



Vol. 44 No. 14 · 21 July 2022

Bad Dust

Tom White



ALBERT POPPLE retired in 1992, selling his small carpentry business in Hull and moving with his wife to the coast. He went to see his GP in Hornsea in October 1994. He had been feeling tired and short of breath. His doctor sent him for tests and in November he was diagnosed with pleural mesothelioma, an incurable cancer that affects the membranes that line the chest wall and surround the organs in the chest cavity. The tumour in the pleura halfway down his right lung was restricting his breathing. His condition deteriorated quickly, and he died in May 1995, at the age of 64. More than 90 per cent of cases of mesothelioma are linked to exposure to asbestos, though the cancer usually develops decades later. Popple was apprenticed as a joiner during the postwar housing boom and would have worked on building sites piled high with asbestos wall and ceiling panels. His wife received £4170 compensation for his premature death from the Department of the Environment. Asbestos was banned in the UK a few years later, in 1999.

Asbestos is a generic term for a group of silicate minerals with a fibrous structure. Chrysotile, amosite and crocidolite – white, brown and blue asbestos – are the most common varieties. Its remarkable insulating and fire-resistant properties have been known for millennia, but asbestos only began to be used on an industrial scale in the last quarter of the 19th century. Large-scale mining began in Quebec in the 1870s, followed by the Urals and South Africa. Its fibrous structure makes it especially adaptable and hard-wearing and means that it can be threaded into other materials to make objects ranging from wall insulation to tablecloths. These same properties also make it dangerous: asbestos fibres break down into smaller and smaller strands, a process that continues long after they become invisible to the human eye. When inhaled, these filaments don't get caught at the back of the throat, but glide into the lungs where they can pierce any cells they reach. And there they remain.

Pulmonary asbestosis was first recognised in workers in asbestos mines and processing plants at the turn of the 20th century. In 1924, the death of a Rochdale textile worker called Nellie Kershaw was described in the *British Medical Journal* by a pathologist called William Edmund Cooke, who found that her lungs contained 'particles of mineral matter', most of them with 'sharp angles'. But it would take decades for companies to acknowledge that mesothelioma could be caused by relatively brief exposure to asbestos. In the 2000s it became clear that some cancers of the lung, larynx and ovaries can also be attributed to it, and a 2018 study estimated that asbestos causes around 255,000 annual deaths. That year Johnson & Johnson paid \$4.69 billion to 22 women who claimed they had developed ovarian cancer after being exposed to baby powder contaminated with asbestos (talcum deposits are often found near tremolite asbestos).

In 2017 a shopfitting company called Concept 70 took Cape Intermediate Holdings to court to recoup compensation payments it had made to employees who had been exposed to asbestos. The

Cape Asbestos Company, founded in London in 1893, opened a mine in what was then the Orange Free State in South Africa to extract and mill amosite, which was then shipped to the UK and woven into construction materials in four factories around London. During the proceedings, Cape handed over previously unseen internal documents to Concept 70, having made a deal that the documents would be destroyed after the court case. Working with Harminder Bains of Leigh Day Solicitors, the Asbestos Victims Support Groups Forum UK challenged this arrangement, and the Supreme Court eventually ruled that the documents must be made public.

When they were released in March this year, it became clear that Cape's executives and managers had known years earlier than they had admitted that mesothelioma could be caused by even a very brief exposure to asbestos-containing products like Asbestolux, the company's high-selling insulation board. Papers from the late 1950s show Cape encouraging its American partner Johns-Manville not to put warning labels on asbestos-based insulation boards in case this damaged profitability. 'A caution label on our products and none on [those of our competitors] would make our selling efforts most difficult,' an executive wrote in 1958. In a document from 1969, Cape's medical adviser acknowledged that mesothelioma could be caused by 'short and possibly small' exposure and that 'no type of asbestos proved innocent.' Cape's own sampling data from the late 1960s and 1970s showed that merely handling Asbestolux panels produced significantly higher dust counts than were allowed by regulations at the time – and on building sites the panels weren't just being handled, but cut, drilled, routed and sanded. Despite this, the company repeatedly reassured the British government and the public that Asbestolux didn't present a risk, and even managed to persuade the British Occupational Hygiene Society to downgrade its recommendations from a 'no dust policy' to a 'maximum allowable concentration approach', and then to increase the proposed limits. Cape only released sampling data that showed low dust counts; tests that produced unfavourable results were withheld. The documents also showed that Cape continued to manufacture and sell Asbestolux until 1980, though it claimed in compensation cases it had halted production two years before that.

Cape's South African mine didn't close until 1979. In a promotional brochure from the 1950s, a series of photographs display the progress of amosite 'From Mine to Factory'. The first image shows two Black men at work underground: 'The natives in the mine, drilling the amosite rock in preparation for inserting the explosive charge', the caption reads. Other than their boots, neither man is wearing protective equipment. A copy of the brochure appeared in a recent exhibition at the Serpentine called *Radio Ballads*, in which various artists worked with people in Barking and Dagenham to consider the different kinds of labour they performed.*

The centrepiece of the exhibition was Ilona Sagar's *The Body Blow*, a film about people with experience of asbestos-related disease: a Cape factory opened in 1913 in Barking, and employed a sizeable proportion of the local community over the next fifty years. The borough has the highest incidence of asbestos-related cancers in London. Over lingering shots of Barking and the Thames, of hospital interiors and operating theatres, and of the asbestos removal process, the narrator of Sagar's film reflects on breathing, risk, time, decay, care and its gendering, value and usefulness. These observations, which were scripted collaboratively, are counterposed by the observations of legal experts, oncologists, social workers, asbestos removal workers, and former industrial workers diagnosed with mesothelioma. 'We were just like worker ants, in a way,' one of them says. A community worker called Yvonne describes the complexity of work capability assessments and government assistance claims. She recounts the delaying tactics of insurers, whose representatives are quick to offer their sincere condolences to the family of the recently deceased. A long sequence showing a 3D scan of ribs eaten away by mesothelioma tumours cuts abruptly to a shot of a half-demolished factory, with its crumbling walls and exposed pipes. A pale pink fragment of lung

tissue removed for a biopsy cuts to the textured pale pink wall of a condemned council flat, a workman in the background in protective clothing.

As Sagar's film hints, we're only in the early stages of this disaster. Mesothelioma UK estimates that 94 per cent of hospitals and 80 per cent of schools in the UK still contain asbestos, along with about thirty thousand buildings owned by local councils. The Houses of Parliament are riddled with it. There's no plan for a nationwide removal programme. In *The Body Blow* an asbestos removal expert explains how easily potentially fatal exposure can occur: a light fitting needs replacing in a ceiling that might contain asbestos; the electrician calls his office for advice; getting a specialist out will delay the job and cost up to £500. Just do it yourself, the electrician is told. Even when asbestos is professionally removed, its safe disposal is difficult. It can't be incinerated, so it's usually buried in landfill sites for hazardous materials.

The Serpentine exhibition also included a photograph by Hein Du Plessis of a protest in the 1990s in the Northern Cape town of Prieska, where much of Cape's workforce lived. One protester holds a sign reading 'NO MASKS, NO PROTECTION, NO LUNGS'. We are told in the film that 6 per cent of the former miners who have filed compensation claims were seven or younger when they started working. But the mining hasn't stopped. Two million tons of asbestos is still produced every year (down from a peak in the late 1990s of five million tons), for sale to customers in China, Russia and India, in developing nations in Africa and Asia, and in parts of Latin America. Until it closed in 2012, a significant proportion came from a chrysotile mine in Quebec, though the use of asbestos in Canada itself had been heavily restricted since the early 1980s.

After the documents went public in March, Joanne Gordon, chair of the Asbestos Victims Support Groups Forum UK, called on Cape to donate £10 million towards mesothelioma research – a modest sum, given the scale of the problem and of the company's cover-up. A spokesperson for Altrad, a French construction conglomerate that recently acquired the company, responded: 'Cape was taken over in 2017 and its current management cannot comment on this matter, based on historical events that occurred over forty years ago.' These events didn't feel so abstractly 'historical' to people like my grandmother Margaret Popple, who died in June 2019, having outlived her husband, Albert, by more than twenty years.

Footnotes

* Frances Morgan wrote about Radio Ballads in the LRB of 9 June.