FILE NAME: Asbestos Sacks and Bags (ASB)

DATE: 1981 June 19

DOC#: ASB083

DOCUMENT DESCRIPTION: Letter to Lawyer for Port of London Authority from London Docks Employers Association RE Documents Relating to Handling of Asbestos

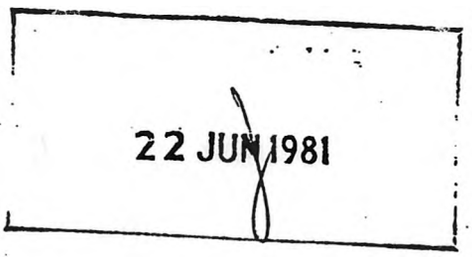
# LONDON ENCLOSED DOCKS EMPLOYERS ASSOCIATION

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19th June 1981

Our ref BEHF/CL
Your ref Q261/80/DD

Dear Mr. Golds,

**Asbestos**

I refer to your letter 17th June 1981 in which you enquire as to whether or not this Association still retains documents relating to the handling of asbestos prior to Devlin Phase II. I am pleased to say that this evidence does still exist and that having been involved in much of the controversy which took place in the 1960's over asbestos, I have also been able to recall a number of the details to which I refer in this letter.

It would be true to say that within the Ocean Trades, in the years prior to 1965, the handling of asbestos in jute/hessian bags was not regarded as dangerous in any way. The Commodity even up to early 1965 was looked upon as a very dusty one only, as were many others at that time. By way of example, in 1947 the Trade Unions successfully applied for an increased piecework rate, not on the grounds of careful handling due to any risk, but solely on the inadequacy of the then piecework rate.

The first instance whereby it could be said that one was made aware of any risk from the commodity itself was 13th July 1954 when one of the H.M. Factory Inspectors visited the "Dunnottar Castle" which was discharging asbestos in hessian bags. His report stated that although the Asbestos Industry Regulations did not cover dock working he would recommend that face masks be issued to dockers handling bagged asbestos. The situation pertained thereafter that if the men requested face masks, the light Martindale mask was issued to them.

In January 1965 the dockers at Dundee Wharf refused to load a consignment of asbestos fibre on the grounds that it was injurious to health and the Wharf Management engaged the services of a qualified Bio-Chemist, Dr. Reginald Milton, to examine the cargo. Essentially his report stated that no health hazard existed in the handling of asbestos fibre in the docks and the commodity could be handled in the normal way but suitable masks should be issued to the dockers involved in the operation.

In June 1965 the one single event took place which effectively marked out this commodity from all others handled in dock working. A Russian vessel,

continued.....

"EMEZK" was discharging general cargo in the Surrey Commercial Docks and in the consignment were a number of parcels of bagged asbestos for London discharge. The stevedore gangs were apprehensive at handling the asbestos, due to recent press reports on the possible risks of asbestosis and they requested the local H.M. Factory Inspector to visit the vessel. His recommendation was that the commodity could be worked safely if the men were issued with heavy duty Siebe Gorman Mark IV face masks which would eliminate any possible chance of loose fibres being inhaled. The masks were issued by Furness Withy & Co. Ltd, the contracting stevedore, but the men complained that their piecework stroke was retarded by having to wear the masks and this was the start of a prolonged period of negotiation and 'go slow' for a compensatory payment. The NAS&D, who represented the stevedore gangs, engaged the professional services of a Dr. Donald Hunter of the Middlesex Hospital and it would be fair to say that some of this gentleman's comments to the gang only increased their fears against the handling of the commodity. Expert opinion was also engaged by the Ocean Shipowners' Group Joint Committee, the senior Joint negotiating body for the Ocean Trades. Not too surprisingly they turned to Dr. Milton who had visited Dundee Wharf earlier that year. Following a visit to the "EMEZK" and a number of other asbestos carrying vessels in London his final report stated: " our preliminary investigations have indicated that it is generally considered that asbestos dust is not a hazard unless there is prolonged exposure over a number of years. There are instances however of definite asbestosis where exposure to the dust had been less than six months and therefore it would seem that the hazard to workers discharging the "EMEZK" was quite low".

In August 1965 when extensive enquiries were being made within the Ocean Trades as to the possible consequences of working with asbestos, the Regional Medical Officer for the N.D.L.B. stated "to the best of my knowledge I have never known of any dock worker to be certified as suffering from asbestosis".

I think it may be significant to your specific enquiries if I mention that within our records, there is a copy letter from Stanley Turner, then PLA Chief Docks Manager, to City Line Ltd. in which he refers to industrial problems with the P.L.A. labour in the South-West India Dock who refused to discharge a shipment of asbestos from the "City of Glasgow". That letter is dated 8th June 1966.

In conclusion I would say speaking from personal experience and with the assistance of documentary records, that prior to 1965 there was never any awareness within the industry in London that a possible risk existed in the handling of asbestos. It was recognised as a dusty commodity but nevertheless it was always handled on a piecework basis. I trust that the foregoing may be of some assistance to you and I have deliberately explained in detail the circumstances relating to the "EMEZK" which I believe was the point when serious investigations into the properties of asbestos was first undertaken in the port.

Yours sincerely,

B.E.H. Furzer.