

Chapter Title: Introduction: Multiple-fatality fires, deregulation and the value of 'thinking with history'

Book Title: Before Grenfell

Book Subtitle: Fire, Safety and Deregulation in Twentieth-Century Britain

Book Author(s): Shane Ewen

Published by: University of London Press. (2023)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.5076351.4>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



University of London Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Before Grenfell*

Introduction

Multiple-fatality fires, deregulation and the value of ‘thinking with history’

Families were evacuated and others trapped in smoke-filled flats when fire broke out on the eighth floor of a 20 storey Notting Hill tower block. Now, Grenfell Tower on the Lancaster West Estate has been labelled a ‘death trap’ by a local ward councillor ... ‘People couldn’t get out of the place because the design is so bad ... People could have died last night and I lay the blame at the feet of the designer of the building. This place is a death trap’.¹

This report of a fire without serious casualties at Grenfell Tower in June 1979 assumes an entirely new and frightening meaning in the context of the tragic events of 14 June 2017, when a horrific cladding fire at the same tower caused the deaths of seventy-two people. Tucked into a folder of newspaper cuttings in the archives of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC), the article flags up significant issues for our understanding of the Grenfell disaster: the need for good design, building control and management of higher-risk residential buildings (HRRBs); the responsibility of politicians, architects and emergency services to protect communities vulnerable to fire; and the urgency of improving communication between housing providers, emergency services and residents. In this instance alone, one resident reported being told by a firefighter to ‘Get your children and get out down the fire escape’, while another was told to stay in her smoke-filled flat with her children: ‘I went back in and put wet towels against the door and just prayed.’ Another resident reported that a police officer threatened to arrest him if he attempted to enter the building to reach his family.²

The RBKC had received criticism for its ‘indifference’ towards the safety and welfare of its residents during the initial planning consultation on the estate in the 1960s, and there is little evidence to suggest that this attitude had significantly altered following its completion a decade later.³ Indeed, the RBKC’s archives record multiple problems with the

¹ Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Archives (hereafter RBKCA), ‘Arrest Threat as Families Flee “Death Trap” Blaze’, *West London Observer*, 28 June 1979.

² RBKCA, ‘Arrest Threat’.

³ RBKCA, Acc/2001/002/Box 14, Kensington Society Conference on Town Planning & Housing in North Kensington, 9 October 1965, 8.

estate's design and management from the mid-1970s to the 2010s – these include anti-social behaviour, structural defects including asbestos and damp, and poor cleanliness, which led to the arrival of unwelcome guests such as cockroaches and rodents – all reported by residents upset by the conditions in which they were expected to live. As one resident angrily complained in a letter to the local paper, 'If only the Kensington and Chelsea Tory Councillors could live on this estate as they seem to think it is so brilliant. They would not spend one night here.'⁴ These problems – not least the complaint that the council did not listen to residents' legitimate concerns about living in multi-storey estates – resonate with the findings of historians writing about lived experiences elsewhere in the country.⁵ They are similarly echoed by recent studies of the institutional neglect faced by Grenfell Tower's residents when raising safety issues concerned with the building's refurbishment in the years preceding the 2017 fire.⁶

Although the RBKC's official archives record few complaints about fire precautions, we know from published and unpublished collections, including oral testimony, that residents' concerns about structural safety were widespread by the 1990s.⁷ The archives collected by local and national stakeholder organisations, including charities, trade unions, fire and rescue services, and other professional associations, have proven useful in providing a more comprehensive and longer-term picture of the problem, drawing upon the perspectives of residents and other building users, architects and fire engineers, and housing and safety campaigners, as well as fire prevention

⁴ RBKCA, *Kensington News & Post*, 13 May 1977.

⁵ Barry Hazley, Lynn Abrams, Ade Kearns and Valerie Wright, 'Place, Memory and the British High Rise Experience: Negotiating Social Change on the Wyndford Estate, 1962–2015', *Contemporary British History* 35, no. 1 (2021): 72–99; Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London: Granta Books, 2012); John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London: Verso, 2019).

⁶ See, eg, Stuart Hodgkinson, *Safe as Houses: Private Greed, Political Negligence and Housing Policy after Grenfell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019); Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins and Nadine El-Enany, eds., *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance and Response* (London: Pluto Press, 2019); John Preston, *Grenfell Tower: Preparedness, Race and Disaster Capitalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2019); Gill Kernick, *Catastrophe and Systemic Change: Learning from the Grenfell Tower Fire and Other Disasters* (London: London Publishing Partnership, 2021); Lucy Easthope, *When the Dust Settles: Stories of Love, Loss and Hope from an Expert in Disaster* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2022); Peter Apps, *Show Me the Bodies: How We Let Grenfell Happen* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2022).

⁷ See, eg, collections held by the Newham Borough Archives (hereafter NBA). I am grateful to James King, Project Officer at Eastside Community Heritage (hereafter ESCH), for sharing transcripts of interviews he conducted with residents and activists regarding the Ronan Point explosion.

Introduction

officers and frontline firefighters. Thus, in 1990, a spot survey of five local authorities in England by Sam Webb, the architectural adviser to the National Tower Blocks Network, revealed a catalogue of structural defects concerning the blocks' resistance to fire and means of escape. Webb called for certification of tower blocks to protect residents by subjecting blocks to regular inspection by the local fire brigade and requiring landlords to comply with their instructions, although this was not seriously entertained by central government.⁸ We also know that local tenants' associations, including Lancaster West's, issued warnings to residents as far back as the 1970s not to tamper with malfunctioning storage heaters without first seeking expert advice, while several local authorities regularly exhibited fire safety advice to vulnerable communities (women, the elderly and the working classes more generally) from at least the late 1950s once flatted estates and houses in multiple occupancy (HMOs) became more prevalent across the British urban landscape.⁹ Such advice was to prevent injury to children and other vulnerable groups, as well as to reduce the risk of fire occurring, which indicates a heightened awareness among residents of what Lynn Abrams et al. call the 'micro-politics of residential space' – safety was the collective responsibility of everyone but it often fell to residents to offer neighbourly advice or, as we shall see, act collectively rather than wait for the council or private landlord to intervene.¹⁰

Grenfell Tower was developed in the wake of an earlier building disaster at the recently completed twenty-two-storey Ronan Point tower block in the East London borough of Newham in 1968. An explosion involving a gas cooker in a flat on the southeastern corner of the eighteenth floor at 5:45am on 16 May blew out the kitchen and living-room walls, seriously injuring its resident, Ivy Hodge. The explosion led to the progressive collapse of the floors above and below Hodge's flat, killing four residents and injuring seventeen more as living rooms collapsed on top of one another in a vertical domino effect. A fifth resident later died in hospital from her injuries. As one of many high-rise pre-cast concrete heavy-panel system-style blocks built

⁸ Sam Webb, *Annual Spot Safety Survey* (London: National Tower Blocks Network, 1990). The Network's archives were deposited with the Bishopsgate Institute in 2022. I am extremely grateful to Sam Webb for corresponding with me during the research for this book.

⁹ Alistair Cartwright, 'The Un-Ideal Home: Fire Safety, Visual Culture and the LCC (1958–63)', *The London Journal* 46, no. 1 (2021): 66–91.

¹⁰ Lynn Abrams, Ade Kearns, Barry Hazley and Valerie Wright, *Glasgow: High-Rise Homes, Estates and Communities in the Post-War Period* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2020), 98; RBKCA Acc/2001/003/Box 24, 'Newssheet of the Lancaster West Tenants' Association', no. 2 (1976), 5.

by the construction firm Taylor Woodrow-Anglian under licence from the Danish firm Larsen-Nielsen, Ronan Point brought Newham residents' concerns about HRRBs into sharp focus. The subsequent media attention and public inquiry, which have been expertly examined by Holly Smith in her 2020 thesis, revealed a litany of problems relating to structural building safety across the country. These findings prompted a national programme of strengthening industrialised system-built tower blocks as well as government-funded research into progressive collapse.¹¹ The Ronan Point explosion directly led to improvements to England and Wales's Building Regulations in order to protect against extreme shocks to a building such as gas explosion or fire. Introduced in the early 1970s, these regulations, more prescriptive than those in place since the mid-1980s, formed the basis for the subsequent development of Grenfell Tower, which explains why the structure did not collapse under the intense heat in 2017 (indeed, the Lancaster West estate's architect stated a year before the fire that the tower 'could last another 100 years'¹²).

The cause of the 2017 fire is the focus of an extant public inquiry and an ongoing police investigation, and is not the subject of this book. The inquiry, headed by Sir Martin Moore-Bick, a retired judge, was announced by the prime minister, Theresa May, the day after the fire. Formally convened in August 2017 following tense public meetings between Moore-Bick and the local community, representatives of whom were justly demanding greater transparency to the formal proceedings, hearings started in May 2018 and drew to a close in November 2022, with the final report scheduled to appear in 2023.¹³ It has been ascertained, as per the Phase One report, that the tower had been disastrously refurbished from 2012–16: the over-cladding of the building with a new insulation and rainscreen cladding system effectively added a new highly combustible external wall to the tower composed of outer aluminium composite material (ACM) rainscreen panels with plastic (polyethylene) cores and foam insulation boards behind.¹⁴ It had earlier been revealed in documents leaked to the media that a more expensive

¹¹ Holly Smith, 'The Ronan Point Scandal, 1968–1993', University of Cambridge MPhil, 2020. The inquiry papers and other documents are held by London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA) GLC/AR/ENG/SE/1/1-9.

¹² Quoted in Hodkinson, *Safe*, 2; ESCH 2018_esch_RoPo_04, Interview with Sam Webb, 20 March 2019.

¹³ The proceedings of the inquiry are available at <<https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk>>.

¹⁴ The refurbishment programme is detailed in Martin Moore-Bick, *Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Phase 1 Report – Volume 1* (London: HMSO, 2019), 33–51.

Introduction

non-combustible cladding, comprising zinc panels with a mineral-rich fire-retardant core, was replaced with the cheaper but flammable alternative, resulting in savings to the RBKC's refurbishment budget of almost £300,000.¹⁵

Originating in a faulty fridge-freezer in a fourth-floor flat, the fire ignited the external cladding system and spread up the east face of the tower within fifteen minutes. The twenty-four-storey block was enveloped in a frightening sheet of flame, with horrific images screened live on rolling twenty-four-hour news channels and social media. Almost half the number of residents present in the tower opted not to follow the official 'stay put' advice, choosing to self-evacuate the building in the first forty-five minutes of the fire. Of those who remained in the tower, London Fire Brigade estimated that around sixty-five residents were rescued by firefighters once the 'stay put' advice had been revoked in the early hours of the morning. This followed the failure of the building's passive defences, resulting in fire and smoke penetrating the tower, entering flats and spreading internally. Subsequent government-funded tests found that the cladding materials, which were supposed to provide forty minutes' resistance to fire in order to allow firefighters to access the building and, if necessary, evacuate it, failed within nine minutes of ignition, therefore indicating that the external walls of the building failed to comply with building regulations. In all, it took the combined efforts of 250 firefighters and 70 fire engines roughly 60 hours to extinguish the fire and rescue trapped residents.¹⁶

As its title indicates, *Before Grenfell: Fire, Safety and Deregulation in Twentieth-Century Britain* is not chiefly concerned with the causes of the Grenfell 'atrocities', as it has been described.¹⁷ It is instead focused on the historical circumstances that created the conditions under which the fire occurred. Inevitably this has involved tracing the evolution and subsequent recasting of Britain's building regulations and its national system of fire precautions, both of which were developed incrementally over the twentieth century (and indeed earlier still). Moreover, this book will draw parallels between historic cases of failure and evidence presented to the public inquiry, delving further into history than other recent publications, and taking a wider net to the high number of largely forgotten multiple-fatality fires that

¹⁵ *The Guardian*, 30 June 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/30/grenfell-cladding-was-changed-to-cheaper-version-reports-say>>.

¹⁶ Martin Moore-Bick, *Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Phase 1 Report Overview* (2019), 4–6, 18–19, 23–4; *BBC News*, 29 October 2019, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40301289>>.

¹⁷ Bulley, Edkins and El-Enany, *After Grenfell*, xii.

have occurred in Britain and further afield across the twentieth century, but especially since the end of the Second World War.¹⁸

The Grenfell fire, we shall see, was less a bolt from the blue than the outcome of an accumulation of decisions and non-decisions, as well as systemic failures at the heart of government to learn from past multiple-fatality fires. It was a fire that was more than forty years in the making, the result of a dangerously casual approach towards construction standards and safety. As academics working within the multi-disciplinary field of disaster studies – which includes environmental and urban historians as well as social historians of technology – have shown, disasters unravel slowly over time due to erroneous assumptions, misinformation and misunderstandings within responsible organisations, as well as failures of governance and regulation, the consequences of which take time to percolate. The cumulative effect of decisions taken for economic, social and political reasons, disasters sometimes take decades to occur, unravelling ‘gradually and out of sight’ before exploding in dramatic and tragic fashion.¹⁹ Brenna Bhandar has argued that the fire was the culmination of a decades-long ‘organised abandonment’ by the state in its provision of ‘basic levels of safety and security’ to all its citizens and it is difficult to dispute this conclusion.²⁰

State abandonment is most evident in criticisms of Britain’s building regulations and central government’s unwillingness to reintroduce tougher codes designed to protect public safety. Within the first year following the Grenfell fire, a succession of investigations by journalists and building safety experts, as well as an Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety headed by Dame Judith Hackitt, a former chair of the Health and Safety Executive, identified systemic faults in the oversight of building safety but failed to assess the regulations themselves or how they

¹⁸ See, eg, Peter Apps cites the Ronan Point explosion and the 1973 fire at Summerland Leisure Centre on the Isle of Man as historic precursors of the 2017 fire (Apps, *Show Me the Bodies*, 28–31), while Gill Kernick cites additional fires at Knowsley Heights, Liverpool (1991), Garnock Court, Irvine (1999), Harrow Court, Stevenage (2005) and Lakanal House, London (2009): Kernick, *Catastrophe*, 29–30.

¹⁹ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2; Scott Gabriel Knowles, ‘Learning from Disaster? The History of Technology and the Future of Disaster Research’, *Technology and Culture* 55, no. 4 (2014): 773–84; Shane Ewen, ‘Socio-Technological Disasters and Engineering Expertise in Victorian Britain: The Holmfirth and Sheffield Floods of 1852 and 1864’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 46 (2014): 13–25.

²⁰ Brenna Bhandar, ‘Organised State Abandonment: The Meaning of Grenfell’, *The Sociological Review Blog*, 19 September 2018, <<https://criticallegalthinking.com/2018/09/21/organised-state-abandonment-the-meaning-of-grenfell>>.

were multifariously interpreted by construction industry professionals.²¹ Less still has been written about the evolution of building regulations over time and how they were often reformed following major building failures; Hackitt's interim report, published six months after the fire, contains a short historical chapter but little analysis of the political, economic and cultural factors that shaped the present deregulated system.²²

A few studies have delved deeper into the underlying issues, revealing the complex web of decisions, loopholes and failures that have created what journalist Peter Apps calls 'a national crisis which continues to grip the country today'.²³ In early 2018, writing for *Inside Housing* magazine, Apps and colleagues published a forensic review of regulatory failures dating back to the early 1990s, which subsequently formed the basis for his excellent recent book which hopefully takes the 'national scandal' to a wider readership. Meanwhile, Andrew O'Hagan cited 'a concatenation of failures at the level of industry regulation and building controls' in his 2018 feature article for the *London Review of Books*, albeit with only fleeting references to the historical context.²⁴ For academics working in the specialist fields of engineering and the built environment, many of the issues facing HRRBs over-clad in combustible materials presented several 'obvious problems' to public safety, but these only really become obvious to the lay reader when placed in their full historic circumstances: materials deemed to satisfy regulations which ignited easily; the rapid spread of fire vertically, laterally and through the building, indicating a lack of fire-breaks and effective compartmentation; and the fire being difficult to extinguish.²⁵

A deregulated system of building control was actively fostered by industry and government actors, often working in tandem. The records of government – both the published accounts of Hansard, available in UK Parliamentary Papers, and the unpublished correspondence, memoranda and minutes of

²¹ Judith Hackitt, *Building a Safer Future: Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety – Final Report*, Cmd. 9607 (London: HMSO, 2018).

²² Judith Hackitt, *Building a Safer Future: Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety – Interim Report*, Cmd. 9951 (London: HMSO, 2017), 30–5.

²³ Apps, *Show Me the Bodies*, 281.

²⁴ Peter Apps, Luke Barratt and Sophie Barnes, 'The Paper Trail: The Failure of Building Regulations', *Inside Housing*, 23 March 2018, <<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/the-paper-trail-the-failure-of-building-regulations-55445>>; Andrew O'Hagan, 'The Tower', *London Review of Books*, 7 June 2018, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n11/andrew-ohagan/the-tower>>.

²⁵ Christopher Gorse and John Sturges, 'Not What Anyone Wanted: Observations on Regulations, Standards, Quality and Experience in the Wake of Grenfell', *Construction Research and Innovation* 8, no. 3 (2017): 72.

relevant departments which have been consulted in the National Archives – indicate growing support for deregulating building control at the heart of government from the start of the 1980s. Over time, central government withdrew from its historic role in maintaining minimum standards of public health and safety (being careful not to admit such on public record), leaving the object of regulation – the building and construction products industries – to become the main vehicle for regulating their own products and practices. *Before Grenfell* traces this cultural change in the operation of government and its regulation of building control and fire safety across the twentieth century. Only with a fuller historical approach can we expect to reasonably understand *how* the Grenfell fire was allowed to happen. In Chapter 1 I argue that a longer-term picture of the evolution of building rules in England and Wales – shifting from a discretionary system of model byelaws introduced in the second half of the nineteenth century to prescriptive national regulations by the mid-1960s, which were later ‘recast’ as functional regulations two decades later – is important in explaining the ‘bewildering and sometimes apparently contradictory directions provided by building regulations’ in operation by the twenty-first century, creating a culture of competition and self-regulation that so disastrously culminated in the 2017 fire.²⁶

In addition to the deregulation of building control and abandonment of effective enforcement measures, commentators have cited a raft of evidence to illustrate the ‘benign neglect’ of fire safety since at least the turn of the twenty-first century. Whereas once fire precautions were subject to inspection and enforcement by experienced firefighters in a number of sectors, this was no longer the case following major reforms to the fire and rescue service. Alongside this, responsibility for risk assessment and mitigation was outsourced to individuals – the designated ‘responsible person’ – in the 2000s, who could be someone with the minimum level of training rather than a public servant experienced in the prevention of fires. Many of the proposals to reduce the powers of inspection, certification and enforcement by fire brigades, and to introduce greater individual responsibility for safety, originated in the 1980s and 1990s and were often expressed in terms of the necessity to reduce ‘burdens on business’ by freeing the individual from the bureaucracy of inspections and form-filling. These criticisms of fire precautions, which were first introduced in the early 1970s to strengthen the standard of safety in a number of sectors (particularly the hotel and boarding-house industry), and their subsequent curtailment and dismantling, form the focus of Chapter 2. The justifications for the swingeing

²⁶ Gorse and Sturge, ‘Not What Anyone Wanted’, 72.

cuts to the funding and resourcing of the fire and rescue service in the five years leading up to 2015 – these included reducing the numbers of both fire prevention staff and safety inspections – are traceable to the New Labour Government’s fire service reform agenda of the early 2000s, as well as being a major consequence of the ‘austerity’ programme introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in 2010. Although safety regulations have, as we shall see, demonstrably saved lives, they have regularly been cited as examples of ‘red tape’ that interfere with personal freedoms and stymie economic growth by successive governments.²⁷

This book is a history of deregulation that situates the horrific events of 14 June 2017 in their longer-term political and social context. As Knud Andresen and Stefan Müller explain, support for deregulation emerged during the 1970s from critics who saw the state as being ‘too powerful’ over the everyday routines of social and economic life. In particular, there was a strongly held belief that free markets were being strangled by state intervention and what was needed was far-ranging deregulation rather than more controls. This led to a concerted push – from outside government, for instance from business and the popular media, but also increasingly from within – to ‘loosen its grasp and remodel it from an interventional and regulatory state into a merely controlling state’.²⁸ Deregulation, then, is as much an ideological change in how powerful political and economic forces view the role of the state in governing society and the economy as it is a set of working practices designed to restrict the state’s regulatory control over everyday life. For the purposes of this book, deregulation refers to a coordinated series of policies and practices that seek to relax or remove existing regulatory controls over the private sector and leave the market responsible for its own regulation; that is, the object of regulation becomes the *de facto* regulator of itself. Deregulation also involved shifting from a prescriptive to a more discretionary set of controls, as well as devolving greater responsibility for safety onto the individual (that is, through

²⁷ Sian Moore, Tessa Wright and Philip Taylor, *Fighting Fire: One Hundred Years of the Fire Brigades Union* (Oxford: New Internationalist, 2018), 44–5; Tony Prosser and Mark Taylor, *The Grenfell Tower Fire: Benign Neglect and the Road to an Avoidable Tragedy* (Shoreham-by-Sea: Pavilion Publishing, 2020); Fire Brigades Union, *The Grenfell Tower Fire: A Fire Caused by Profit and Deregulation* (Kingston upon Thames: Fire Brigades Union, 2019).

²⁸ Knud Andresen and Stefan Müller, ‘Contesting Deregulation: The 1970s as a Turning Point in Western History? Introductory Remarks’, in Andresen and Müller, eds., *Contesting Deregulation: Debates, Practices and Developments in the West since the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 4; Adrian Williamson, *Conservative Economic Policymaking and the Birth of Thatcherism, 1964–1979* (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 24.

self-regulation or, in certain key instances, self-compliance measures). This is based on the understanding, entrenched within neoliberal thinking since the late 1970s, that the duty holder is better placed to know their obligations to the safety of those for whom they are responsible rather than waiting for the state to tell them what to do and how to do it.²⁹

Deregulation was part of a series of methods used by neoliberal governments from the late 1970s through to the 2010s to weaken the public sector and reduce the state's control over everyday life in preference for empowering the free market to regulate its own affairs. These included, as we shall see in Chapter 3, the privatisation of public services, including building and fire safety research. For a large part of the post-war period, the responsibility for providing the infrastructure and funding for scientific research into fire safety rested jointly with the state and the insurance industry, with public safety accepted as the core priority of the work undertaken by the Building Research Establishment (BRE) and its predecessors. After its sale in 1997, however, BRE lost sight of its historic public safety role, becoming a highly competitive organisation geared towards fulfilling its contractual obligations to its customers, many of whom came from the building and construction products industries. The privatisation of fire research deprioritised the significance of public safety by adopting the dubious maxim that commercial testing information was confidential. It is interesting to note that a few lone voices – notably following a motion passed at the Fire Brigades Union's annual conference in 2022³⁰ – have called for BRE's return to public ownership in the wake of the Grenfell fire.

Historians of twentieth-century Britain have increasingly turned their focus to the changing relationship between the state and its social obligations since the 1980s and, in some instances, earlier. Between them, Hilary Cooper and Simon Szreter, Paul Almond and Mike Esbester, and Christopher Sirrs have described a multitude of policies – including monetarism, privatisation and the growing use of 'light-touch' discretionary powers – as marking a decisive shift from a relatively narrow conception of mid-twentieth-century governance that centred on employers, organised labour and regulators to a larger, more diffuse coalition of corporate and financial interests, third-sector organisations and individuals at the turn

²⁹ Robert M. Ledger, "A Transition from Here to There?" Neo-Liberal Thought and Thatcherism', Queen Mary University PhD thesis, 2014.

³⁰ Fire Brigades Union, 'FBU Calls for Grenfell Building Safety Body to Be Nationalised', 13 May 2022, <<https://www.fbu.org.uk/news/2022/05/13/fbu-calls-grenfell-building-safety-body-be-nationalised>>.

of the present century.³¹ At its core, deregulation has served as a loosely coordinated set of policies by which successive governments since the 1970s have governed. Notwithstanding the political differences between governments, the broad outcome has seen the emergence of a ‘neoliberal age’ in which the values and interests of free trade economics and private financial institutions are given priority as the main determinants of progress in society, as a recent edited collection has charted.³² This has been at the expense of what Sam Wetherell calls the ‘developmental and social aims’ that guided mid-twentieth-century Conservative and Labour governments in building a socially progressive and more equal society through the visible hand of the state.³³

British economic and political historians have most closely aligned deregulation with the ‘Big Bang’ of the mid-1980s, which involved a reduction in state controls over the governance of banks and other financial institutions, chiefly as a means to boost the competitiveness of British financial services with competitors overseas.³⁴ The economist’s traditional view of regulation, that it adds unwelcome costs to business, has held sway across much of the literature: ‘Competition when possible, regulation where necessary.’³⁵ However, historians have also started to examine the evolution of ideas and practices related to deregulation as they pertain to other areas of government work beyond financial institutions, including

³¹ Hilary Cooper and Simon Szreter, *After the Virus: Lessons from the Past for a Better Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 70–1; Paul Almond and Mike Esbester, ‘Legitimate Risks? Occupational Health and Safety and the Public in Britain, c. 1960–2015’, in Tom Crook and Mike Esbester, eds., *Governing Risks in Modern Britain: Danger, Safety and Accidents c. 1800–2000* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 280; Christopher Sirrs, ‘Health and Safety in the British Regulatory State, 1961–2001: The HSC, HSE and the Management of Occupational Risk’, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine PhD thesis, 2016, 276–9.

³² Aled Davies, Ben Jackson and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, eds., *The Neoliberal Age? Britain since the 1970s* (London: University College London Press, 2021).

³³ Sam Wetherell, *Foundations: How the Built Environment Made Twentieth-Century Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 11–12.

³⁴ Aled Davies, ‘The Roots of Britain’s Financialised Political Economy’, in Davies, Jackson and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Neoliberal Age*, 299–318; Robert M. Ledger, *Power and Political Economy from Thatcher to Blair: The Great Enemy of Democracy?* (London: Routledge, 2021); Forrest Capie, ‘Financial Deregulation in the United Kingdom’, in Alexis Drach and Youssef Cassis, eds., *Financial Deregulation: A Historical Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 48.

³⁵ John Kay and John Vickers, ‘Regulatory Reform in Britain’, *Economic Policy* 3, no. 7 (1988): 287.

urban regeneration and the allocation of enterprise zones.³⁶ Similar tactics were used in housing policy to incrementally deregulate the private rental market in the late 1980s³⁷ and, as we shall see, in building regulations and fire precautions at various stages between the 1980s and 2000s. Research into deregulation has also extended into the realm of home, parenthood and family life where government policies have impacted upon interpersonal relationships and the work–life balance. For example, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite has traced how this new way of thinking was used to unravel the post-war system of state-led, paternalistic welfare provision in preference for a family-centred, moralistic individualism with the ascendancy of Thatcherism from the late 1970s, which has been echoed by Helen McCarthy in her study of working women and motherhood.³⁸

Deregulation was a preferred strategy for governments of different political shades, proliferating on the world stage as a central tool of the ascendancy of the neoliberal world order during the final decades of the twentieth century.³⁹ Deregulation was similarly used to remove or rescind safety laws in American business during the 1970s and 1980s, reflecting a ‘more callous and divided’ nation where government ‘had essentially given up on protecting its most vulnerable and precarious citizens’.⁴⁰ Nor did deregulation emerge in Britain with the election of the Thatcher Government in 1979, important though that moment undoubtedly was in heralding the acceleration of the ‘market-driven politics’ of the 1980s and 1990s.⁴¹ For instance, James Vernon has shown how both Conservative and Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s introduced forms of economic liberalisation such as the deregulation and outsourcing of security two decades before Heathrow

³⁶ Ledger, ‘A Transition from Here to There?’, 107; Sam Wetherell, ‘Freedom Planned: Enterprise Zones and Urban Non-Planning in Post-War Britain’, *Twentieth-Century British History* 27, no. 2 (2016): 266–89.

³⁷ Jim Tomlinson, ‘The Failures of Neoliberalism in Britain since the 1970s: The Limits on “Market Forces” in a Deindustrialising Economy and a “New Spennhamland”’, in Davies, Jackson and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Neoliberal Age*, 99.

³⁸ Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, ‘Neo-Liberalism and Morality in the Making of Thatcherite Social Policy’, *Historical Journal* 55, no. 2 (2012): 497–520; Helen McCarthy, ‘“I Don’t Know How She Does It!” Feminism, Family and Work in “Neoliberal” Britain’, in Davies, Jackson and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Neoliberal Age*, 135–54.

³⁹ Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁴⁰ Bryant Simon, *The Hamlet Fire: A Tragic Story of Cheap Food, Cheap Government, and Cheap Lives* (New York: The New Press, 2017), 15.

⁴¹ Colin Leys, *Market-Driven Politics: Neoliberal Democracy and the Public Interest* (London: Verso, 2001).

Airport was privatised in 1986.⁴² Likewise, moves towards a deregulated fire safety sector can be traced from the privatisation of routine research and testing in the early 1970s. Nevertheless, these examples collectively illustrate a desire by the modern neoliberal state to free the economy from controls, dismantle the model of state-orientated welfare capitalism and establish a stronger connection between individual responsibility and freedom. As Stephen Brooke has argued, deregulation helped speed up the scale and pace of change to everyday life in late twentieth-century Britain and facilitate access to an increasingly globalised marketplace of ideas, capital and people.⁴³

Paradoxically, deregulation has never meant an end to all regulation and has occasionally involved the creation of new or additional regulations, as several authors have shown. It has also necessitated a greater use of internal checks and inspections by professional bodies as well as individual firms as part of the growing trend towards self-regulation, which was embraced by government ministers during the 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁴ But, as Michael Moran has shown, self-regulation is itself a ‘hard-to-clarify’ concept because it has evolved incrementally as a largely undefined ‘regulatory ideology’ that has in practice been ‘mobilized to legitimize any number of particular institutional arrangements’. Self-regulatory systems have therefore developed as a form of ‘quasi-government’ with tools ranging from ‘entirely informal sets of practices to those that, involving more direct control of regulatory systems by central government, shade off into systems of state control’.⁴⁵ This, according to William Davies, requires the state to exert ‘an active force’ in enabling such ideas and practices to be rolled out; it ‘cannot simply rely on “market forces”’.⁴⁶ Giandomenico Majone reveals the 1980s as the decade when regulation became ‘the new battleground of ideas on industrial and social policy’ and, while writers have generally seen Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative governments of 1979–90 as presiding over a substantial reduction in controls over public services, it should be noted that

⁴² James Vernon, ‘Heathrow and the Making of Neoliberal Britain’, *Past & Present* 252 (2021): 213–47.

⁴³ Stephen Brooke, ‘Living in “New Times”: Historicizing 1980s Britain’, *History Compass* 12, no. 1 (2014): 24.

⁴⁴ Capie, ‘Financial Deregulation’, 49.

⁴⁵ Michael Moran, *The British Regulatory State: High Modernism and Hyper-Inflation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 67.

⁴⁶ William Davies, ‘Neoliberalism: A Bibliographic Review’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 1, nos. 7–8 (2014): 310.

her governments also extended statutory regulations.⁴⁷ This was the case, as we shall see, with fire precautions, in which successive governments took a path of least intervention, either by creating new statutory regulations as discretionary powers or by proceeding on a ‘regulate-to-deregulate’ basis;⁴⁸ that is, in cases where a new regulation was introduced to strengthen the governance of fire safety in notoriously high-risk premises – invariably following multiple-fatality disasters such as those at Bradford City’s Valley Parade stadium in 1985 and King’s Cross Underground station two years later – this was offset by the relaxation of existing regulations as applied to lower-risk premises. We also see the paradox of deregulation in central government’s persistent refusal to introduce licensing of HMOs throughout the 1980s and 1990s on the basis that existing discretionary powers allowed local authorities to effectively regulate the private rental housing sector despite the high number of fatalities in fires in bedsits, lodging houses and hostels. Chapters 2 and 4 will explore the historic connections between the impulse to deregulate and the necessity for governments to be seen to regulate in the interests of public safety as they applied to different ‘at-risk’ premises, including hotels, care homes and hostels, thereby illustrating how deregulation is itself contested terrain between competing ideas, institutions and extra-institutional actors.

What can a historical approach contribute to our understanding of the Grenfell disaster and ‘to ensure another Grenfell never happens again’?⁴⁹ First of all, *Before Grenfell* offers a longer-term perspective on issues that did not form an integral part of the inquiry’s remit. While Sir Martin Moore-Bick references earlier milestones in building regulation, ‘stay put’ and multiple-fatality tower-block fires (notably in a section titled ‘Before Grenfell’ in which he briefly examines the fire at Lakanal House in South London in 2009, which caused the deaths of six residents, including three young children), these are generally only included as background details in his Phase 1 Report.⁵⁰ Even then, with a couple of important exceptions, the proceedings and evidence trail tend not to go back much before the present century, which is unsurprising given the skill and patience required in

⁴⁷ Giandomenico Majone, ‘Paradoxes of Privatization and Deregulation’, *Journal of European Public Policy* 1, no. 1 (1994): 54; Philip Booth, *Thatcher: The Myth of Deregulation*, IEA Discussion Paper No. 60 (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 2015).

⁴⁸ Ng Sek Hong and Chris Rowley, ‘Globalization and Hong Kong’s Labour Market: The Deregulation Paradox’, *Asia Pacific Business Review* 6, nos. 3–4 (2000): 174–92.

⁴⁹ Grenfell United’s statement supporting its #DemandCharges campaign, 16 December 2021, <<https://grenfellunited.org.uk/latest/demandcharges>>.

⁵⁰ Moore-Bick, *Phase 1 Report*, 73–5.

piecing together records from an earlier, pre-digital age.⁵¹ By tracing the waves of building regulation, fire precautions and scientific testing of materials over the past century or longer, drawing on the records of several prominent and lesser-known institutions (these include the Joint Fire Research Organisation and its Fire Research Station, the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council and Fire Brigades Union, and numerous specialist periodicals published across the fire and construction sectors), we are able to situate Grenfell in its historic context and recognise its significance as an unintended but not unanticipated outcome of the state's deregulation of public safety.

Secondly, in *Why History Matters*, John Tosh argues that 'thinking with history' performs a vital role in supporting the function of democratic society by illuminating and deepening current issues. As a way of thinking and a discrete academic discipline, history is also important in demonstrating how the present is both connected to and a product of the past. The historian's role is less to teach specific lessons drawn from the past than to provide the evidence and interpretative framework through which readers can make their own informed judgements about the issues of the day.⁵² This applies as much to policymakers, whose principal consideration for decision making is previous policy, as it does to those communities who are directly affected by the decisions taken on their behalf. *Before Grenfell* offers a critical historical account of the evolution of fire safety research and practice across the twentieth century, but with a particular focus on the period between the 1970s and the present century, to deepen the reader's understanding of the complexity of the current issues and their contested perspectives. Following Alix Green's cue expressed in *History, Policy and Public Purpose*, I have sought in this book to write 'history with public purpose', and my argument and approach here has been shaped by two decades of researching, writing and speaking about the British fire and rescue service to a variety of audiences, including civil servants, trade unionists and other stakeholders.⁵³

This builds towards, thirdly, plugging what Green calls the 'history gap' that exists in contemporary policymaking. Historians have noted that the British government repeatedly fails to learn from past policy successes and failures because of its lack of institutional memory and its inability to use

⁵¹ Those witnesses who took the most historically informed approach to their testimony were Sam Webb, architect and safety campaigner; Matt Wrack, general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union; and Luke Bisby, professor of fire at the University of Edinburgh.

⁵² John Tosh, *Why History Matters* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 120–1.

⁵³ Alix R. Green, *History, Policy and Public Purpose: Historians and Historical Thinking in Government* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 42.

history as either a 'way of thinking' or a resource for 'good' policymaking.⁵⁴ This is no less evident in the fields of fire service and housing policy, which have been subject to multiple 'machinery of government' changes since the 1990s, leading to a significant hollowing-out of civil servants' skills. Fire and rescue service policy has resided with four different government departments since 1997,⁵⁵ while, as of January 2023, there have been twenty-three housing ministers in post over the same period, serving an average term of a little over one year (there were five different ministers or under-secretaries alone in 2022 as the present government lurched from crisis to crisis). These startling, if unsurprising, revelations reflect the low priority given to housing and fire policy by successive governments, as well as the 'benign neglect' of fire safety issues. They also reveal a discontinuity in policymaking, which has caused more harm than good to those who are most vulnerable to injury or death, as monstrously illustrated on 14 June 2017. It is my contention that responsible policies will only emerge following serious engagement with the tools and skills prevalent within the historical discipline; policymaking necessitates learning *with* history as well as learning *from* history. Until that happens, ministers will continue to play with fire and we will all nervously sleep with one eye open.

⁵⁴ Green, *History, Policy and Public Purpose*, 43, 48; Lucy Delap, Simon Szreter and Fiona Holland, 'History as a Resource for the Future: Building Civil Service Skills', *History & Policy*, 15 July 2014, <<https://www.historyandpolicy.org/consultations/consultations/history-as-a-resource-for-the-future-building-civil-service-skills>>.

⁵⁵ These were the Home Office, Department of Transport and the Regions, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Department for Communities and Local Government, before returning to the stewardship of the Home Office in 2016.