

TELFORD ANTI NUCLEAR GROUP

FIRE AT C.O.D. DONNINGTON : RESIDENTS' VIEWS

Main Conclusions

- 1) The level of public confidence in the Central Ordnance Depot in Donnington, Telford, Shropshire has fallen during the time since the fire and asbestos fallout from the base in June. This is shown by the fact that 24% of people in the area affected by the fallout had changed their attitude to the Depot because of the fire.
- 2) Over 80% of people interviewed were concerned about asbestos being a hazard to health.
- 3) 60% of people could not be confident of their safety in the event of a similar fire happening again.
- 4) The great majority of people interviewed found that the advice and clearing up operation mounted by Wrekin District Council to be satisfactory, but it was far too late. This lateness is put down to an excess of secrecy and a lack of accountability by the army to the civilian local authority. 50% said that the army was to some degree at fault in this respect, against 40% who believed that the army had done all it could.
- 5) The fact that radioactive materials are stored at and pass through the Depot affected the attitude of 37% of people towards COD.
- 6) Over two thirds of people had picked up the debris on the same day as the fire and without using gloves. The presence of asbestos was announced four days later and a warning leaflet issued six days later.
- 7) There is substantial concern on the long term aspects of health, particularly as it relates to children.

5.9.83.

TELFORD ANTI-NUCLEAR GROUP

FIRE AT C.O.D. DONNINGTON

SURVEY OF RESIDENTS AFFECTED BY ASBESTOS FALL-OUT

PURPOSE

To review the events of the fire and ensuing asbestos fallout at C.O.D. Donnington, Telford, and to report on a survey of residents affected by the fallout.

RESULTS

Introduction

On Friday morning 24th June 1983 a major fire occurred at the Central Ordnance Depot, Donnington, Telford. A single 10 acre storage building containing uniforms, batteries and other items was eventually totally burnt out. The smoke was blown in a westerly direction by a light wind and darkened the sky sufficiently for automatic street lights to come on in Wellington, over three miles distant.

Wrekin District Council officers were present at the fire and were assured by the army that there were no substances in the fire that posed any danger to health.

Substantial amounts of debris from the fire were carried for a distance of at least three miles and deposited particularly but not exclusively on the housing areas of Leegomery, Admaston and the northern half of Wellington. No mention was made in the media of any possible danger during that Friday or the weekend.

On Monday and Tuesday 27th-28th June Wrekin District Council had the debris tested at Wolverhampton Polytechnic and later at Aston University. These tests confirmed the presence of white and brown asbestos. On Wednesday 29th June the Council distributed green rubbish bags and a warning leaflet to all homes in the affected areas and returned later to collect the bags of debris. The council also organised a general clear up on public areas.

Following the announcement of finding asbestos, schools in the area kept children in at break times.

There has been no public statement about the incident since the fire, and no public inquiry has been announced (C.O.D. are holding an internal inquiry).

Involvement of Telford Anti-Nuclear Group

The group's involvement is specifically on two inter-related issues, namely :

- a) the secrecy (or lack of knowledge) on behalf of the army,
- b) the inability of the authorities to deal with the situation for a period of six days.

This is also related to the fact that radioactive materials are stored at COD (as confirmed by a garrison spokesman reported on the front page of the Telford Journal on 24th April 1981) and are occasionally moved to and from the Depot.

The Telford Anti-Nuclear Group is concerned over the asbestos problem and also poses the question :

If the fire had involved any leakage of radioactivity, would the level of secrecy have been maintained (or enhanced) and what, if anything, could any authority have done about ensuring public safety?

It is these concerns and the lack of any public inquiry that has prompted the group to carry out a sample survey in the areas affected to obtain peoples' views.

Survey Results

During the last week of August, members of the Group carried out a one in ten random sample survey of households in the Leegomery and northern half of Wellington areas, resulting in 136 completed interviews. All interviewers carried identification. Respondent co-operation was excellent and substantial interest and concern was shown. The results from this survey were subjected to the normal statistical tests. Any sample, by definition, is subject to error, in this case $\pm 8.5\%$. This means that the results are representative of all the households affected by the fall-out within that margin of error.

The results are as follows :

Q. Did the fire or the fallout directly affect your dwelling or its garden?

Survey respondents reported fallout ranging from light dust to substantial chunks of material up to 10 inches long. Fallout covered houses, gardens, allotments and schools.

Q. If you were affected by the debris did you know what it was?

<u>Table 1</u>	%
No	85
Yes	15

Table 1 shows that only a few people thought they knew what it was, and a fewer number of people kept their children in and/or did not touch the debris until the official green bags arrived.

Q. How many days after the fire did you know what it was?

<u>Table 2</u>	%
When on TV/in paper/radio	87
Immediately	9
Don't know	4

Table 2 shows that only a few people definitely knew immediately. The difference between the 15% 'yes' in table 1 and the 9% in table 2 comprises people who needed confirmation of their opinion.

Q. How had you dealt with the debris?

<u>Table 3</u>	%
Collected up same day & in own binsack	68
" " " " using gloves	9
Waited until Council green sack came	14
Don't know/not stated	9

Table 3 shows that the majority of people cleared up on the Friday, usually in the late afternoon or evening. Most did not wear gloves. Comments included : children were playing with the debris; settled as dust; the dog ate some.

Q. Did you find the advice given to you and the general clearing up satisfactory?

<u>Table 4</u>	%
Clearing up itself satisfactory	81 - but 39% said it was too late
Was not satisfactory	14
Don't know	5

Table 4 shows that most people found that the clearing up by the Council to be satisfactory but many commented that it was far too late. Those not satisfied mentioned many places where the fallout was still to be found.

Q. Are you concerned about asbestos as a danger to health?

Table 5 %

Yes 31

No 19

Most people are predictably concerned about asbestos as a health danger. Some of those who were not had been working with asbestos and had not experienced any ill effects. An elderly person said that she would be more concerned if she had children at home.

Q. Has this fire affected your attitude towards C.O.D. Donnington?

Table 6 %

Yes 24

No 76

Considering the fact that the Depot has 'always' been there, the one quarter of residents who have had their attitude towards the place affected is a very high proportion. The variety of reasons stated for this change included the need for sooner notification of the danger from the fire, the issue of secrecy and the lack of sufficient fire precautions.

Q. Do you believe the military installation at C.O.D. to be adequately accountable to the civilian population of Telford?

Table 7 %

Yes 40

No 50

Don't know 10

This question was particularly related to the topic of secrecy and of not providing the local authority with enough information to act in case of accident. That half of the residents were not satisfied with the level of accountability is a very high proportion indeed.

Q. Are you aware that radioactive materials are moved through and stored at COD?

Table 8 %

Yes 29

No 70

Don't know 1

Nearly one third of residents were aware of the presence of radioactive materials at the base. This was, of course, referred to earlier (p2) in a 1981 press report.

Q. Does this knowledge affect your attitude to the Depot?

Table 9 %

Yes 37

No 62

Don't know 1

Well over one third of people said that the presence of radioactive materials at the Depot affected their attitude towards COD.

Q. Do you feel that the events of the fire at COD have been properly explained and that the public can be confident of its safety in the event of a similar accident occurring?

Table 10 %

Yes 33

No 60

Don't know 2

A large proportion of people are not satisfied with the situation and are concerned for the future.

Comments by Residents

A large number of comments were made by residents interviewed. Some of them are included below to illustrate the range of topics.

" The fire shows the futility of civil defence preparations. If they can't even deal with this sort of fire properly, how can they expect to deal with a nuclear crisis? "

Secrecy/Length of time

" Haven't clarified exactly what was involved in the fire. Can you believe them?"

" Still no official account."

" Should have been warned earlier."

" Kept in the dark too long."

" Much is still unknown."

" Only explained through press. Need some other statement."

" P.R. from military was disgusting. Health officials should have been notified earlier."

Many others were in the same vein.

Clearing up

" Council have done a good job but army haven't done enough."

" Some(debris) still not cleared up."

Fear/illness

" Will the asbestos affect people in years to come?"

" Scared stiff of the whole thing!"

" Very concerned about the children and the possible effects on their health. Would they get compensation? "

" Worried about young baby."

" 7 year old got rash which couldn't be diagnosed."

" Both adults had sore throats."

" People at work had sore eyes and stomach upsets."

" Glad to move from here if possible."

General

" I do wonder a bit about the place."

" People in the area should have a right to know all the details."

" Lack of public information."

" (Presence of radioactive material) A bit alarming in light of the accident."

" Friend works there (at COD). There have been many leaks & Depot has been sealed off."

Conclusions are on page one.

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