

Roof Repairs and Asbestos Contamination

Asbestos closes classrooms at Bradford school

Wiltshire Times. 12:48pm Friday 10th September 2010

http://www.wiltshiretimes.co.uk/news/inyourtown/bradfordnews/8385224.Asbestos_closes_classrooms_at_Bradford_school/

Letter from Headteacher:

<http://www.st-laurence.wilts.sch.uk/news/default.asp?storyID=108&pid=3>

Extracts:

"Five rooms in the art and design block of St Laurence School in Bradford on Avon have been sealed off after asbestos was found in the roof.

The contaminant was discovered in dust samples shaken from the ceiling of the art and design block during re-roofing work this summer....

The block was built in the late Sixties...

"Fallen dust is routinely tested and it was just above the threshold for safe levels".

Unfortunately the early (and noisy) works involved the use of "scabblers" on the roof which led to extreme vibration of the building resulting in dust falling into 5 Art & Design rooms. A small proportion of the dust samples tested have shown some asbestos contamination associated only with the early stages of this roofing project."

"The five rooms have been sealed and specialist contractors are now engaged in the removal of ceilings and lights alongside a deep and thorough clean. "

Comment:

Before any work begins that might disturb asbestos, by law a risk assessment has to be carried out to avoid precisely the sort of incident that has occurred in this school that has caused widespread contamination and disruption. The classrooms will be closed for most of the term while a very expensive environmental clean takes place which no doubt will involve the loss of the children's work and equipment.

This could and should have been avoided, but it is the second time in a week that roofing work on a school has contaminated the classrooms.¹ If it is known that there are asbestos materials in the building, and particularly in the ceiling void, it is probable that vibration, and in particular extreme vibration, will disturb the material and dangerous fibres will be released. The asbestos should have therefore been identified and if there was any chance of disturbing it, removed before the work began.

Asbestos fibres were found in the classrooms, which, according to the deputy headmaster: *"Fallen dust is routinely tested and it was just above the threshold for safe levels."* If the quote is correct then it shows a disturbing lack of asbestos awareness, for there is no safe level. Dr Rudd is one of

¹ [asbestos insulation boards are removed from the ceilings](http://www.asbestosexposureschools.co.uk/npaper%20articles.htm). The Press 3 Sep 2010 <http://www.asbestosexposureschools.co.uk/npaper%20articles.htm>

the most highly respected mesothelioma experts in the country. At a High Court hearing into the death of a former pupil from asbestos exposure in a school he stated:

“Mesothelioma can occur after low level asbestos exposure and there is no threshold dose of asbestos below which there is no risk.”²

Despite this, the clearance indicator of 0.01 f/ml is routinely used in schools as the level below which the classrooms can be reoccupied after an asbestos incident or after work has taken place on asbestos. However it should not be as at that level a person will inhale over 6,000 fibres an hour. The HSE state that *“the threshold of less than 0.01f/ml should be taken only as a transient indication of site cleanliness... and not as an acceptable permanent environmental level.”³* (follow the link in the footnote to benchmark levels of asbestos fibres⁴)

14, 210 schools were built between 1945-1975⁵ and many are long past their design life. Tim Byles the Chairman of the Partnership for Schools that oversees the refurbishment and replacement of schools, stated *“80% of schools were beyond their shelf life... this is about teachers not being distracted by leaking roofs or crumbling walls”⁶*

Many of these schools are “system built” buildings which typically have flat roofs and large areas of glass. Most, if not all of these schools built between 1945-1975 contain asbestos. Some contain large amounts. The majority contain the more dangerous types of asbestos materials containing amosite (brown asbestos) and some contain crocidolite (blue asbestos) A Parliamentary written answer estimated that 13,000 schools in the country are system built.⁷

The flat roofs are prone to leaking with a number of asbestos incidents being caused by leaking roofs, for asbestos fibres are picked up by the water as it leaks through the asbestos materials that may be in the ceiling, lagging, firebreaks or walls and is then precipitated out as the water dries in the rooms.⁸ It is therefore essential that the roofs are repaired and kept in good order, or in the case of St Laurence, replaced. It is equally essential that the asbestos is removed if there is any possibility that it will be disturbed during maintenance or building work.

It is a depressing reflection on the occurrence of dangerous asbestos contamination in our schools when the headmaster is able to say *“Finally, decontamination procedures in schools today are not uncommon.”*

*Michael Lees
10th September 2010*

² High Court QBD Liverpool District. The Hon Mr Justice Nicol . Dianne Willmore and Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council 24 July 2009 Para 4

³ HSE Control of Asbestos Regulations 2006 p68 para 309.

⁴ Mesothelioma. Benchmark levels.

<http://www.asbestosexposureschools.co.uk/pdfnewslinks/MESOTHELIOMA%20%20BENCHMARK%20LEVELS%20OF%20ASBESTOS%20EXPOSURE%2022%20Oct%2009.pdf>

⁵ Asbestos and man-made mineral fibres in buildings DETR Aug 1999

⁶ BBC Today programme. Tim Byles Chief Executive of PFS 1 Apr 2010

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/today/newsid_8598000/8598276.stm

⁷ Parliamentary written answer Shadow Schools Minister Nick Gibb MP/ Schools Minister Jim Knight MP 276313 4 Jun 2009.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090604/text/90604w0011.htm>

⁸ Follow link to comment on water leaks and the implications for asbestos contamination. Also HSE letter.

<http://www.asbestosexposureschools.co.uk/npaper%20links/water%20leaks.htm>