

Workers stories: Graham Higgins - Brick worker

As a young man Graham Higgins from Devon worked on building sites as a brickies labourer and road worker before taking up post at a local brickworks in the 1970s where he worked for 25 years.

He remembers the dust on the sites and in the brickworks 'In the sunlight there were little pinprick holes in the roof and where shards of sunlight came through, the factory would be glistening with quartz sand and it would be like hundreds of mirror balls. It was all glistening in the sunlight but, get out of the sunlight and you couldn't see them - so there was dust everywhere, all over.'

Only now do Graham and his wife and children realise that the invisible fine dry silica quartz dust that he breathed in at work would so severely affect his health.

At every available opportunity Graham would escape to the freedom and fresh air of the Cornish surfing beaches. He learnt quickly and began competing at a national level. "Sometimes we'd finish work 4 or 5 o'clock and go straight down to the beach. Other times I've gone surfing 5 o'clock in the morning and then gone to work'. In 1999, Graham came a very creditable 9th in the UK national long board championships. 'That's my claim to fame', Graham grins.

Little did he know that the uncontrolled dust created by the machine drying the sand for sprayblast finishing onto the clay bricks, and dust from other processes was lodging in his lungs and becoming a ticking 'time bomb'. He now knows what the risks are, but was never told about them, and unfortunately did not find out until it was too late

"It was dusty but no-one knew that it did any damage to you. Dust seemed no different at work than if you were sweeping the floor or dusting the furniture at home. You'd come out looking like a snowman or a flour grader, covered in dust. "

Graham regrets that he did not know the risk at the time and that he was not told and did not ask. He does not recall managers ever telling them to wear breathing protection. "Now you've got boxes of dust masks for all different kinds of tasks. You've got eye wear, gloves and ear defenders but still some workers don't use the protection. People with that attitude have got to learn, see videos and read things to find out what could happen to them. I wish I had had the opportunity when I was young.'

Graham first noticed he was slowing down in 2001. 'I was still surfing. I'd just put it down to my age that I was struggling a bit more in the water. I didn't have the energy that I used to have and all these young lads were flying past me'

Then he was knocked completely off balance by pneumonia' in 2001,' it knocked seven bells out of me -flat out in bed. I couldn't go anywhere or do anything. ' An x-ray showed a problem and was the start of a slow path to diagnosis of silicosis. His wife and young children were very distressed.

At 45 he had to give up surfing, and was told that his condition would get worse. When last checked, Graham was rated at 30% disabled and now, aged 55, feels he spends half his life sitting in a hospital waiting room.

'I'm more susceptible to illnesses cos I've got a weak chest so it has been a bit of a bad winter for me. I want to get my percentage reassessed. It's had a big effect this disease, I've changed my lifestyle. It's frustrating to a point that I can't do the things that I used to do. I love working on cars but it's not so much now.'

His employer retrained him for safety management related work, but, finding himself confined to indoor office work, he left. He eventually went to work in a limestone quarry which involved working with some silica, but he was only told after he asked."

As for employers, he says : 'There's got to be a lot of forethought as to how they're going to set up a process and how the people in that environment can be protected. People at the top have got to know what's likely to happen not today, not tomorrow but in 12 months time, two years time. It shouldn't be down to an individual at the bottom of the ladder to run around to find out what the product is and how dangerous it is. He should be told before he starts. If they don't tell you its wrong."

Graham insists that all workers must be made aware of the delayed but very real threat from breathing in silica dust.

'The lads with the stone cutters. You know hand held ones, they're right above the product that they're cutting. Some of the tools on the market are wet cut but some like the mobile ones are dry cut. Many workers wouldn't think of tipping a bucket of water on the floor before cutting just to keep the dust down. Had we been offered dust masks in the early days we probably wouldn't be having this conversation now'.

Graham knows that his lung function will get worse and that at some stage in the future it may turn into cancer. Though he admits he is a smoker, he draws small comfort from his consultant's opinion that his level of smoking probably made no difference to the much bigger impact of the exposure to silica.