



## Wittenoom – A Town Born To Die

Australia is renowned for its wide open spaces and picturesque landscapes. The



Pilbara region in the Northwest is one such area which currently attracts thousands of visitors wishing to experience some outback magic. Prior to 1930, however, only the few who owned or worked on the pastoral settlements even lived there. This began to change with the discovery of vast asbestos deposits in Yampire Gorge on Frank Wittenoom's Mulga Downs Station.

Asbestos had been known for 4,500 years, and even Marco Polo recounted that cloth made from the fibre could not be burnt if thrown onto a fire. Clearly it was an extremely useful product that was destined for inclusion in a host of modern adaptations.

Cement fibre became a standard building material; fire blankets were made from it, along with gaskets and brake shoes for automobiles; also protective clothing; anything, in fact, that might be exposed to fire. Asbestos would eventually be in high demand. In the 1930's this was all in the future; but Frank and his partner, Langley (Lang) Hancock, must have foreseen the lucrative prospects and started mining the white asbestos in Yampire Gorge. When Lang happened to pick up a chunk of blue asbestos crocidolite and learned that it was, at the time, worth £70 a ton, he knew for certain they were on a winner and pegged the claim.



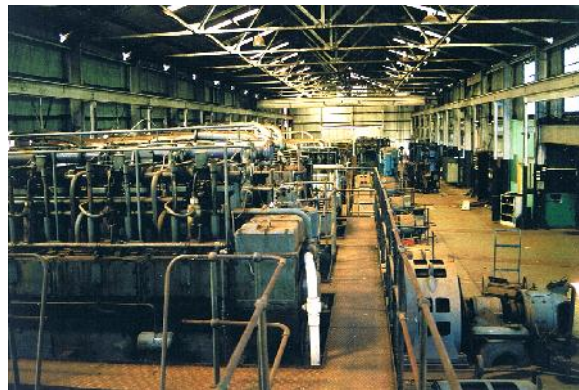
Despite the promise of fortunes to be made, nothing came easy in those days, certainly not for the workers. By 1940 there were twenty-two of them, much of the time having to endure oppressive heat while labouring in dusty, dirty conditions. In effect, theirs was an appalling job that few would tolerate for long. Later, in order to maintain the workforce, men were recruited from as far afield as Europe where employment was hard to find. Workers were probably required to live in shacks or tents that were conveniently close to operations, all no doubt covered in asbestos fibres. As the workforce increased over the coming years it was deemed necessary to build proper accommodation separate from, but reasonably near to the mine. Lang named the new town after his partner Frank; so in 1947 Wittenoom was born. From a small beginning, by 1951 it had grown to 150 houses with a population of 500 people, making it the Pilbara's largest town; and no wonder when, for the next nine years, it would be Australia's only supplier of blue asbestos. No-one realised that the settlement and the operation that gave it birth were on the road to self-destruction.

Despite concerns by some factions, the dangers of breathing the fibres were summarily dismissed in favour of high profits and a naive disregard for the possible consequences. How harmful could it be? Asbestos was used in WWII gas masks, helmets, tanks, planes and battleships. Houses and schools were built from it, garden fences too. It was in fire-fighting gear, upholstery, cookware and many other appliances. Residents in those days were surrounded by it; and many still are today; all unknowing or non-caring about the risks. And how about this - one tobacco giant even used asbestos fibres in its cigarette filters from 1952 to 1956 !

Thanks to plain ignorance and arrogance, Wittenoom adhered doggedly to its tradition of supplying crocidolite to whomsoever would buy it; turning a blind eye to the misery it was already causing, and would continue to inflict for decades to come. Asbestosis, or Mesothelioma, were just words; scare tactics likely to shut down a very lucrative business. Who would truly want that? Presumably not the 7,000 workers who had been paid to put up with the discomfort of their employment over the company's twenty-three years of operation. Some eventually might be thinking twice, though; particularly as 85 of their number had died by 1986; and 700 cases have been predicted to be diagnosed by 2020.

The threat was real enough, with evidence to support multiple claims by representatives of those suffering the disease. The usage of asbestos was brought into question and production of anything made from the deadly fibre rapidly ceased. There was already too much asbestos in communities around the country and the world, and nobody wanted more. The dangers having finally been recognised and reluctantly admitted to, operations in Wittenoom came to a sudden halt in 1966.

There was no dismantling of equipment for either scrap or use elsewhere. The final bell had tolled, mining had stopped, generators and processing machinery lay idle; and management and crew simply walked away. The only ones who stayed were those who owned homes in the township. Despite having lost their main source of income virtually overnight, they were not about to abandon a place they had come to love.



Unfortunately for them, some agencies had other ideas. In 1978, concerned over safety issues in a town contaminated by crocidolite, the State Government decided it was time to phase out Wittenoom. Residents were encouraged to leave voluntarily. Offers were made to buy their homes, and reimbursement of relocation costs was an additional incentive. Many, however, remained opposed to the plan which would eventually see the closure of their town; and they lobbied to have the area cleared before being re-developed as a tourist attraction. Sadly for them, it wasn't to be.

The town itself was gradually whittled away. As they became vacant, houses were demolished. By 1992, fifty had gone along with other buildings. Soon, the school, nursing post and police station were closed; so too the airport in the following year.

The die-hards clung on; but were advised that, although they would not be forced to leave, new residents would be discouraged. In 2006 power from the main grid to the town was cut off, and in the same year it was announced that its official status would be removed. When the town was eventually degazetted in 2007, its location would no longer appear on any maps or road signs. Only those who already knew where it was were able to find it. In official terms, Wittenoom had ceased to exist.

As of 2016, only three permanent residents remained. Wittenoom had become a ghost town, a silent reminder of greed and a need that had passed its best-before date.



Despite the inherent danger of exposure to the dust and asbestos fibres that still contaminate the area, according to a 2018 report, thousands of tourists continue to visit. Do these people have a death wish; or is this one road-trip too fascinating to pass up?

With luck they will be no worse for the experience and will be able to tell their grandchildren of the day they went to Wittenoom, the town that was born to die.

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