

High rise deaths cost Otis £545,000

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[Work at height](#), [Workplace transport](#)

An incident in which two men plunged down a tower block lift shaft after the lift door swung open and closed like a "cat flap", has cost a lift operator Otis £545,000 in fines and costs.

The prosecution followed an accident on 4 February 2001 at Shirley Towers in Southampton when Michael Dawson and Daniel Digby fell 30 metres after they collided with a lift door on the seventh-level landing (14 floors up) during a post-party scuffle. The door swung open and closed behind them because of inadequate fixings on the lower rail of the opening. Both men died from their injuries.

Dennis MacWilliam, the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) investigating inspector, told HSW that the "guide shoes" holding the bottom of the door in position on its track gave way. The lift company Otis had failed to maintain the lift at Shirley Towers and two other tower blocks in line with its contract with the blocks' owner Southampton City Council.

The investigation revealed that Otis had repeatedly fitted the wrong-sized door shoes: they were too small and not robust enough to withstand foreseeable vandalism. The company replaced the shoe guide assemblies at Shirley Towers on a like-for-like basis without reviewing whether they were adequate. Maintenance records showed that lift engineers had repaired landing doors forced out of their running tracks as a result of misuse at least 30 times at the three blocks between 1990 and 2001. Inspectors found rusting, bent and broken shoes at the flats.

Otis Investments (formerly Otis plc) and Otis Ltd (formerly Express Lifts Company) admitted breaching Section 3(1) of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 for failing to ensure the safety of non-employees. Throughout sentencing at Southampton Crown Court, the companies were referred to as a single entity (Otis). On 7 April, Judge John Boggis QC fined them £400,000, plus £145,000 costs (divided equally).

Summing up, Judge Boggis criticised Otis management from "top to bottom" for failing to maintain the lifts and ensure the safety of lift users. He particularly highlighted the absence of major maintenance on the doors at Shirley Towers since August 2000, even though a maintenance visit was due in November 2000.