Chinnor Cement Works.

Background

In 1908 Mr. William Benton founded a small business to manufacture lime on the southern edge of Chinnor. In 1919 he added a small cement plant and by 1936 had grown into the Chinnor Cement and Lime Company and it continued to operate, latterly as Rugby cement, until it closed in 1989. Unfortunately, the manufacture of cement involves an environmental impact at every stage of the process including airborne pollution in the form of dust and gases including silica. Cement is made in various forms with limestone, chalk combined with slate, silica sand, and iron ore. Of these substances, silica is a known human carcinogen liable to cause lung cancer, silicosis, congestive obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and other lung conditions which was only identified as such ` by the World Health Organisation International Agency in Cancer Research in 1996. Before the advent of government controls, workers were exposed to the full force of the silica dust and anyone in the village could have been affected by the fallout, the prevailing wind being south westerly.

Although nationally there was a decrease in mining mortality by 1905 this was as a result of improved working conditions but did not address the issue of miners' diseases. It was not until the *Compensation Act 1906* was passed that occupational diseases were included in the *Workman's Compensation Act 1897* which formally only covered accidents.[1] It had long been recognised that miners suffered from many pulmonary disorders and the aetiology of lung disease was much debated during the nineteenth century for example whether tuberculosis was caused by lung tissue damage due to dust irritation.

In December 1929 Chinnor Parish Council voted to send a letter to the District Council to complain about the smoke and bad smell from the works and asking that they, (the DC), do something about it and in February 1934 a letter from the Chinnor residents about the continued nuisance from the cement works chimney prompted a further letter to Bullingdon District Council to address this issue again and they also sent a letter to Mr. Benton regarding the actions Chinnor Council had taken. This was followed up in September 1934 when the council sent a letter regarding this continuing nuisance to the Ministry of Health and in December 1934 it was minuted that the land and properties surrounding the works were frequently covered with a fine white powder.[2] [3] Jim Rose recalls that he was always aware of the Cement Works. 'It would tell the time and give a weather forecast. Firstly from the twelve-o-clock hooter to check his watch and if the smoke from the chimney went straight up the village was in for a dry spell, if it blew down towards Emmington it would soon be raining'. Although a new dust extractor was installed in 1963, which was an improvement, these problems from the cement works continued under discussion in the local paper into the 1970s.

The *Chinnor Chronicle* (published monthly) reported a personal account of a trip around the cement works in 1971 in which it was recounted that the works chemists took samples from the slurry to ensure that it contained the correct amount of silica and calcium carbonate. The author of the article recalls that it was a 'dusty trip.' To illustrate the ongoing problem a cartoon in the *Chinnor Chronicle* as late as 1971depicts a cricketer challenging the umpire's decision as he (the umpire) could not have seen the wicket due to the pollution emanating from the cement works chimneys in the background.

A series of editorials in the *Chinnor Chronicle* during April June and July 1972 further commented and demanded a solution to the perennial dust and pollution from the works. This was prompted by a letter in April 1973 from Don Mitchell, (a Chinnor resident) who refers to the nuisance created by the cement works pointing out that many pollutants, previously thought to be innocuous, are now categorized as toxic and urging for the promised electro static filters to be installed immediately.[4] Jean Braginton whose father- in- law worked at Chinnor Cement recalls that men came down from the works, their faces white with cement dust.

To gauge the effects of this pollution on the workers a search was made of the marriage register which gave the occupations of the bride's father and the groom and those listed as cement workers were identified. This was cross checked with the burial register and an examination of the death certificates of men known to have worked at the cement works was made, a list of workers at the cement works not being available. Two were recorded as having died of carcinoma lung and one who was certified as dying from bronchitis was known to have carcinoma lung. However, as contaminates from the works were reported to be spread over the village it may well have affected others for example one man, a farm shepherd, from Oakley had cancer of the face. The issue of the accuracy of death certificates is discussed later in the chapter.

John Neighbour recalled that his father told him that of 12 men who retired from the cement works in one year only one was still alive a year later. Retirement age in 1925 was 65 years having been reduced from 70 in 1908. One other group of workers who could have been affected by the pollution were the German Prisoners of War who worked there after D. Day and the Italian prisoners of war who worked on the land.[5] Ironically, given the ill health and death rate to which the cement works may well have contributed, it brought money and jobs to the village.[6] Mabel Howlett commented that 'The cement works and the Bentons saved our village from dying on its feet, as did many other villages before the war.'

Two recorded accidents occurred at the Chinnor Cement works 1908-1947. Cyril Gibbs remembered that his father suffered a serious head injury which resulted in him being unable to work with machinery again due to developing epilepsy as a

result of his injury. No compensation was paid.[7] Mabel Howlett remembered her father having an accident at the cement works whilst trying to free a stuck belt which brought bags of cement down onto the lorries. Suddenly, the belt released itself and started moving again. The movement of the belt tore the muscles from the top of his right arm. Other workers were about to send for an ambulance when it was remembered that it was Dr. Cooper's day in the village and he was sent for and, with the aid of the first aid man, and using the canteen table as an operating table, Dr. Cooper sewed the muscles back into place.[8] It was not only the cement works which was the site of accidents.