

164

The Senior Inspector of Mines,
Mines Department,
Kalgoorlie W.A.

Cue, 12th. December 1960

re:- Australian Blue Asbestos Ltd. - HITTENDON.

There are several matters relating to the operations and administration of Australian Blue Asbestos Ltd. which you have raised in recent correspondence, and which have not yet been acknowledged. I delayed submitting written reports because I considered that the nature of some of these matters made them extremely complex to cover adequately through medium of the mail, and it did seem possible that I could have visited Kalgoorlie prior to the commencement of my forthcoming leave. However, I will be proceeding direct to Perth so I will attempt to cover all aspects now.

Firstly, the matter of the underground ventilation at the Colonial Mine, has not been handled in a manner likely to leave either the mine manager or myself in a happy frame of mind.

When I saw Assistant Inspector Simmons in Port Hedland after the June survey he did not express any particular disapproval of the ventilation standards when I queried him. I asked for a copy of his report to be sent to me when he had compiled one and was assured that I would receive one. Despite my repeated requests for copies of such surveys I did not receive a copy of any ventilation inspection made within my inspectorate during the period of my appointment, until your memo of 3rd. October last was received.

In that particular memo you criticised me for apparently short cutting my Colonial inspection of 17th. August, especially in view of the fact that you were then aware that Assistant Inspector Simmons was not happy with the ventilation.

In actual fact I was placed in a most embarrassing position when I called on the manager at the completion of my inspection and was told that he rather resented the Inspector Simmons' report and the subsequent action of senior officers of the Mines Department in approaching his superiors without having first referred the matter to him as Registered Manager.

I explained that I had been on the road for more than a fortnight and that any correspondence dealing with the matter was probably in my office awaiting my attention. Not only must I agree that the action was unethical from the viewpoint of the manager; but I felt incensed to think that such action would be considered without first seeking my comments. You have on occasions attributed me with a fair knowledge of mine ventilation and its associated problems, yet in this instance you have accepted the findings of an officer who hadn't seen the mine for four years, and deemed it to be of such importance that it was necessary to approach the Company Executive. Furthermore, this action does not tie in with the explanation that Mr. Simmons' original figures were not sent because a check inspection was required.

My reference to Assistant Inspector Simmons is not intended to discredit him in any way; no doubt he found out later that the dust concentrations were higher than a visual examination would have indicated, and I feel quite sure that he would have told me if he had suspected that sub-standard conditions prevailed.

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This aspect does indicate an important point. It means that whilst Workmen's Inspector Hunt and I have made frequent inspections of the Colonial Mine workings, we have normally confined our remarks concerning ventilation to the need to supply auxiliary ventilation to certain stopes. On the same basis that Inspector Simmons did not become particularly concerned about the ventilation until his dust counts were checked, we too, have not considered the underground atmosphere was persistently poor. It is now clear that more frequent inspections will have to be carried out to test the purity and quantity of the underground atmosphere.

While this task has been done by the officers attached to the Inspection Branch, I consider that an Inspector should have the mine Ventilation Officer accompany him and take dust samples under the direction of the Inspector, who could later check the results himself. During the process of the three recent surveys at Wittenoom I have been told to make the Workmen's Inspector available to assist in the survey, but there has never been any suggestion that I myself be brought into the picture. Consequently I am entitled to assume that all major policies on mine ventilation will be a matter for the mine concerned and the Kalgoorlie office.

You are no doubt now aware that Mr. H. Marshall will be replaced as Underground Manager by Mr. K.S. Carter; and that Mr. A. Spencer will be replaced as Mine Production Engineer by Mr. R. Lehm.

Although some of these staff changes were pending for several months they were in some way precipitated by friction between the underground executive staff and the mine manager, who was previously the mill superintendent and thereby considered to be 'unqualified' by the underground staff. Our condemnation of the ventilation was passed on to the underground staff for explanation, at a time when relations were not the best and all employees were recoiling from the impact of such a number of asbestos indications being notified by the Mines Medical Officer.

I can foresee some troubled times ahead for Australian Blue Asbestos Ltd. The staff changes, and the realisation of the risk of asbestosis amongst the more experienced miners has brought about an exodus of skilled miners at a time when production should be increasing. In addition to this the mine is going to be left without the expert guidance of Mr. Spencer and his absence will be felt until his successor has time to properly familiarise himself with the trend of operations, which differ markedly from those with which he has had experience mainly because of the absence of broken ore reserves at Wittenoom.

The 'break-through' from the stoping area of J level St. into the side of the gorge will probably enable better ventilation standards to be maintained in the lower workings, but the fact remains that all operations on the lower seam are getting so far from the main portal and from other openings, that ventilation will be harder to maintain and the output per man-shift will be less by virtue of greater haulage and servicing distances. Under poorer conditions of working environment and with longer lines of supply, the output per man will drop to the extent that it will not be possible to average the high rates being earned at present, unless increased rates are to be paid.

It has been the attraction of high wages which has kept the better class of miner at Wittenoom and it is ~~xxxxxxxx~~ easy to imagine what will eventuate if the mine is left with inexperienced migrant miners. Now that attention has been focused upon the need to maintain proper ventilation, we can expect to receive plenty of complaints regarding the inadequacy of the ventilation; and with the drift of older miners the question of migrant miners inability to speak English will become worse.

In accordance with your letter of 27th. October concerning the language problem at Wittenoom I recorded the decision to be most definite in our requirements that all underground employees be able to speak and understand english at the end of a three months period commencing early in November. Your reference to complaints about the Mine Administration not making sufficient attempt to ensure that all miners can speak english, would be challenged by the management on the grounds that they pay wages to all migrants who attend english classes on Saturdays.

Whatever the outcome of the ventilation and employment problems may be, the company still have the right to engage whom they please provided the persons pass the necessary medical tests. It will always remain our task to police the suitability of employees for underground work; and it will always be our duty to ensure that ventilation standards are maintained. Under the existing arrangement whereby the District Inspector is stationed so far from the mine, and could be on duty even further away; and with the ventilation officer in Kalgoorlie we will never be able to cover this mine adequately. No worthwhile supervision from this Department can be expected until a District Inspector is based at Port Hedland.

I have attempted to place on paper most of the points I would have discussed with you had I been coming to Kalgoorlie. This has been a very trying year for me, both from the employment and domestic angles. Maybe I have interpreted the Wittenoom business incorrectly but it was most upsetting. Your inference that I failed to carry out a reasonable inspection on 17th. August added to my current worries. The explanation was that I had previously twisted my back whilst carrying out an inspection of the "Blue Spout" shaft with the manager and Inspector Hunt. This inspection was done from the bonnet of the cage and I had three trips through the shaft to each single inspection made by the other two. I would have been quite justified in not even attempting to inspect the Colonial mine because the condition of my back was aggravated by driving. You should have raised the matter when I called on you in Kalgoorlie and an explanation would have been given then.

Far from dodging the responsibilities of my appointment I have done far more than could be reasonably expected of a Inspector at Cue. You need have no misgivings about my attitude to the work, and I will gladly receive all criticisms and welcome the opportunity to state my reasons for any particular action which may be frowned upon.

The scope of the work performed from this office is not properly understood, but as my predecessor you should be best fitted to appreciate the difficulties concerned. I have a letter to hand which was written by you ten years ago whilst occupying this appointment. You were incensed by the unannounced visitations of other Inspectors into the Cue Inspectorate, and you wrote to Mr. Foxall expressing the need for better co-operation so that the officers concerned would be kept fully aware of what was planned. To me, it seems that history has been repeated.

Three weeks ago a Medical Practitioner at Geraldton gave me a thorough examination and pronounced that I was run-down and needed a long spell. He was prepared to have given me a certificate which would virtually have sent me on sick leave until I commenced L.S. leave. However, it was fairly essential that I complete the recent trip in order to finalise the Annual Report details, and in any case the medico's finding that there was nothing else wrong with me supplied the necessary pep. I commence leave shortly and am looking forward to a better appreciation of my official problems from all concerned when I get back into gear.

DISTRICT INSPECTOR OF MINES, CUE.