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Dust storm
The pretty Yorkshire town of Hebden Bridge is home to quirky shops, a thriving arts scene and, campaigners claim, Britain's biggest industrial disaster. Former resident Mark Piggott meets the ex-employees of a local factory, whose lives have been blighted by deadly asbestos. Photographs by Adam Bloomberg and Oliver Charrier

The town of Hebden Bridge, where asbestos dust has been found in many places, is now a playground

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Marguerite Brook has fond memories of Acre Mill, the factory on the moors above Hebden Bridge where so many of her family and friends worked. The mill employed generations of local workers, and was considered the best place to work in the West Yorkshire town, employing 600 men and women in its heyday. 'The mill paid well,' she recalls. 'Much better than most places around here. My dad worked there for years, and at Christmas they used to have parties for us children. I remember the dust was everywhere, even in the canteen.'

Brook's living-room, in a suburb of Wakefield, is crammed with mementoes and photographs. She lives here with her husband and a grown-up daughter. In 2005 Brook noticed she became breathless at the slightest exertion: 'I went to my doctor and he sent me for tests. I thought it was bronchitis. The phone rang at tea time and the doctor said, "I've got good news and bad news – which do you want first?" I said, "The good news," so he said, "You haven't got bronchitis." I said, "What's the bad news?" And he said, "You've

got asbestos on the lung." I burst out crying and asked how long I had left, but he didn't know.'

Brook was diagnosed with bilateral pleural, diffuse pleural thickening (when the membrane covering the lungs becomes scarred), and possible asbestosis, a chronic lung complaint that causes significant respiratory problems. She was relatively lucky. Asbestos is also responsible for a far more dangerous disease, mesothelioma, a relatively rare cancer that affects the lungs or abdomen. It can take 20 to 60 years for mesothelioma's symptoms (which include coughing, fevers, blood in the sputum, and weight loss) to appear, by which time it is usually too late. Once diagnosed, the sufferer is often dead within 18 months; there is no cure.

Brook's first husband, Arthur, who also worked at the mill, died from mesothelioma. 'In 1978 his stomach swelled up, so he went to the doctor, who sent him to hospital. They filled two and a half demijohns with greeny-yellow liquid. They said nothing could be done for him, so I turned our back bedroom into a little sitting-room so Arthur could see all his friends. I begged them not to tell him what he had. He died on August 8 1978.'

Brook, now 70, came into contact with asbestos dust both as a worker ('I only worked

at the mill for a month, in 1957') and from her father's clothes before that. He worked at Acre Mill for 30 years, and for the same employer, Cape PLC.

'I remember when my dad worked there, he'd come home looking like a snowman,' Brook says. 'He'd just laugh. Me and my brother and sister used to have to wash his clothes, because Mum had Parkinson's.' Brook is claiming compensation from Cape, and her case is ongoing.

Based in Wakefield, West Yorkshire, Cape is now a multi-national company specialising in scaffolding, insulation and fire protection, and employing 7,700 people in 23 countries worldwide. Offshoots operate in the oil, gas and chemical industries. In 2005 Cape's turnover was over £261 million. The company has not manufactured asbestos products since 1981. Acre Mill was razed in 1979.



I'd be dead by Christmas. He didn't think anything could be done, but I wasn't giving up so easily.' With the help of Tom Carden from the Ridings Asbestos Support & Awareness Group, Dyson claimed industrial workers' compensation and went to court against Cape. According to Dyson, Cape disputed that he had ever worked at the factory and he had to sketch the mill's interior to prove he had been there. When Cape paid up, after 18 months, Dyson spent a large chunk of his compensation money on a treatment being pioneered by Dr Gil Lederman – the controversial surgeon

who treated George Harrison in his final weeks – at Staten Island University Hospital, New York. During the treatment, stereotactic radiosurgery, the tumour is given a precise, high dose of radiation, which does not affect the surrounding tissue. 'I had 39 sessions on the ray gun and also chemotherapy. The after-effects were unpleasant, but they monitor you all the time. I was there three months in all. When I left, Dr Lederman said, "I'll see you in 20 years." That was music to my ears.' Dyson's treatment cost £28,000 – money he considers well spent. 'I had a flash car, but what use is



Despite being banned in the 1980s, asbestos remains Britain's worst workplace killer – roughly the same number of people die from asbestos-related illnesses each year as are killed on the roads (about 4,000). Professor Julian Peto, a cancer specialist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, predicts that 200,000 people will die in the UK alone over the next 15 to 20 years, with deaths peaking around 2020.

'Ironically, if you worked with asbestos in a factory, you were often less at risk,' Prof Peto says. 'From about the 1930s asbestos in factories was quite well regulated; Acre Mill was an exception. Generally, it's people such as carpenters who worked with asbestos who are most in danger – and it's impossible for them to sue, because they bought the stuff themselves.'

Derived from a Greek adjective meaning 'in-extinguishable', asbestos is mined in Canada, Australia and South Africa. Even in the first century ad the Roman philosopher Pliny the Younger spoke of the 'sickness of the lungs' among slaves who wove asbestos, but it was commonly believed that you had to be exposed to high quantities for a long time to be in danger.

When 15-year-old Peter Dyson went to Acre Mill to install a dust-extraction system, he had no idea that 50 years later he would be facing premature death from cancer. In 1956, he says, he was unaware of any safeguards at the factory: 'Acre Mill was like a sand storm. You'd be walking through six inches of dust; you'd walk back 20 minutes later and your footprints would be covered. We were all covered in it. There was a bus stop by the extractor vents, but people wouldn't wait there even though it was warm because they'd get dust all over their coats.'

Dyson went on to run his own successful fabrications business, but in 2004, aged 63, he began to tire easily and went to his doctor. 'The doctor said I'd be dead by Christmas. He

didn't think anything could be done, but I wasn't giving up so easily.'

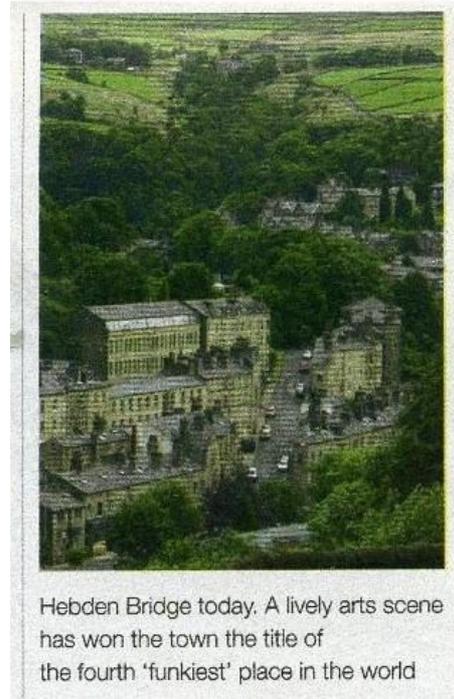
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Dyson's treatment cost £28,000 – money he considers well spent. 'I had a flash car, but what use is that if you're dead? I now jog three times a week and regularly do 20 lengths at the swimming-baths. They caught me early; I was lucky.'

Today, Hebden Bridge, 900ft above sea level on the edge of the Yorkshire moors, with a population of under 10,000, is best known for its quirky shops, bohemian wine bars and thriving arts scene. In 2005 the British Airways inflight magazine named it the fourth funkiest 'city' in the world. Another survey voted it Britain's most unspoilt town. The birthplace of Ted Hughes and burial site of Sylvia Plath, it attracts writers and artists, and many newcomers work in the media. You are as likely to hear a Home Counties accent as a West Yorkshire one.

Hebden first became a popular alternative community in the 1960s, because of its accessibility to the nearby cities of Leeds, Manchester and Bradford as well as its beautiful setting and low house prices (though these days they are considerably higher than in other parts of Yorkshire).



The town was chosen as a site for a cotton mill in 1859 because of its plentiful water supply. Cape PLC took over the running of the mill in 1939, and during the Second World War it was used by the Home Office for the manufacture of gas masks, using the miracle material asbestos. After the war the mill turned to manufacturing other asbestos products, including rope, pipe-lagging and textiles. Hebden's largest employer, Cape was popular because it paid and treated its workers well, organising outings and parties for families. My mother brought me to Hebden from inner-city Manchester in 1970, to the village of Pecket Well, two miles from town and a mile from Acre Mill. I didn't know it at the time, but according to locals, dust from the factory blew across the playground of Old Town School, where I went, right up to the mill's closure in 1971. (This dust was said to be in such quantities that children would often make asbestos 'snowballs'.)

Campaigners estimate that 700 people have already died of asbestos-related diseases linked to Acre Mill, making it not only Britain's worst industrial disaster, but an ongoing tragedy. The local newspapers frequently report new deaths. According to the Northern and Yorkshire Cancer Registry and Information Service, rates for mesothelioma in Hebden Bridge from 1981 to 2004 were almost three times higher for men and four times higher in women than the national average, and cases included many who had never set foot inside the factory.



Like many village children, I gravitated to Carr Head landfill site, a makeshift playground 50 yards from our house. Although we were not aware of it, the site was one of several where bales of asbestos had been dumped locally. My mother still lives near Carr Head tip, where all of the remaining asbestos was buried deeper underground in 2002 at a cost of £1.5 million. (Taxpayers picked up the bill.) Trees planted on the site have stubbornly refused to grow, so that the lines of white sticks are eerily reminiscent of the battlefields of France.

John Pinder, who now lives in Rochdale, 'laiked' on another local tip, at Scout Road, Mytholmroyd, in the 1950s. 'Scout Road was like an Aladdin's cave,' he says. 'You could find bogie [go-kart] wheels, and inner tubes to float on the canal. But there was a lot of asbestos about: when the lorries came down from the mill carrying bales, people took in their washing.'

Diagnosed with mesothelioma after suffering constant back pain, a common early symptom, Pinder, 63, kept the disease at bay for two years, but is now undergoing chemotherapy. 'I never smoked, always kept fit and active, played rugby and cricket till 50, took early retirement and played golf. I used to walk five miles up round Hollingworth Lake, but now I'm gasping after 20 yards like I've just run the marathon.'

In 2006, supported by the local solicitors Pickering & Co, Pinder took Cape to the High Court in Manchester for exposing him to the dust. His solicitors argued that Cape should have made much greater efforts to ensure asbestos was disposed of safely, away from children.

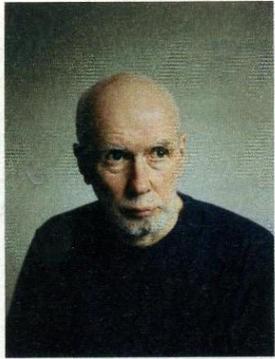


In its defence, Cape argued that in the 1950s nobody really knew how dangerous asbestos could be in smaller quantities; and that even if it was asbestos from its mill that was being dumped (something it initially disputed), it couldn't be expected to be responsible for the security of council tips. The judge concluded that as it was only in the late 1960s that contact with low levels of asbestos became a concern, to impose a duty of care prior to the 1960s would be applying hindsight to the standards which applied in the 1950s. Pinder lost the case, yet bears little animosity towards the company. Others are less forgiving.

When Alice Jefferson found a lump under her arm in 1981, she went for a check-up and was

told she had terminal mesothelioma. She had worked at the mill only for a matter of months, 30 years earlier. She was still in her forties, and had four children. Her son Paul was then 15, in the year above me at Calder High School. 'I was just getting to know Mum as an adult when it all happened,' Paul says. 'I hope I could be as brave if it happened to me.'

In Alice's final months, a film crew from ITV made a documentary about her and the mill. Paul remembers she kept her humour to the end: 'Before she got ill, Mum was a big woman, but she lost loads of weight. When the camera crew came in she'd say, "I think I took my diet a bit too far."'



By the time Alice: A Fight for Life was broadcast in 1982, Alice was dead. 'Our solicitor, John Pickering, took Cape to court to get compensation,' Paul says. 'They fought it, and made Mum go to court in Leeds when she was really ill. The judge was furious. And the compensation wasn't nearly enough; not when you consider she might have had another 30 or 40 years, and Patsy [her youngest child] was only five.'

Very few television programmes have had such an impact as Alice: A Fight for Life. The documentary led to a government inquiry, as a result of which the levels of asbestos permitted in UK factories were dramatically reduced. It was reported that about £60 million was wiped from the share prices of asbestos companies in the aftermath of Alice.

John Pickering moved to Hebden Bridge from Manchester, where he had worked at the

industrial compensation specialists Thompsons, in 1967. He had already heard of Acre Mill. He suspects many former employees had already died. His first case, in 1969, was terminated by the plaintiff. 'You have to understand the ambivalent view of Cape that people had locally,' Pickering says. 'There was the loyalty factor: men on the shop floor knew the managers, the safety inspectors; they were often friends. To go to court and face people they worked with was difficult.'



Working with the Hebden Bridge Asbestos Action Group, founded in 1975, many members of which are now dead, Pickering found that his caseload increasingly concerned former employees and their families, and by the 1980s the scale of the situation was apparent. 'For about 20 years from 1970 we dealt with about 20 cases a year, then it slowed to about 10 a year, but they're still dying; there have been several deaths in the past few months. The UK's worst ever industrial disaster was at Senghenydd [in Wales, where a mining disaster killed 439 in 1913]. If you count people who worked at the mill or had families there and didn't or wouldn't claim, I'd estimate up to 700 have already died.'

It is difficult to put a figure on those who have developed asbestos-related illness. Michael Coneron, 65, worked for Cape in the 1960s. Recently he was diagnosed with pleural thickening, which he believes was caused by exposure to asbestos dust at Acre Mill; he could still develop full-blown mesothelioma. 'I only worked there for 12

months,' Coneron says. 'I started on asbestos pipes, then moved to another room, which was even worse. Every now and then there'd be "blow-back", and the room would fill with dust and they'd ask you to get out. When it settled you'd just go in again.'

Pickering is not alone in his assessment that this is Britain's worst industrial disaster. Christine McCafferty, the Labour MP for Calder Valley since 1997, has long campaigned for victims; she also has a personal interest: her father worked for a Cape subsidiary in Manchester and died of lung cancer in 1982.

I meet McCafferty at Portcullis House, as the Government sets out proposals to provide faster compensation for all those affected by asbestos. McCafferty, 61, grew up in Manchester and recalls collecting her father from work: 'Dad worked at Small & Parks, in North Manchester, a subsidiary of Cape. In the early 1970s I used to collect him in my old Renault 4. I remember the factory was covered in dust; so was Dad. It was all over my car. In fact my mum knitted him a little bobble cap to keep the dust off his hair.' McCafferty's father became ill in 1981 and died in a matter of months. Because he had died of lung cancer, Cape fought the case; McCafferty remains angered by their attitude.

'Cape said they didn't know how dangerous asbestos was until 1965, but people are still dying, and caring for them costs millions.'

According to Cape, as soon as the company became aware of the true dangers posed by asbestos it changed its working practices accordingly: 'Cape's management did not set out deliberately to kill anyone,' a spokesman says. 'Nor was there a single act or event or disaster for which Cape's then management might reasonably be held responsible. It was as a result of becoming aware of the wider

dangers of asbestos in 1965 that even more stringent safety measures were introduced.'

In 2005 Cape's CEO, Martin May, announced the company was setting up a £40 million fund to provide compensation payouts for its British workers who are expected to file asbestos-related claims for the next 40 years or so. In the course of putting the fund together, Cape says it wrote to all former employees for whom it had records, claimants' solicitors, and asbestos victim support groups, as well as placing advertisements in the press and in doctors' surgeries in areas where Cape owned factories. At the time May said, 'We have former employees we have damaged. Asbestos has killed a lot of people and impaired their lives. If you prove you have a form of asbestos disease and have a need for compensation, Cape will pay.' The company says that payouts can range from £5,000 to £200,000.

None of the management of the Acre Mill site is still employed by Cape, and a company spokesman said recently that 'an apology from today's management would be an empty and meaningless gesture'.

The Hebden Bridge tragedy would probably cause greater outrage if more of the victims were young. Asbestos is a slow killer, and many of its eventual victims are old. Visit the site of Acre Mill today and you will find a dark scar on the landscape, but otherwise nothing to suggest that this was the place where hundreds of people had their death warrants signed. A memorial briefly stood here; in the late 1980s, it was vandalised and removed. It is 28 years since the factory was demolished, but the invisible tragedy is far from over. Many of those affected may not know it yet.

Ends

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/3309579/Dust-storm.html>