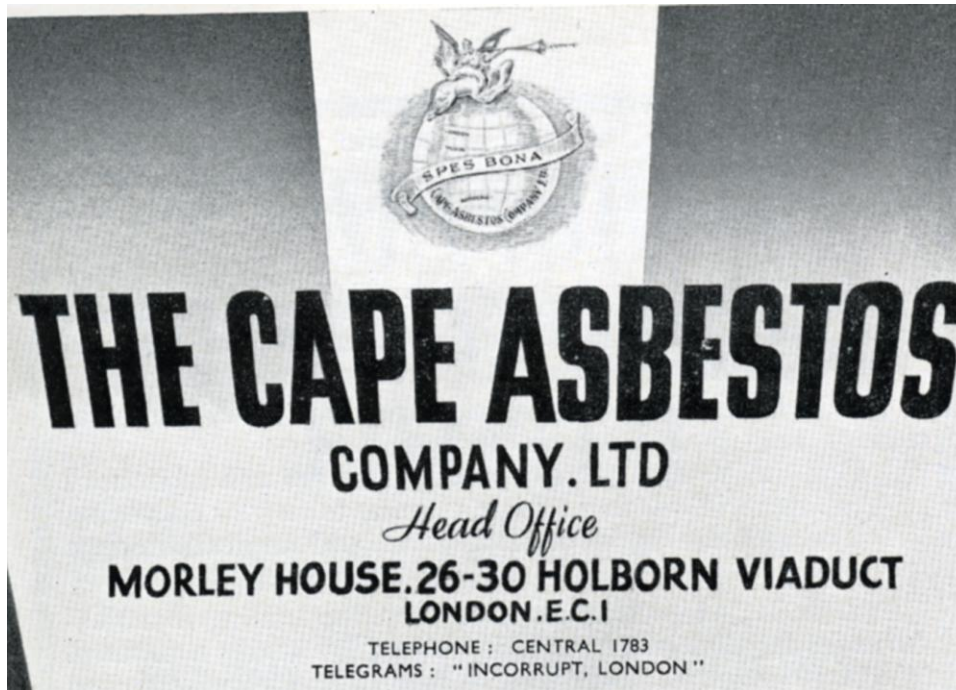


London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
Local Studies Information Sheet no. 42

CAPE ASBESTOS, HARTS LANE, BARKING



Asbestos is a natural mineral, made up of tiny fibres as strong as steel but which can be woven like cotton and are highly resistant to heat and chemicals. Blue asbestos was first discovered in South Africa in 1803-6, and later in the century workers at the Kimberley diamond mines found large seams at Koegas, near Prieska on the Orange River. The Cape Asbestos Company was founded in 1893 in order to mine the asbestos at Koegas, than ship it to factories in Europe to be woven into fire-resistant materials. The Barking factory in Harts Lane opened in 1913 and was the fourth in the London area (the others being at Carlisle Avenue, Cable Street and Bow Common Lane). Production continued at Barking until 1966, and Cape stated in 1979 that a total of 10,142 people had been employed at their Barking factory over the years.

The Barking Medical Officer of Health wrote in his 1929 annual report that "many people in Barking are suffering from disease of the lungs due to the inhalation of asbestos dust". It could affect workers at the factory, people living nearby, women who washed the dusty overalls, and also family members of workers who had brought home fibre particles on their clothing. The main asbestos-related diseases are asbestosis and mesothelioma, and do not tend to appear until many years after the initial exposure to asbestos fibres. Today, Barking and Dagenham is the tenth worst area in the UK for asbestos-related diseases amongst men (the nine boroughs with worst rates are all shipbuilding regions). Barking and Dagenham is also the worst borough in the country for the numbers of women dying from mesothelioma. Unusually, women in the Barking factory worked alongside the men, in direct contact with asbestos fibres.

Asbestos continued to be widely used in the UK for various industrial purposes until the mid 1980s. The supply and use of asbestos and asbestos products has since been banned for all but a few exceptions by the Asbestos (Prohibition) Regulations.

The Cape factory was not the only source of asbestos in the Borough. Former workers at Barking Power Station are also suffering asbestos-related diseases, as are those who worked in some other local factories. A support group for Barking and Dagenham residents affected by exposure to asbestos has been set up (details are given below.)

Primary sources

The LBBB Archives holds no archive material for the Cape Asbestos company. It is not known whether any personnel records or plans of the building have survived.

Useful weblinks:

<http://www.capeplc.com/> Website of the Cape Group (a range of companies including Cape PLC and Cape Industrial Services Limited).

<http://www.capeasbestosfund.co.uk/> Gives details of the compensation fund set up by Cape for those affected by exposure to asbestos.

<http://www.badasbestos.org.uk/> Website of the Barking and Dagenham Asbestos Victims Support Group.

<http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/> Contains a section "Asbestos and Related Illness" listing documents on the subject produced by various Government departments, mostly from the 1930s and 1940s.

Secondary sources held in the LBBB Archives and Local Studies Centre

Cape Asbestos: the story of the Cape Asbestos Company Limited 1893-1953, published by Harley Publishing, 1953. The Barking factory is only mentioned on a handful of pages.

The Archives and Local Studies Centre also has an **Asbestos topic file** which includes press cuttings on issues such as experiences of local people with asbestos-related disease, and discoveries of asbestos from time to time at various sites in the Borough.