Transcript of House Planning Help episode 363

Ben Adam-Smith 00:00
This is House Planning Help - episode 363. Hello, I'm Ben Adam-Smith, and this is the podcast for you if you're interested in self-build or retrofit. I'm exploring what houses we should be building in the 21st century and trying to break down the major roadblocks that may get in our way. Coming up in this session, my guest is Greg Byrne from RB Asbestos Consultants. We're going to learn more about asbestos as a material, how it became so popular, and why it got such a bad reputation. And then we'll also ask, could your current house actually have asbestos in it?

And this is a great example of why I love doing this podcast. We've clocked up 13 years now, amazingly, and construction is still so interesting. There are so many subjects I haven't got to yet, but we will try. We'll keep on going and we often talk about retrofitting homes, so this is major work, and it's the time when we're going to be stripping the buildings back so what we don't want to do is discover that we've started doing all this stripping back and then, oh my goodness, that was asbestos.

Find out later, as you're hear in this interview, Greg even has some examples of where that's happened on site. And so we really want to flag it up now, do the survey, and hopefully it will be good. So after listening to this topic, if you know of anyone else who might be in a similar position, perhaps home from the 1960s or 70s, then please share this episode with them.

Let's get to our featured interview with Greg Byrne, Director of RB Asbestos Consultants. And I started by asking Greg how he came to work in this particular area.

Greg Byrne 01:42
The strange thing about asbestos as an industry is almost no one ever says I woke up one morning and thought, that's the industry for me, I want to go into. Pretty much everyone, including myself, comes in from a sort of a sideways angle and mine was no different, really. I actually trained back in the 80s in sports science, did a degree in that went off into that for a couple of years and realised that cleaning sports centres was probably about as far as I was going to get in the first sort of five years. So a friend of mine had actually moved into the asbestos industry, and they needed somebody to help them out. I got the call, came up, and I'm kind of still here really.

Ben Adam-Smith 02:20
It's obviously gone well, that's the good news. I think we have to start with a couple of obvious questions, so let's just go with it for a minute. What is asbestos?

Greg Byrne 02:29
Yeah, I'm really glad you started with that question, because it's one of those names that or words that people bandy around without actually knowing what it is. People say, Oh, it's a man made mineral or something. In simple terms it's a mined mineral that's come out the ground, and probably a good way to

visualize it, I tend to use when I train people, is if you looked at a rock face, almost like you get a vein of quartz running through it, asbestos is a mineral that occurs in veins in rocks. The big difference, however, between something like an asbestos and something like quartz, is, if you get quartz out of a rock and break it down, pretty much turns into sand. However, with asbestos, the structure of the crystals is completely different. So rather than being small, little angular pieces like sand, they're long and fibrous. So what happens is, people mine the asbestos mineral, break it down into its fibrous state, and that's really the start of the whole process, when it then becomes added to other products. So in many cases, you very rarely see asbestos in its natural state, it's almost always added to something else. And we call those asbestos containing materials, or ACMs, for short.

Ben Adam-Smith 03:37
And they have been around for a long time.

Greg Byrne 03:42
Far longer than people would actually think in so much that you can go back 1000s of years, and asbestos was used in pots. Various tribes around the world picked up that it was good at adding strength to pots. The Greeks worked out quite early on you could spin it and weave it, and make mats and lamp wicks and all strange kind of bits and pieces. So a long, long time it's been used.

Ben Adam-Smith 04:04
And then what about when it was used in construction? Because it must have had some good properties to really take off there.

Greg Byrne 04:13
Yeah, really, I always find this part really interesting, because you get the mid 1800s and you've got various European chemists and people going over to America to make their fortune, and they start developing these asbestos products, and they sell really well. Early on, they make things like Bakelite, those sorts of products have got asbestos in. Not all Bakelite has asbestos in, but a lot of it did. And then these products start selling really well. And a large company called Turner's in America, Turners Asbestos Company, are doing really well, and they want to start selling around the rest of the world. So they decide they're going to expand. So they look across the Atlantic, and they go, Where can we set up? And they choose, probably the best place to start, which is Manchester, because Manchester has got the industrial sort of heritage, industrial revolution. And you've got skills there, mills. You've got all the elements you need, including two large ports, one in Hull, one in Liverpool, Liverpool being the biggest one in the world around that time. So they set up, really in Manchester as a starting point, and then very quickly develop right across the whole of what you describe as the M62 corridor. And that part of the world becomes pretty much the biggest area in the world of making asbestos products. So very quickly they start getting put into the construction industry and all kinds of stuff.

What happens then is a bit of a hiatus, really, because they started in the early 1900s. The First and the Second World War turn up, so there's kind of a large break between, pretty much anything happening everything goes onto a war footing. Once you come out the Second World War, we're kind of just getting into the 1950s and then we're rebuilding Britain. So we're building houses, commercial buildings, and that's when it really takes off. And pretty much, as a surveyor, we survey anything,

probably less so the 50s, a little bit, but certainly once you get into the 1960s pretty much everything they built has got asbestos in it somewhere. And then at the peak of use of it, 60s into the 70s, 80s, it still starts to turn down quite rapidly. Mid 80s, it starts to fall off a cliff. And then by 1999 we've pretty much run out of steam, and all asbestos is banned. So that kind of a quick potted history of asbestos in the UK and in construction.

Ben Adam-Smith 06:28
What sort of products are we talking about, and might we recognise?

Greg Byrne 06:34
Yeah, another great question. So we don't have an exhaustive list of how many different products contain asbestos. What we think it's around is about 4000 so that's 4000 different materials that got asbestos in it. And it cuts right across everything, not just construction, but all kinds of industries, from automotive, making boats, ships, planes, but if we focus more on construction, because that's obviously more relevant to what we're talking about today there's almost no part of a building that's not been touched by asbestos right from the floor, so, you know, you might put a floor slab in, you might put asbestos cement under it to support it. You then got floor tiles on top of your floor slab. You've then got asbestos walls, ceilings. You've got coatings, you've got vinyls, textiles. You've got bits in electrical industry, lagging on pipes, roofing materials, right from the bottom to the top of the house, almost anything could contain asbestos.

Ben Adam-Smith 07:34
I feel like this interview is just leading itself, because it's just so extraordinary. So all of these materials, all of this history, and then, is it something we did with the asbestos that, that started to be the end of it, or has it always had problems, but we just didn't know about it?

Greg Byrne 07:53
Again, if we look historically, there are some early indications that the Greeks had worked out. I haven't got this reference to hand, but I have read it that somebody deciphered a Greek tablet with all these prices on and what eventually worked out were these were prices for slaves, and the bottom price for a slave was somebody who mined asbestos. And that kind of fits with the modern sort of view of asbestos, because obviously you're buying a slave, and they're not lasting as long as the other slaves, because asbestos mining has had an effect on them. The first time we really start to get to understand the problems with asbestos and the effects it has on people is kind of in the early 1900s in the UK, it's about 1907, 1908 where the first recorded case of somebody dying due to asbestos exposure is recorded, and that's recorded in medical records.

And then a very early female factory inspector, which is unusual, picked up on the fact asbestos was affecting people, and she started introduce controls in factories. Then it kind of goes quiet a bit and again, probably because of the First the Second World War, really, after that Second World War, where we've got the heavy production again, and then people are starting to realize that people are dying from asbestos exposure. So slowly that starts ramping up. Factory inspectors come in, the factory act comes in. You've got a large factory in Leeds producing asbestos products. They're told they have to ventilate the factory to make it better for the workers in there. So what do they do? They ventilate all the

asbestos dust out through the roof, and it ends up filling up the houses of the people living nearby, which I actually worked on much later on after the factory was closed down.

So you've got all this evidence of things getting worse and worse, and that really starts the process of people starting to control asbestos and ban it, and then it just gets worse and worse, and so much so that if we look now at pretty much anything from an occupational point of view that's likely to kill you, there's absolutely nothing in the same league as asbestos. I often use this in my training courses, particularly with tradesmen, builders, plumbers, electricians. I say to them all, what's most likely to kill you in any particular year going to work? And they all usually go for the same thing, which is falling from height. So getting on the roof, falling off, and it kills you. And they always say, Well, how many people died falling off roofs last year? They generally don't know, but it's often in the reads of about 20 to 30 people. I then say how many people died from asbestos last year? They go, dunno, 40,50, but it's actually 5200 died last year from asbestos.

The big problem with asbestos is it doesn't kill you straight away. Falling off a roof will, yeah, but breathing asbestos won't and some people will breathe asbestos in, and it will never affect them. Other people will breathe it in, and 20, 40, 50, 60, years later, it'll go bang, and it's all over. And particularly one type of asbestos related illness, mesothelioma is a one way ticket. It's the lowest survival rate of any type of cancer you can get, and it's caused by asbestos, only asbestos, as far as we know. So you can see the issues.

Ben Adam-Smith 11:08
Let's start looking for some good news here. I'm assuming it's a full ban, so nothing new is coming our way with asbestos?

Greg Byrne 11:17
Pretty much a full ban in the UK from late 1999 so generally, 2000 onwards, we don't survey buildings for asbestos. You do get the odd sort of exception here and there, but for most cases, that's it. So if your building was built after 2000 there shouldn't really be any issue. And the great thing about the regulations in the UK is they're really good. They're mostly designed to protect the employee or the person at work. So all the nuts and bolts are there. The big problem for most people is they don't know what the regulations are, they don't understand them. You're a plumber or electrician, you start a business and you're worried about getting work and getting paid and doing all the right things. Nobody comes and taps you on the shoulder and says, excuse me, you need to know about these asbestos regulations. And that's one of the problems, particularly with smaller businesses and anybody working in the domestic market, is they often don't know. They don't know that in a lot of cases, before any work happens on a domestic property built before the year 2000 an asbestos survey should be completed, and if it's not, you are liable to be prosecuted, not the householder, the person who's doing the work.

Ben Adam-Smith 12:25
So let's talk a little bit about that. How do we get one of these surveys?

Greg Byrne 12:30

Okay, so there's several ways. You can go on Google and Google ‘asbestos surveys’. If your builder or your contractor is connected to somebody, they might be able to hook you up with an asbestos surveyor, but there's plenty of companies out there offering asbestos surveys, big companies, small companies, so it's not difficult to sort of hook yourself up with an organisation or an individual who can survey your property for asbestos.

Ben Adam-Smith 12:54
And is the reason for this that we could start meddling around with a property pre 2000 and just almost look straight past it?

Greg Byrne 13:03
Yeah, absolutely. And for a typical householder, your thought process is, okay, I'm going to have a new kitchen and bathroom fitted, how much will it cost? So you do some research, and you go out to the market, and you speak to different contractors, and they come along and people draw plans, architects. At no point does anybody say, oh, by the way, you need an asbestos survey. I mean, particularly architects, for me, it can be quite depressing. I'll go and train architects and say, you know, how often do you commission or speak to clients about asbestos surveys? And in the domestic market it almost never happens, and these guys are trained for seven years. It's almost at every element, it's against the homeowner, unless they do their own research. There's good information out there on Google now that you can find, the HSE have got good information. So it's really down to the householder, to a large extent, to protect themselves, because if you rely on your builder or your contractor, it often won't happen.

Ben Adam-Smith 13:59
So these surveyors, what are they looking for when they come into a building? What are the telltale signs?

Greg Byrne 14:06
An asbestos survey is very similar to a standard Building Survey. The only difference really is the surveyor has had some training in knowing what to look for. So generally, they'll go around a particular building, room by room or space by space, take a photo of it, describe the various construction materials in there, and anything they think could contain asbestos, they'll take a sample of that'll go to a lab, it'll be tested, and that information will come back and be in the survey report. Once you've got your survey report that'll detail any asbestos, and hopefully, if it's a decent report, we'll tell you what kind of treatment, what kind of contractor you need to do any remedial or removal work.

Ben Adam-Smith 14:45
Now, I remember an example of some garages that had some asbestos on the roof, and we all knew that. But are they always in places that we can see, or are some of these products? You mentioned of, I think, 4000 products so they could be hidden within the walls.

Greg Byrne 15:06
Absolutely, yeah, lots of asbestos can be hidden, and you can't always find it. There are two different types of recognised surveys, one we call a management survey. That's kind of a basic survey really,

doesn't really go heavily into the fabric of the building. If you're having some refurbishment work done, then you need a refurbishment, or if you're demolishing a demolition asbestos survey, and those two refurbishment and demolition are kind of in the same category. So that means the surveyor, you would generally give him a set of plans showing the work that's going to be done, and then they would target those areas of the building that could be invasive. It could be putting holes in stuff, lifting floorboards, taking parts of ceilings down, and looking for anything that might be hidden and still in domestic properties, you tend to know where to look. There could be hidden things. A good example might be packers. They sometimes pack window or door frames out with little chunks of asbestos so you're not going to see it until it's there.

A quick, funny story for you. I had a huge refurbishment on my own property, so I did my own asbestos survey, which was handy, didn't cost me too much! I came home one day and I looked out the window and I could see all these things stuck in my lawn. And I thought, what is that? So I walked out and there was chunks of asbestos cement stuck in my lawn. So I shouted down the roofers and said, what you doing? And they said, don't worry, it's just a bit of asbestos that. I went, where's that come from? And it's something called a cavity closer. So if you imagine a wall where the wall sort of finishes just before it hits the roof, there's a cavity between the inner and the outer wall they close it off with a piece of asbestos cement. Now you can't get to it until you take the roof off, which is exactly what they were doing, but these two lunatics broke it off and flung it in the garden. It was stuck in the lawn. So depressing, really, but it just shows you that, you know, it can turn up absolutely anywhere.

Ben Adam-Smith 16:58
So who is going to be doing the removal? You talked about training different trades and so forth. Can it be our contractor?

Greg Byrne 17:08
It could be, but to kind of simplify a little bit, all asbestos products fall into two distinct groups, high risk and low risk. So anything high risk and for high risk, think asbestos pipe lagging, asbestos boards, asbestos sprayed loose materials, things like that. You can only do it if you have a license from the HSE. If it's the low risk group, and for those, think floor tiles, Artex cement garage roof, then somebody who's got appropriate training can do it. So it could be your contractor, if they're trained, very few of them are, or it could be a standalone company that have just done the lower risk element of training. In reality, there isn't many companies or individuals who've done that training that are readily available out there. So in a lot of cases, you end up going to a licensed company anyway, and it can be expensive. And to give you an idea of expense, something low cost, removing some floor tiles in a kitchen could be £400, £500 or £600. If you've got a two story detached or semi detached property and you've got asbestos soffits, you could be around £10,000 to £15,000.

Ben Adam-Smith 18:18
Well, so what does it look like as they go about their work? We talked, I think you said it was respiratory, a lot of the dust going in. So is it mainly about that? Or how would it work? If you could just describe a picture of them removing it from site.

Greg Byrne 18:35

The controls are sometimes slightly less stringent for low risk and the reason is, if it's a high risk material, they have to build an enclosure which is airtight. They've got specialist air movement equipment that sort of filter it through a high efficiency filter. So if it's the higher risk materials, it's guys, people often describe it as being in moon suits, but they're fully covered. They've got breathing apparatus, like, I say, the specialist air moving equipment on. They've got a decontamination unit. That's the high risk. At the lower risk end, they might just close the door, have a bit of specialist air movement extraction equipment on. All the guys are still got all the appropriate PPE masks, suits, etc, still doing it carefully. All the waste is double bagged, sealed, locking, skip goes off to a specialist waste site. So whichever way it's been done, the processes are still fairly tight.

Ben Adam-Smith 19:28
And is it just being buried? Is it landfill for this?

Greg Byrne 19:31
Yeah, that's quite interesting that. So we've been burying it here in the UK ever since we've started removing it into landfill. And it's not just any landfill. They basically reserve a cell, as they call it, line it out with clay, and when it's full, they cap it off with clay. And that's almost like a clay tomb for the asbestos. If we had stayed in Europe, the EU are pretty much more advanced than we are now, particularly since we've left. And they're, by virtue of the EU moving forward with regulations we are by default moving away. So the EU were going to stop us putting it into landfill, because what they've been finding is, and we've seen evidence of this, is that over time, water courses get into the landfill elements where asbestos is and start to bring it back out again. So what the EU are saying is we're going to have to stop sticking it in landfill and find other ways of dealing with it. And probably the most likely way is to super heat it, but you need to get kind of well over 1200 degrees to turn it into something that's non fibrous any more. There is one place in the UK that I know that does that now, but they only treat asbestos cement currently.

Ben Adam-Smith 20:34
And, I'm imagining that all this processing waste and so forth, this gets expensive, too. So does asbestos always get dealt with properly?

Greg Byrne 20:46
Does it always get dealt with properly?

Ben Adam-Smith 20:48
I can probably guess.

Greg Byrne 20:51
Do you know what? I suppose anything where there is a lot of money to be made, people will cut corners, do it wrong if they see an opportunity. Two directors of an asbestos removal company, and I use the term removal in inverted commas, were sent down last year, because of the way they were removing it. They had no license. They were pretty much just doing it uncontrolled. So it will attract people who will not do it correctly because of the money there. But I think, because it's so heavily regulated, for the most part, it's generally done fairly well.

Ben Adam-Smith 21:26
So you mentioned that regulation already, but perhaps this is a good point, just to underline it. So what are we looking for? What should they be qualified in? Or what certificates should they have?

Greg Byrne 21:35
Okay, so everything really starts from the Control of Asbestos regulations 2012 now that's the most up to date set of regulations. So coming from there, you've got what we call ACOPs or Approved Codes of Practice. You've got various different types of training. So in simple terms, anybody who's removing needs a license or something appropriate, what we call one day non licensed training. So that's a certificate for somebody who's done a course in working with asbestos at the lower risk end. And then, obviously, you've got all your certifications that you require for transporting asbestos. If you take asbestos to a specific tip site, they would give you a waste note, which would show that asbestos has gone from point A to point B, so it's really tightly controlled, and all the various elements are there.

And like anything, your average household that is not going to know this, and why should they? But what they have to do, really, is kind of like, do the bit of research, take some advice. I get people all the time phoning me up because I offer free advice, probably too often, actually, but I think it's important, because I over the sort of 30 odd years I've been in asbestos industry, I've seen so many occasions where people have been exposed to asbestos, and particularly in the domestic sector, because people will phone me up and say, I've had a builder in and he's pulled this ceiling down, and he told me, in his opinion, it definitely wasn't asbestos. I sent a sample off, and it came back, and is asbestos. So, you know, there's been exposure at that point, and it's really frustrating. So I think it's incumbent on people like myself and other people in the industry to try and help out as much as possible. One of the downsides is some of the larger firms won't even touch domestic work because they focus so heavily on commercial based stuff, where they can earn a lot more money.

Ben Adam-Smith 23:23
And is this becoming less and less of a problem? You're eventually going to do yourself out of a job.

Greg Byrne 23:30
People have been saying that to me for 30 years, and actually, I think it's going to go the other way. If I give you an example, if you picked 100 random buildings in the UK built before the year 2000 and asked me to do a survey we'd probably find asbestos in around about 80 to 90% of them, that sort of amount. And now the reason I say it's going to get busier is because, with this push towards 2050 carbon neutral, etc, there's going to be more work on buildings. And by default, if there's more work on buildings, there will be more asbestos surveys. If there's more asbestos surveys, there will be more asbestos found. And because it's in so many different types of products, and like I say, a lot of them are low risk, it will be there, and it will keep turning up for the next 30, 40, 50 years.

Ben Adam-Smith 24:20
Is there a substitute for it today, or is it just multiple different substitutes?

Greg Byrne 24:28

Yes, there are substitutes, and there are multiple different substitutes. And what you tend to find is, depending on what the product is, they then try and make it without asbestos, so you can put other types of ceramic fibres, fibreglass, organic fibre. You tend to find, though, it depends on what the application of that product is. So if, for example, you wanted something that was an outstanding level of fire protection, the best thing they made in the 1960s was something called asbestos insulation board. That stuff is so good, it still stands after glass and steel have melted down. Have they got anything as good today? No, because they've got nothing as good as asbestos. So in some cases, you can get a product that will do the same job, but not to the same effect.

Ben Adam-Smith 25:15
It's a very interesting case study, I'm sure it's been used widely too. But could it happen again? Could we, my immediate thought is of plastic, and not quite on the same scale, but create something today that we use, and then in 100 years time, 200 years, start to think, what were we doing?

Greg Byrne 25:35
I think you're absolutely right and people are already looking at other things. They're looking a bit more closely at fibreglass, ceramic fibres, nano fibres. If you look at, if you talk to the HSE, they look at it in a more rounded approach, which is a good thing to do, and look at exposure to dust. So think about your average building site. You walk through a town centre, there'll be a guy there, he'll have a hat on, he'll have a fag in the corner of his mouth. He'll have a big Stihl saw, and he'll be bashing his way through some concrete curb stones with no PPE on, because silica dust has a very similar effect to asbestos. So the way to look at it is not just asbestos, it’s any dust, you don't want to be breathing it in. And I always try and advise people when I train them that if you're going into small spaces, roof spaces, floor voids, ant rooms, boiler rooms, particularly if they're old and dusty, and if you haven't got good information, wear some kind of mask, but wear the right kind of mask.

For those who don't know, if you ever go into B and Q, a good way of doing it is when you walk down the aisle where they sell the masks, you'll see these filter ratings on them that are FFP one, two or three. That stands for Face Fit Protection Factor. One and two, you might as well have your underpants or your knickers on your head. Waste of time. Anything to do with asbestos has got to be FFP three, minimum.

Ben Adam-Smith 26:54
And our biggest risk moment is demolition?

Greg Byrne 26:58
I'd actually say probably more refurbishment. And the reason is, often with demolition, you've got guys on big machines kind of out the way bashing things. With refurbishment, you're inside a building in smaller spaces, and guys are sort of pulling buildings apart bit by bit on the inside. So if you take a typical, I don't know, maybe a city centre shop or something, it might have been refurbed over the years. You might have to pull three layers of shop fitting stuff out to get to the core of the building, and that's where the asbestos will be. And I use that example because we've just seen that in the last couple of weeks. Exactly that.

Ben Adam-Smith 27:35
And just to allay our fears is a little bit, because you use that number, 90% of buildings potentially have some asbestos. So if the asbestos is not being bashed around and all the rest of it, how safe is it at that point?

Greg Byrne 27:49
All asbestos is safe, providing it's not disturbed, so assuming it's reasonably well sealed or bonded, you can walk past it, it's not going to bother you. It's really when that active damage occurs and in most cases, that could be as simple as sanding something. More often it's going to be physical destruction, cutting, sawing, drilling, that type of thing, particularly drilling, that's the one thing you don't want to do to asbestos.

When I do a training course, I have a sample of asbestos from a mine, which I show to people, obviously, is safe and sealed in some resin. In this particular sample, you actually see what looks like an asbestos fibre poking out. So what I do is I show people this and get them to look at this fibre, and then I show them a picture of that fibre under a microscope. And then I ask them how many fibers are in this picture on the on the screen, and they always say, oh, 10,000 100,000 and go, that's actually a picture of one fibre. And the issue is with asbestos is the one fibre you can see is probably never going to bother you, because it's too big, but when you break it down, it breaks down into millions of fibres, so it's those that you can't see. And we're talking, when we talk fibre size, we're talking microns, so a 1,000th of a millimetre, that's why you can't see them, and that's where you can breathe them in easily. So it doesn't take a lot to damage asbestos and get a lot of asbestos fibre in the air coming off it.

Ben Adam-Smith 29:11
And what if we feel we've come into contact with it? We might have touched it, I suppose, or we might have inhaled. Is quick medical assistance going to help us or not really.

Greg Byrne 29:23
I feel, I feel like I'm giving you nothing but bad news. Unfortunately, if you're exposed to asbestos, there really is not much you can do. The most important thing, first of all, is to make sure you're away from that element that might exposure to it further to start with. Then in terms of what you do going forward, you go to a doctor, but there's not a great deal they can do. They can check out your current state of health, which might be handy, but asbestos doesn't really cause an issue for maybe 10, 20, to 60 years down the track. I think what is important to do, though, is record it. Record that the event has happened, because particularly later in life, if something does happen, that's when you start looking for evidence, and something that's formal and written could be useful, certainly to a solicitor who might be helping you with trying to get some form of compensation for your family.

Ben Adam-Smith 30:15
So what about your day to day? What are you doing? We've heard you mention the word training a few times, is that taking the bulk of your time, or are you sometimes heading to sites?

Greg Byrne 30:24

I wouldn't say training is the bulk, it's probably the smaller element, to be fair. As a practice, what we generally do is, we don't remove any asbestos. For me, that's a conflict of interest, if you're doing the actual finding and then the removing. So we stay well away from that.

Ben Adam-Smith 30:38
I'm sorry, why? Why is that a conflict of interest?

Greg Byrne 30:42
Okay, let's say I come to your house to do an asbestos survey, and I see there's, I don't know, three, four rooms with Artex on it. I could take a sample of one of your ceilings. It might come back positive. I might sample the other three, they come back negative, but I'll tell you that they all need doing. I think the fact that somebody has the ability to find the asbestos and then give you a price to remove, it always leaves me feeling a little bit at risk or at edge from the accusation that you're a poacher and you're also selling the stuff. So that's why we always stay away from that element. So we purely do this survey, so for me, the best result, if I come to your house is there's no asbestos, because I have no interest in finding it.

There are quite a few organisations in my sort of side of the fence, people who survey, who do make a lot of money by passing work on to removal companies, who then charge an extra sort of percentage that they pay back to the surveying company. I know it goes on, it's gone for years and years. It probably goes on in all kinds of construction elements, but there's so much work out there you don't need to rub extra money off the punter, so to speak. Just be honest with people, and like somebody said to me once, if you never tell a lie, you'll never have to remember what you said. So do it properly. There's no excuse.

Ben Adam-Smith 32:02
Now I interrupted you a couple of minutes ago when you were just telling me about your day to day work.

Greg Byrne 32:08
So yeah, most of our work will be surveying buildings for asbestos. And then, I know you're focusing today more on the on maybe the domestic element, but in the commercial world, what you have to do that you don't have to do in the domestic, is you have to manage asbestos, and that's a legal requirement. So we help people manage asbestos. We have a lot of large, sort of UK based customers who've got places throughout the UK. We'll survey their properties for them. We'll find out where the asbestos is, and then we'll help them manage it over a period of time to make sure that they protect the people in the building, and the people who come to work in the building.

Ben Adam-Smith 32:43
Now, what about if we're buying a property? Will this, or should this see us take some value of a property, if we've done a survey?

Greg Byrne 32:53

You've actually hit on probably the most common phone call I get, which is, Hi, Greg, I've put an offer in on a property, we've had a survey, and it's come back saying there's potentially, let's say there's Artex asbestos in the house, on the ceilings of the walls. What do we do? I say, well, the most important thing is you test it, because if you don't and you buy the property, it then becomes your asbestos. When you get to the point where you test it, let's say it comes back positive, you're then in a little bit of an arm wrestle with the person who's selling the property. And you get all kinds of reactions, honestly, you wouldn't believe some of them. Actions from get stuffed and yeah, that's the house, that's the price you pay for it. Some people will drop the asking price of the property based on the cost of removing it. Some people meet each other halfway. It depends how badly you want the property. You know, are you willing to take on some of that cost yourself? Do you want to leave it there? What are you can do the property long term? Are you going to rent it out? Are you going to sell it in the future? Because if you buy a property with asbestos in and you keep it in there, you'll have the same problem when you come to sell it. The best piece of advice I give to people, though, is, if the seller says, don't worry, I'll get rid of it myself, be really careful about that, because I've seen the old I'll get rid of myself, and it usually means they'll make it worse.

Ben Adam-Smith 34:13
And let's say we're in that scenario. Should we always get rid of the asbestos? If we're just going to be using the building and we're not agitating it in any way, is that something… or really always, if we have the opportunity?

Greg Byrne 34:30
If you've got the opportunity and the money to get rid of it, then just get rid of it, because then you never have to worry about it. And if you sell the house in future, you don't have to worry about it, but there's no reason, you know, the house I bought was a 60s bungalow, and it had Artex asbestos ceilings in, didn't bother me. I wasn't going to do anything to them until the actual refurbishment work started, so I wasn't worried about it. So it really depends on the individual, depends on the property, depends on your long term sort of view and expectations.

So almost all the answers are available, but the most important thing for me is certainly older properties. You can make an excuse for, maybe properties in the 90s where there's not much asbestos in them, but anything particularly sort of 70s, early 80s and backwards in terms of time, I would suggest you always get some form of asbestos survey. Because if you're spending, I don't know, what's the average price of a house now, £300,000, for £300 or £400 to find out there's any asbestos in, not only from a safety point of view, but from a risk in terms of to you of buying asbestos, then I think it's definitely worth doing. If I give you an example, okay, this is an extreme example, and I've got some absolute belters for the domestic market, but this one's in the commercial world. A chap, phoned me and said, I bought this particular factory. I'm not going to say which one it was, because it's actually quite a well known one. He said, I've been told there might be some asbestos in it. Could you come and have a look for me? So I said, okay. So walked around, I could see what the problem was straight away and he said, how much to do a survey? And said, it'll be, it's going to be about £2000 or £3000. And he said, have I got an asbestos and I went, oh yeah. What do you think it would cost in terms of removal? And I went, well, I don't do removal, but I can give you a rough idea, It's about £1.4 million. And he fell off his chair, and he actually couldn't do anything with the building at all, other than, I think he rented it

out for some trucking purposes, and then eventually had to sell it. All you had to do was spend a few quid getting a survey done. So the same principle really applies in domestic property. Get it checked.

Ben Adam-Smith 36:29
It makes me think of liability, and we've seen the fallout from Grenfell, where it feels like nothing is really going to happen. Plenty of people to blame. But what about this? I'm assuming, just because it's been used so widely and it was such a long time ago and mixed up with history, has anyone been prosecuted?

Greg Byrne 36:48
Do you mean in terms of the manufacturers and all that type of thing?

Ben Adam-Smith 36:52
I think so. Yeah, people, I suppose if someone installed it after 2000 maybe you'd have more of a case.

Greg Byrne 36:58
Not really. What they've done is what most companies do, they chase the profit and then till it gets too sticky. And then what they do is they either stop producing it and go, look, we didn't really know. In a lot of cases, they file for bankruptcy. So for example, if you, let's say you were a plumber and you worked at three or four companies in the 40s, 50s and 60s, you develop an asbestos related disease, when look for compensation the solicitor goes back and looks at those companies, and if those companies no longer exist, they go after the insurers, but you're still getting a pittance in real terms.

So there's not really much accountability, at all in terms of the people who manufactured and processed this stuff. If you compare us, we're a bit rubbish when you compare us to, say, America and a great example is if you look at Johnson's baby powder. So Johnson's massive American company producing talcum powder, which people have used right across the globe for years and years. They have been whacked with lawsuits for particularly women getting mesothelioma after using Johnson's baby powder, because talc has been known to be contaminated with asbestos, so much so they have now stopped selling talcum powder in North America, and it's probably only a matter of time before they stop selling it in Europe and places like that. But what else do we use talc in? The big thing we use it in is makeup and lots of times, we've been testing makeup across the UK and across the world, and found it does contain asbestos, not all the time, just invariably. So it's pervasive asbestos. It gets everywhere, into all kinds of products you wouldn't even think about.

Ben Adam-Smith 38:40
Are there any lessons that we can learn just from this whole conversation today, some of the elements that we've touched on?

Greg Byrne 38:49
I think, going forward, I mean, as a country, as a society, I mean the lessons are there in history, we ignore them at our peril. From an individual point of view, I think, as we've already covered with domestic property, caveat emptor all the time, you know, buyer beware. Look at what you're buying, get it checked, get it tested, do your due diligence. And it's really strange. I get all these calls from various

people asking me questions about it. And I've noticed there's a lot of younger women are really getting switched on and clued up and asking really good searching questions, doing research, why it's young women more than young men, I don't know. Maybe they're just better at it than we are, but certainly I think the message is getting out there, but maybe not quickly and widely enough. But you know, do your research, ask somebody.

Ben Adam-Smith 39:40
And it's not a geographic area or that place there has got a lot of asbestos. This is just woven into everything.

Greg Byrne 39:49
It's not a geographic area, but what you can say is, if you look at big conurbations and places where asbestos was used a lot, you might be a bit more likely to find it there. Certainly, let's look at things like what we call new towns, so if you look at places like Skelmersdale and Lancashire in the north, Milton Keynes, potentially down south, places that were built in the 60s. So if the estate you're on, the town you're in, if it's got that real kind of 60s, 70s element of build, that's when you're much more likely to find asbestos. I'll give you an example. Blackpool, we surveyed, I think it was around about 800 properties in Blackpool for asbestos, and we found it in 782 of the 800, but the interesting bit was, we hadn't been inside any of those properties. We only surveyed the outer envelope, so we're talking roofs, soffits, rainwater goods, damp proof courses, damp proof membranes, mastics, putties, all that kind of stuff.

Ben Adam-Smith 40:54
You seem to have had a lot of very interesting people calling you with questions. So do any more come to mind?

Greg Byrne 41:02
Nothing sort of readily comes to mind, but they're all pretty much along the same lines. If you look at the most common products that you would find in domestic property, they tend to be two distinct products, and they would be Artex, or textured coatings, as we refer to them, because remember Artex is actually a trade name, so this is the type of stuff that you get on ceilings and walls and people stipple it and make fancy patterns, maybe like shell shapes or that type of thing. And then floor tiles, they will be sort of thin, hard, stuck down, often about six inch by six inch. Both products have got a low amount of asbestos in and they're probably the two most common ones. The ones to be really careful of, which are much more dangerous are things like asbestos boards, and you will find those on soffits, canopies, they'll often put them around or underneath boilers. You sometimes find it used to pack windows and door frames out. If you've got a property where somebody's built a garage into the house and you've got a bedroom above, they've sometimes fire stop it with asbestos board in that sort of application. But there's so many different things, but they often revolve quite often, in terms of questions around floor tiles and Artex.

Ben Adam-Smith 42:13
Is there anything else we should be mentioning in this conversation?

Greg Byrne 42:18

I think we've covered probably most of the elements, in terms of, where you're going to find asbestos to removal, the treatment, surveys, training, that type of thing. The fact it's really well regulated in the UK. The big problem is the HSE, particularly, who were geared up a bit more towards construction and what have you, the EHO or environmental health to a certain extent as well, there's just not enough of them. They've been sort of undermined and cut back over the years by various governments, but particularly the last lot who sort of reduced their numbers and the amount of money they've got to be able to do the things they want to do. So it's tough for them to get out.

I literally, before I came on here to talk to you, I often check the HSE website to see prosecutions that type of thing. And the one that jumped out at me straight away was two 16 year old boys have been exposed to asbestos during the refurbishment of a domestic property, smashing up asbestos roof sheets because the company that employed them didn't get an asbestos survey and told them to smash up these roof sheets and bag them up. So I mean, stuff like that's going on. Did the people who own the company know those roof sheets for asbestos? Well, if they're in someone's house, refurbishing, building, and they didn't know a wiggly shaped cement roof might contain asbestos, then frankly they're either lying or they're daft as a brush, or both.

Ben Adam-Smith 43:45
You've, been around this subject for a long time. So is there anything you would like to see changed? Let's say you moved into politics or building regs or whatever it might be. What needs to happen in the UK?

Greg Byrne 44:00
You're giving me power now. So it may go to my head. Like I say, the regulations are good. What we need is certainly more help for the statutory bodies to inspect. But really what we need is more training. So I think about my time in school, particularly learning things like algebra, trigonometry, Latin, you know? Okay, we do need that stuff, but what we really need is to educate kids about stuff that's really going to affect them. I go and train apprentices in universities and colleges, who do building courses in asbestos, because the training they get is really basic/non existent, and what have you, so I offer my services, and go in and train them for free, because what we've got to do is educate people as much as possible. And that's probably the best way of getting that information out there, getting to the young people. Start educating them and make it mandatory. Well, it is mandatory that anybody who works, this is regulation, some the asbestos regulations. It's mandatory that anybody who works in a place where they may be exposed to asbestos should have asbestos awareness training. It used to have to be done annually, which was maybe a little bit too much, but the previous government hacked that to pieces and basically said, now, all you need to do is do it regularly. The number of people being trained dropped off a cliff almost, so again, what we're doing is doing the wrong thing. We should be making sure people are trained regularly, annually, if it needs to be, because look at the number of people dying every single year. It's only just started the curve to tip down below about 5200 people a year, and the next nearest one is about 30 people falling off buildings. So there's such a vast gulf between falling off buildings and asbestos that we need to keep pushing and pushing.

Ben Adam-Smith 45:54

And finally, how would you like to conclude today? Is there a thought or highlighting something from our conversation.

Greg Byrne 46:02
I think the general theme is, get your building checked before you buy or sell. Even more importantly, before you do any work on it of any description. If you're just going to slap some paint on, you're probably okay. But the minute you're going into the fabric of a building, get some form of check whether it's I mean, you can buy these testing kits online, which I'm kind of split about a little bit, basically a pack turns up, and you can take a small sample yourself. I'm kind of okay with it for really low risk products like Artex or floor tiles, with 1% 2% asbestos in. But for more dangerous products, then you really need, you know, a specialist training and the survey and what have you. So it is a kind of a halfway house to help out, particularly if people don't have a lot of money. But whatever you do, get your property checked before you do any work on it, and don't rely on your builder to do that for you. Give him a dig in the ribs and make sure you know you get it done, because if he lets you down, and sometimes they do, he won't pick up the phone.

Ben Adam-Smith 47:01
Greg, it's been fantastic. I've really enjoyed that today. It's been very informative, and I've certainly learned a lot. So thank you very much.

Greg Byrne 47:07
You're most welcome.

Ben Adam-Smith 47:08
Head online to take a look at the show notes that accompany this session, houseplanninghelp.com/363, you can review the key points once again, in our summary. We've also got some photos of different building products that include asbestos, a look at the fibres that are so tiny as well. If you've got a comment or you'd like to ask a question, either do that within the show notes, just scroll down to the bottom. Or on social media, we've got links. We'll link you to the RB Asbestos Consultants website, all of that at houseplanninghelp.com/363.

My call to action is to check out The Hub, and this is the membership community that I run alongside House Planning Help. The idea is just more assistance, more learning, more access to experts, more details from real case studies. More, more, more and useful, useful, useful. We want to accelerate your house building journey. So if you've never followed this link before, maybe today is the day. Go and investigate houseplanninghelp.com/join. And this is the great thing about memberships, use it while it's useful and then unsubscribe. It's not a handcuffs thing here where, ah, we've got you we're not letting you get away. Just come and go as you please. That's often the first thing I say to people, just to underline it, come and go as you please.

That's it for today. Thank you so much. The House Planning Help Podcast is produced by Regen Media - content that matters.