEATERS (REPORT)

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. R. A. Butler): A Report by the Joint Fire Research Organisation of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research and the Fire Offices' Committee on the effect of draughts on the burning of portable drip-feed radiant oil heaters is being published this afternoon. Copies have been placed in the Library.

The main conclusion is that these heaters are safe in a house with the outer doors and windows closed, but that all the heaters of this type tested are capable of starting a fire very quickly if exposed to a draught such as can be caused by an open outer door.

As my right hon. Friend the Minister of Education stated last Thursday in reply to a Question by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey (Lady Gammans), copies of the Report have been sent to the Government Departments concerned. Copies have also been sent to the manufacturers, and immediate consultations will be undertaken with a view to the adoption of a safe standard of performance for the future, and of any other measures that may be found desirable and practicable.

Meanwhile, it is important that portable oil heaters of the drip-feed radiant type should not be used unless it can be ensured that they are not exposed to a draught.

Mr. Gordon Walker: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that this is a very alarming and unsatisfactory statement? It is difficult to understand how firms have put such dangerous appliances on the market. The right hon. Gentleman was rather complacent when he said that they are safe in a house with the outer doors and windows closed. It surely would be easier to say that they are very dangerous if there is a window open. Would he not agree that he has an obligation to start very quickly making regulations, and ought not the Government also to embark, because these appliances are so widespread and dangerous, on a really vigorous propaganda campaign to bring to people's attention the danger of these appliances, which they have bought in good faith?

Mr. Butler: I am obliged to the right hon. Gentleman. That is the reason why I took the exceptional course, on a Monday afternoon, of making a statement to the House, so that the public should be aware immediately of the danger directly the Report of the D.S.I.R. is published, which will be this afternoon. As I have said, copies will be placed in the Library.

I trust that all means of propaganda, the wireless and other methods, will follow the remarks made in the House this afternoon. I do not agree that there is any complacency about the matter. What I have said comes as a digest from the Report of the D.S.I.R. and I cannot exceed them in precaution or knowledge. I shall be having immediate consultations with the manufacturers with a view to finding a safe standard of performance for heaters in the future and any modifications, where possible, of existing heaters. After that, I shall decide what is the quickest possible method of remedying the situation which has come to our notice and about which I think we are quite right to tell the country immediately.

Mr. Doughty: Is my right hon. Friend aware that these heaters have been demonstrated to hon. Members by experimental laboratories and that they have three serious dangers which must be looked for? One is the threat of their bursting into flame in a draught; the second is their not going out if knocked over by chance by a child, or dog, or any other cause; and the third is that if there is the slightest damage to the burner they give out large quantities of carbon monoxide which could prove fatal and which has, in fact, proved fatal in some cases. All these three dangers have to be looked at in consultation.

Mr. Butler: I hope that my hon. and learned Friend will read the full Report, in which he will see that some of these points are mentioned.

Mr. Chetwynd: Will any attempt be made to withdraw these types of apparatus already in use and to get people to return them for suitable modification at the proper time?

Mr. Butler: That is precisely the object of the consultations which we are immediately undertaking.

Mr. Nabarro: Does not my right hon. Friend recall that last December I questioned him as to what powers he had within existing statutes to specify a minimum standard of proficiency and safety for these very dangerous oil heaters and he replied that he had no such power? Would he not agree that it is wholly insufficient to rely on optional British standards of minimum proficiency and safety and that he should legislate to give the appropriate Minister powers to require these safety standards for all new appliances from a very early date?

Mr. Butler: Yes, Sir. That may well be a necessity. The question of taking legal powers must follow upon the immediate consultations which my Department is undertaking.

Mr. de Freitas: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that each year the Royal Society of Arts has a competition for the examination of devices with a view to preventing fires in such cases as this? Would the right hon. Gentleman consider getting in touch with the Royal Society of Arts to see whether it cannot consider this matter in one of their next competitions?

Mr. Butler: Yes, Sir; certainly. I should like to have advice from whatever sources will help me in this problem.

Sir G. Nicholson: To get this matter in true proportion and to prevent undue alarm, and to cause the necessary measures of precaution to be taken, can my right hon. Friend tell us how many fires or accidents have taken place from this cause during the last appropriate period?

Mr. Butler: The most serious out-break of fire occurred at Ware, in November, 1959, which was caused precisely by such an oil heater as this. The Director of Fire Research gave evidence at the inquest. I am glad to say that in co-operation with the manufacturers the Fire Research Station undertook a series of tests of the effect of draughts on 34 different oil heaters of the drip-feed type, and it is arising from that that we now have the Report of the D.S.I.R.

Sir G. Nicholson: How many accidents?

Mr. Butler: That is the main one of which I have knowledge in recent times.

Mr. Lee: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that a fire took place in my house about five weeks ago, caused by one of these oil burners? Will he look at the very intensive propaganda of the oil companies? It may well be that because of the financial advantages people who would not otherwise take these risks are being induced to take them.

Mr. Butler: Yes, Sir. I think that we must be quite definite in dealing with what might otherwise be a very serious problem in all our homes, and many homes with children in them.

Mr. Fletcher: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that about 3 million portable radiant oil heaters have been supplied up to the present? Will he see that the widest possible publicity is given to his statement? Will he also take steps to ensure that manufacturers cease immediately from supplying any more of these heaters and see that no more are imported?

Mr. Butler: Yes, Sir. The latter points are very much in my mind in the consultations which my Department is undertaking. The figure quoted by the hon. Gentleman is correct. There are about 3 million heaters of the drip-feed type and there would be approximately 10 million of a variety of types, but this dangerous type in respect of outside draught numbers about 3 million.

Mr. Gresham Cooke: While I agree that there are many of these dangerous appliances about, will my right hon. Friend confirm that very active research is going on at the moment, and that there are modifications that can be quickly applied to new stoves? Would it not be possible soon to be able to put a stamp of approval on stoves safe to use even where there is a draught?

Mr. Butler: I am obliged to my hon. Friend. In fact, the Director of Fire Research has drawn attention to this in some of his annual Reports - not in detail, but in general warning. The Fire Research Station has now produced a wind-producing apparatus, believed to be unique, which has, as a matter of fact, been in operation for only a few months. It is in this way that science catches up with danger. I am glad to say that we now have the equipment at the Fire Research Station necessary for dealing with this sort of difficulty, and we shall be able to take the necessary action.

Mr. Shinwell: In view of the danger to which consumers are subject, would not this be an appropriate occasion to advise consumers to use gas, electricity or even coal fires? Has it not occurred to the Home Secretary that he might advise his right hon. Friend the Minister of Power in this direction?

Mr. Butler: Naturally, we should wish those who have heard of my statement to be very careful about their existing stove and, alternatively, to consider other sources of supply.

6

Mr. Gordon Walker: Would not the right hon. Gentleman be a little more specific in answer to the suggestion that he should stop free sales of these dangerous appliances while various consultations and considerations are being undertaken? These things really are very dangerous. Clearly, the House is worried about them.

Mr. Butler: The trouble is that under our Constitution there are certain limits to the powers one has, but I shall be very glad to keep the House informed of the steps that I have in mind and, if I need further powers, to come to the House for them.

Several Hon. Members rose -

Mr. Speaker: Order. Clearly, we cannot debate this now.

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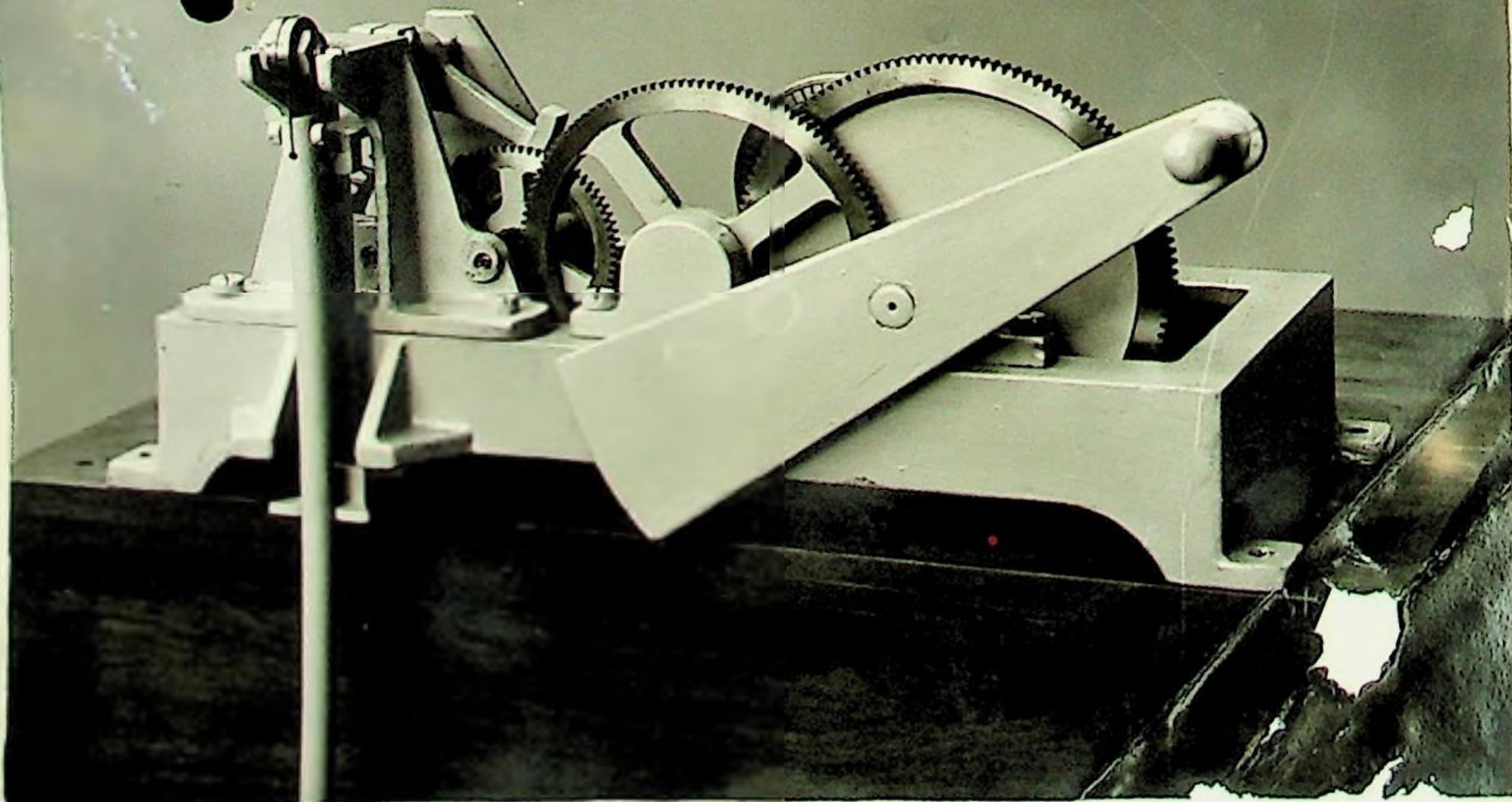


Photo. "C" (a)

Weight-driven, hand-wound, timepiece,
with one-seconds pendulum. (front view)

GILLETT & JOHNSTON,
Croydon, England.