Shipyard Environmental Conditions Fatality File

Former shipyard worker’s warning to today’s young tradespeople

A former shipyard worker is warning young tradespeople of the dangers of asbestos after losing around a third of his body weight since being diagnosed with mesothelioma.

James Queen, 74, worked as a shipwright in Liverpool and Glasgow where he was exposed to asbestos. Last year he was diagnosed with mesothelioma, a type of cancer linked to asbestos exposure.

Before diagnosis he used to weigh 14-and-a-half stone but now touches the scales at just over 9-and-a-half stone.

Mesothelioma is a type of cancer that develops in the lining that covers the outer surface of some of the body’s organs. James says he was regularly exposed to asbestos as he embarked on an apprenticeship at Glasgow docks in the 1960s.

James moved to Liverpool in 1970 and continued working as a shipwright after marrying Patricia. They were married for 51 years – Patricia died in 2022 from dementia, the same year James was diagnosed with mesothelioma.

James said: “I knew something was wrong with me last year but as my wife was ill as well, I just concentrated on her.

“It was only when I had a fall at my wife’s funeral and broke my hip, scans found two types of cancer including mesothelioma.

“I can’t drive anywhere, I’ve lost my confidence, I’m short of breath, constantly coughing with nothing coming up – my body is wasted.”

Asbestos-related diseases take decades to develop – most people

living with them today will have been exposed well before the tightening of controls and the use of asbestos was banned in 1999. However, around five thousand people a year die from asbestos related illnesses.

The current regulations have led to a significant reduction in exposure and the number of people developing asbestos-related illness is predicted to fall as we get further from the date asbestos was banned.

The current regulations state that where asbestos is present in buildings it must be managed, maintained in a good condition, and stay undisturbed. If this level of protection cannot be achieved, then asbestos must be removed.