

Squibb firm pays out over crane tragedy

Parties agree undisclosed settlement after 85-year-old woman died when a 27-metre tower crane crashed through her roof

SAFETY

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A family whose relative died when a crane crashed through the roof of their home have agreed an out-of-court financial settlement with a housing association and contractor.

Former Squibb Group subsidiary PGCS Partnership, plus Swan Housing Association and its subsidiary Swan Commercial Services, were taken to the High Court in 2023 following the incident in Bow, East London. The parties have now agreed a settlement, the terms of which have not been disclosed.

On 8 July 2020, June Harvey, 85, died after a 27-metre tower crane crashed through the roof of the house she shared with her niece Jacqueline Atkinson, now 67, and great nephew Sam Atkinson, now 32. Her niece and great nephew were also in the house at the time and described how they thought a bomb had exploded and watched as their house and possessions were destroyed.

"I was with my aunt in her bedroom, Sam was downstairs with the dog when it all happened," Jacqueline told *Construction News*. "I was sorting some clothes out under an ottoman bed so I had my head under and there was a bang, I felt something hit me and thought [the lid] had fallen down.

"Then as I looked up, there was what I thought was smoke everywhere. I thought a bomb had gone off. June had disappeared totally."

A neighbour brought a ladder and Sam raced to their rescue, but it was too late for his great aunt. "I thought a plane had come down," he said. "The roof came completely down on one side. I was screaming to try to get to them both, but the stairs were just rubble."

Jacqueline was trapped in the dust and could hear neighbours trying to help her. "People were shouting 'get out, get out'," she said. "I couldn't even figure out what had happened, June was gone, I couldn't see anything... It was unbelievable. Then we had a long wait. I had such bad panic attacks, I couldn't breathe."

The crane was being used on land owned by Swan, which was building 65 units of social housing at Watts Grove, Bow, at the time of the incident. Construction subsidiary Swan Commercial Services was leading the project. Swan and its subsidiary were taken over by housing association Sanctuary in 2023.

Claims launched

In July 2023, Jacqueline and Sam both launched claims at the High Court. PGCS Partnership, a subsidiary of Squibb Group that went into liquidation in July 2022, had been a consulting engineer on the job. Squibb itself was wound up by the High Court in December 2023 after being served a winding-up order by HMRC.

Even though the court case has been settled, the police and Health and Safety Executive (HSE) are still investigating.

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Sam Atkinson



Sam told *CN* the settlement was “a small piece of justice” but with the criminal investigation approaching its fifth year, it was not enough. “It shouldn’t have happened at all. There’s no way, with how far we should have progressed, that a crane should fall,” he said. “You walk around London and see how many cranes there are. It happens extremely rarely but it shouldn’t have happened at all. Until that investigation is concluded, what is to say it won’t happen again?”

Jacqueline and Sam have suffered mental health impacts and Sam has been unable to return to his job as a chef, due to PTSD and anxiety. “I still wake up with nightmares, any loud noises I jump, I struggle with bad anxiety, struggle to sleep and have some anger issues, which I never had before, that I’m trying to deal with,” he said.

The tragedy could have been even worse had the crane fallen differently, Sam added, given there was a block of flats behind their former home.

He said there has been little contact from investigators and they are in the dark as to why the investigation is taking so long.

In speaking to *CN*, the pair hope to prevent similar incidents taking place and want to raise awareness of the lack of support for people in their situation.

Lawyer Helen Clifford, who has represented the family, said: “The delays that Jacci and Sam have faced and continue to face are unacceptable. They

are entirely innocent victims of a disaster that should never have happened.”

She alleged that a lack of police and HSE resources have contributed to the delay, and criticised cuts imposed by central government after 2010.

Clifford also called for the restoration of the tower crane register, which was introduced in 2010 after the 2006 Battersea crane collapse and made it a requirement to notify the HSE if a tower crane was in use on site. She added that it should be extended to all types of crane. The register was abolished under the Coalition Government’s drive to reduce “red tape” in 2013. The HSE previously said the register did not bring about any “demonstrable improvement to tower crane safety”.

Asked about the settlement, a spokesperson for Sanctuary said: “Our thoughts remain with everyone affected by this tragic incident in Bow in 2020. Legal proceedings have continued since our acquisition of Swan Housing Association in a rescue deal in 2023 and while these are ongoing it would be inappropriate for us to make any further comment.”

Begbies Traynor, liquidators for PGCS, has been approached for comment.

A Metropolitan Police spokesperson said: “Detectives are working closely with the Health and Safety Executive and Crown Prosecution Service. We remain in contact with June’s family to keep them apprised of the complexities of the investigation.”

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