



## South Georgia.

Our initial involvement in Antarctica came as somewhat of a surprise. When we received the call we had to check and make sure it wasn't April Fools day! This call in the late 1990's led to us undertaking work for the [British Antarctic Survey](#) (BAS) at a number of their remote historic sites still used by BAS researchers. Our role was to undertake asbestos surveys and deal with the organisation of asbestos removal, where necessary.

Although this work would only involve a few days of site activity the logistics of getting to site and the extremes of climate meant the work took almost six months to plan and involved a member of staff being away for over 8 weeks. The journey along the Antarctic peninsula presented our staff with many challenges and in the months before our trip one of the BAS vessels had needed to go the rescue of another ship which had been damaged in a giant wave. The trip is a journey of a lifetime with tourists even now paying in excess of £10,000 to undertake the same trip.

After the work for BAS we were asked by BAS and the Falkland Island Government to assist with a project on South Georgia, at King Edward Point. Lying almost 1000 miles south of the Falkland Islands South Georgia is one of the remotest places on earth and home to colonies of penguins and seals. The island is only accessible by ship. It is better known today for its part in the Falkland Island conflict of the 1980's, the Island was once one of the world's largest sources for whale products.

Our task was comparatively simple, we were to assist in the demolition of Shackleton House a large military accommodation block, built after the Falklands Conflict at King Edward Point. Our role was to identify a suitable UK based asbestos removal contractor and undertake the necessary monitoring and supervision.

The project was almost a year in the planning but none of the asbestos team had seen the site or knew what to expect. After almost a week of travelling by air and ship we arrived at South Georgia only to be welcomed by bemused penguins

Our first days work was to determine how we could get the building ready for the demolition contractors joining us. It was then that we discovered that the asbestos survey which had been provided prior to leaving the UK and upon which all our programme and supplies had been based, was incomplete and a considerable quantity of additional asbestos was rapidly identified. This resulted in an extended programme and the need to bring in additional resources.

Located in the Southern hemisphere the South Georgia summer coincides with our winter. The original plan had the asbestos team on site from October to early December and being back in the UK for Christmas. The revised plan called for only a short Christmas stop over and the return of a larger team early in the

New Year. The logistics of working at South Georgia meant that almost immediately after our arrival the additional supplies needed were being

shipped from the UK to ensure they arrived some eight weeks later.



*Asbestos operative at King Edward Point (Shackleton House in the background)*

It was during this phase of works that we were asked to conduct an assessment of the [Grytviken](#) whaling station a short distance from our location at King Edward Point and this assessment was to present us with probably our biggest challenge to date.

The South Georgia and the Grytviken are seeing an ever increasing number of visitors each year. The buildings on the site were in a very poor condition and the high winds were causing a rapid deterioration of the structures. More importantly for us, asbestos has been used extensively as an insulating material on the plant used for processing the whale meat. It is

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difficult to explain the scale of the site, but at its peak Grytviken was home to over 1000 workers.



*Building damage at Grytviken*

We were asked to report upon the asbestos on the site and other related issues and based upon our assessment, it was decided that funding needed to be made available to conduct a full environmental clean of the site. In addition to the asbestos, oil from ruptured tanks was beginning to be washed out into the bay and other environmental concerns were identified.

The Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI) appointed UK based AWG as the main contractor and Thames Laboratories were awarded the contract with AWG of ensuring the work was completed safely and within the budget available.

It was identified that resourcing the asbestos removal from the UK would be uneconomical, when added to the range of other specialist skills needed on the site. An American contractor was short listed for the work. One of roles was to visit the contractor in the USA, conduct interviews, review work processes, equipment and records. What made the project even more interesting, was that upon arrival we discovered that the American contractor was utilising one of Chilean sister companies for the asbestos removal work.

The project was almost two years in the planning and due to location careful consideration needed to be given to the supply and the selection of materials so they would not harm the fragile ecology. At the same time able to withstand the extreme conditions. It was not possible to ship the waste from site so suitable locations on site needed to be identified for the disposal of the waste.

Upon establishment of the camp, in which all of the site workers were to live during the project, a programme of site induction was undertaken for both the asbestos removal and demolition teams. The induction was led by the 2 Thames Laboratories staff present throughout the project, with translation into Spanish.

The conditions presented numerous challenges to those on site and even during the planning period the condition of some of the buildings had changed considerably requiring a change in approach.

In some locations, it proved necessary to partially demolish buildings before safe access could be gained to undertake the asbestos removal work. The demolition and the high winds meant that the enclosures typically used for asbestos removal work could not be used.

This change in approach resulted in considerable modification of the site processes and resulted in a considerable amount of work being undertaken without enclosures using wet stripping and wrap and cut techniques.



*Asbestos Removal Operatives Clearing the site of material*

It was fortunate that in the planning stage, consideration had been given to this potential problem and suitable equipment had been included "just in case".

As an addition consideration all those on the site needed to be fully aware of the environmental damage that could be caused.



*Asbestos waste disposal*

South Georgia is an extensive breeding ground for both penguins and seals. During the early summer elephant seal colonies are present on the beaches around the whaling station. The pups and even adult seals can be found in the buildings. Although not fast moving, the adult males weigh several tonnes are capable of inflicting considerable damage.

Later in the season the elephant seals are replaced by the fur seals. These are unpleasant foul smelling creatures that are very nibble on land and are able to run and climb quickly. Just like angry dogs, they lay in wait for the unsuspecting. Fortunately only one of the team sustained an injury and this was quickly treated

In these days for risk assessments you could image the documentation that was produced for dealing with the local in habitants, and the potential ecological problems.

In April 2004 after almost 6 months of intensive work the asbestos removal at Grytviken was completed and site made safe. Where possible, the machinery and plant used by the whalers remained to provide visitors with an idea of the scale of the operation.

Thames Laboratories has considerable experience of dealing with the unusual and are able to assist with the management of asbestos projects both small and large. If you need any additional information on our project management services then please do not hesitate to contact us.

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