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THE U.K. DOCKS PROBLEM:

The continuing adverse publicity from 1965 described under the heading "The Development of the Problem" ran parallel with the difficulties being experienced at the various docks. The U.K. Unions concerned with the ports have been for many years trying to clean up their members' working conditions. The repeated appeals by the Unions to the Port Employers Association and to the Shipping Companies had met with little success. The very nature of the Dockers work - out in all weathers and frequently in dirty holds and sheds, increases their susceptibility to chest and throat complaints.

The packing of asbestos originally in open weave jute bags, created a lot of dust and the situation was never helped by the fact that the shipping companies rarely gave Asbestos bulk stowage in the holds, but all too frequently used it as dunnage around other cargo and for packing in any available corner of the hold. This treatment naturally tended to damage the bags and even more dust was released into the hold or shed.

The adverse publicity about dusty cargoes and "Asbestos as a health hazard" provided them with just the weapon they needed to again press the shipowners and Port Employers to clean up working conditions.

The original difficulties arose in connection with the Russian ship "AMELK" which arrived at the Surrey Commercial Docks with a cargo of short Russian Asbestos in open weave jute sacks. The very dusty condition of the cargo resulted in the Union Local Branch Secretary asking a Dr Donald Hunter of the Middlesex Hospital to advise them. Dr Hunter visited the ship and afterwards made it very clear that he felt Asbestos dust was dangerous for the men's health. He advised the use of respirators and vacuum cleaners even if it took the men longer to unload the cargo and said" that if their health is damaged by Asbestos, the process is irreversible". These comments, together with the article in the South London Press, under the headline "A cargo with a risk of cancer brings threat of strike" was sufficient for the men to refuse to handle asbestos normally.

London is served mainly by two Unions - The Transport and General Workers Union, and the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union - although they work independently, one usually supports the other in any dispute. In this case, while the normal unloading rate for asbestos was about 35 tons per hour the T.G.W.U. unloaded at an average of 18 tons per hour while the N.A.S.D.U. varied between 1 to 8 tons per hour. As the different Unions work different sections of the London Docks, the unloading rate for ships was related to

which docks they used. Canadian Pacific, for example, whose ships were unloaded by N.A.S.D.U. labour, decided that they could not afford to suffer the long delays and refused to accept any further consignments of Asbestos fibre from Canada.

This action subsequently revealed the lack of a known authorative voice for the Asbestos Industry, for the Canadian Asbestos Producers had for some time been experimenting with an impervious bag. The Importers themselves, not being happy with the results of shipments in ordinary paper bags, due to their liability to tear or burst thus releasing the Asbestos, had agitated for a lined jute bag and experiments had already begun in using a laminated jute-paper bag. If Canadian Pacific had been able to consult such a body as the Asbestos Information Committee or the Asbestos Fibre Importers Committee, they could have been informed of these new bags and arrangements with the Unions could have proceeded immediately for trial shipments to come forward.

Approaches were made to the Employers Association and to the Ministry of Labour in an attempt to resolve the initial difficulties. It was at this time that the first meeting of the Representatives of the Asbestos Producers and Importers was held (this name was changed in May 1967 to the Asbestos Fibre Importers Committee) to discuss the problems. In response to agitation to the Ministry of Labour for some action to refute the dangerous and misleading statements that were circulating, or to put them more into perspective, a very non commital letter was received in October 1965. This dealt mainly with Asbestosis and the long exposure required to contact it and also mentioned that their dust tests had shown that where impervious bags were used, Asbestos dust was well below the published upper limit of safety. Mesothelioma was mentioned when the letter carried on to say that the risk of mesothelioma did not appear to be more common in those exposed to Asbestos and that the problem was under urgent review. The risk of mesothelioma is no greater for dockers than for other workers exposed to Asbestos.

However, it was nearly six months before Canadian Pacific agreed to take a trial shipment of 200 tons in impervious bags, but even despite requests for block stowage, some of this had been packed as dunnage around large rolls of kraft paper and in the unloading a number of bags were damaged. One Canadian company unfortunately had not accepted the instructions that only jute lined bags were to be used and had shipped in 5-ply paper. It was ironical that it was a number of these bags that had been used for dunnage

around the rolls of paper, with the inevitable result of burst bags. The Union's representatives who had been invited to inspect this trial shipment, felt they had been misled when they saw the damaged paper bags but agreed eventually that the laminated bags looked a promising type of package for Asbestos.

Canadian Pacific then agreed to accept consignments in laminated bags. They restricted the tonnage per vessel to approximately 1000 tons but as time went on and there were no further difficulties, they allowed more tonnage per vessel.

Despite the fact that nearly all Asbestos was now packed in impervious bags, difficulties were still being experienced, particularly in certain sections of the London Docks. At one Dock, in November, 1966, the dockers refused to unload a consignment of Cyprus Asbestos. A Factory Inspector, Dock Manager, the Shipping Company, the Importer and the Union were all present to discuss the stoppage. The Factory Inspector pointed out that the bags were impervious to the escape of dust and in good condition and there was virtually no danger to health, but as an additional precaution, masks could be worn. The dockers still refused to handle the consignment and even suggested that "dirty" money should be paid to those handling the cargo underneath the Asbestos in case it was contaminated by Asbestos dust. They were only prepared to handle future shipments of Asbestos if it was loaded onto pallets and wrapped in a protective covering.

A meeting between the Principal Medical Officer for the Port of London Authority, the Medical Adviser to the Trades Union Congress and a Consulting Physician, led to the publication of a Report on the Medical Aspects of Working Cargoes of Asbestos by Dockers of the Port of London which stated that "we are fully satisfied, so far as the Docks Industry is concerned, that no unacceptable risk at present exists and that provided the currently approved requirements and methods of work are followed, Dockers may proceed with confidence in the handling of Asbestos cargoes."

Soon afterwards (17th April, 1967) the Ministry of Labour made a statement in the House of Commons summarising the present knowledge about asbestos as a cancer risk.

Both of these Reports were reprinted in a pamphlet entitled "Asbestos and your health" prepared by the A.I.C. for issuance to the Dockers. This pamphlet also included a question and answer section dealing with various aspects of the problem. This pamphlet was distributed to the London Dockers through the Unions and was made available to Employers Associations etc., both in London and other U.K. ports.

The May 12th issue of "The Port" (a new London dock newspaper) reprinted the pamphlet together with other articles on Asbestos. The following issue reported on the formation of the Asbestos Information Committee and carried letters from dockers on the subject. The emphasis was on the containerisation of Asbestos.

In the meantime, the dockers in other ports around the U.K. were making their own decisions about the handling of Asbestos. Some would only handle palletised cargoes, some would handle crocidolite on pallets but other types of Asbestos in the impervious bags. Some would only handle pressure packed bags, some required additional payments and some continued to work Asbestos normally. There was no set pattern of action by the men at the different ports. Fortunately the larger ports served by the steamship lines from the Asbestos producing countries were those that continued to handle Asbestos normally. The Asbestos cargoes normally shipped to London (approximately 40,000 - 50,000 tons per annum) were switched to other ports and although there was occasionally some difficulty in obtaining shipping space because of the bigger demand, on the whole Asbestos continued to move into the U.K. fairly satisafctorily.

One problem which still occasionally re-occurs is when the dockers want to know what type of asbestos they are handling - Is it crocidolite ? Perhaps the re-telling of an incident at one point will illustrate the difficulties. The dockers at this particular port stopped work because they thought they might be handling crocidolite (it was fact amosite). The local Secretary called in a local Consultant who advised them that it was impossible to tell the difference visually and that he would submit a sample of the Asbestos for analysis. The U.K. Agents for the producers, immediately they heard of the incident, sent samples of amosite and crocidolite, pointing out the colour difference. This satisfied the men and they restarted work on unloading the Asbestos.

It was felt by the A.F.I.C. and others that although Asbestos was still being imported, there was always the considerable risk that any further adverse publicity could affect dockers still working Asbestos. There was also the risk that dockers who had refused to handle Asbestos, realising the tonnage they were loosing to other ports, might take action to persuade dockers in these other ports to support them and only handle Asbestos packed in containers. In view of this the A.F.I.C. have continued their endeavours to get a satisfactory solution to the problem of handling Asbestos, particularly in London docks.