

## **Establishing Wittenoom's asbestos industry: the role of government**

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*The establishment of industries in the North-West has long been a knotty problem for both State and Commonwealth Governments. They will not find an industry more ready to hand than this one.*

*J.S. Foxall, WA State Mining Engineer, 1942.*

**T**he development of Colonial Sugar Refining Company's crocidolite (blue asbestos) industry at Wittenoom Gorge in the Hamersley Range was heavily influenced by state and federal governments acting in tandem. It is probable that had these governments not promoted and assisted the venture so strongly, mining might have remained small-scale, undercapitalised and intermittent like other isolated mining ventures in the region at the time. In suggesting this probability, I do not intend any mitigation of the company's responsibility (now re-affirmed by litigation) for the operation of the Wittenoom venture and its disastrous health outcomes; responsibility lay with the ownership and management. Nevertheless, governments' role, driven by a commitment to northern development, was crucial to Wittenoom's establishment and needs recognition.

Studies of Wittenoom's history since the 1980s have, not surprisingly, concentrated on the failures of the company, the unsatisfactory working conditions and appalling health outcomes, the legal struggles for compensation, and personal stories of suffering and death.<sup>1</sup> Examination of governments' role in the story has been confined to identification of the regulatory failures of the mines inspection regime.<sup>2</sup> This article therefore adds a new dimension to Wittenoom's story.

### **Growing interest in the deposits, 1930s**

Asbestos remained a prospector's mineral in Australia in the 1930s as governments encouraged unemployed men out of the cities and into the bush, while rising asbestos fibre prices in the last years of the 1930s increased its lure for hungry prospectors. New or previously abandoned leases were worked by hand, the high-grade long fibre extracted by cobbing, which involved knapping the fibre from the surrounding rock by hand. In 1936-38, 150 to 200 men joined what the WA Assistant State Mining Engineer J.S. Foxall reported as 'the great asbestos rush' to the Hamersley Range.<sup>3</sup> In July 1938 he described prospectors working at gorge faces on the exposed seams: 'It is a day's work for a man to clean from one to two bags (of 100lb) by hand knapping'. Donkeys then carried the bags out of the gorges where trucks completed the long journey over rough roads to the coast at Roebourne (Fig. 1; Fig.2), itself a tiny northwest town.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 1:** *Wittenoom Location Map.*



Source: Unknown.

There was busy trading in lease-holdings in the Hamersley Ranges between 1938 and 1943 as small syndicates struggled to turn their prospectuses into reality on the ground; but the times were against them. In wartime conditions they failed to obtain the shipping space to carry their bags of long fibre to overseas markets. As well, none of them impressed governments, either state and federal, as asbestos ground was claimed and traded and then not effectively worked.<sup>5</sup> Neighbouring pastoralist Lang Hancock, through L.G. Hancock Asbestos Company, took part in this trading, acquiring leases centred on Wittenoom Gorge,<sup>6</sup> and began small-scale mining and milling. Most importantly, he became an influential promoter of Wittenoom's deposits.

At the same time Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), a business with no mining experience, became interested in asbestos. This followed its 1935 move into the manufacture of building materials.<sup>7</sup> The company began investigating asbestos-based external sheeting in 1941, commenced mining and milling white asbestos (chrysotile) fibre near Zeehan on Tasmania's west coast in 1942, and took over the small Sydney asbestos cement company, Asbestos Products Pty Ltd in 1943. In 1943 as well it acquired L.G. Hancock Asbestos Company's blue asbestos leases<sup>8</sup> and pilot milling plant at Wittenoom Gorge.<sup>9</sup> To undertake this Western Australian venture CSR operated through Australian Blue Asbestos Ltd (ABA), incorporated in April 1943.

**Figure 2:** *Wittenoom: Loading Truck for journey to Port.*



Source: Courtesy John Kitching

CSR investigated Australia's supplies of asbestos fibre in 1941–42 and found them inadequate to national requirements. In these wartime conditions the federal government focused on asbestos fibre's strategic importance to national security, and Australia's worrying dependence on overseas sources of supply. In December 1942, the Director-General of the Department of War Organisation of Industry wrote to CSR of his government's 'complete agreement as to the importance and urgency attached to your projects'.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it was the worst of times for the company to engage in long-term project planning.

While it is unsurprising that business competitor James Hardie found CSR's entry into asbestos manufacturing unwelcome, its particularly strong criticism of CSR's Wittenoom decision is notable. The deposits in the Pilbara were well known to the Australian asbestos industry: James Hardie's chairman had examined them in the late 1920s, judging them uneconomic.<sup>11</sup> In an exchange of letters between chairmen in June–July 1944, James Hardie suggested that 'the Colonial Sugar Refining Co.'s knowledge of the asbestos cement industry is of the same order as ours of the sugar refining industry' and questioned the economic viability of CSR's planned investment.<sup>12</sup> It was a warning to be heeded but CSR ignored it.<sup>13</sup>

An even more dire warning for the future lay in the company's apparent lack of due diligence before acquiring the Wittenoom leases: the decision was taken after L.G. Hancock Asbestos Company's approach offering sale of its leases, rather than as the result of a systematic analysis of asbestos minerals and asbestos mining opportunities.<sup>14</sup> Thus, CSR launched into mining about which it knew nothing, and into asbestos mining at Wittenoom, proposing to mine crocidolite, the most challenging to mine and mill of the asbestos fibre types and the most difficult to market.<sup>15</sup>

### **Constructing knowledge of Wittenoom's crocidolite deposits**

In the crucial period of the early 1940s when decisions were made which ensured that the Hamersley Range's crocidolite deposits were developed on a large scale, the Western Australian Mines Department played a key role in providing authoritative knowledge of the deposits. When the Department began constructing that knowledge in the late 1930s, the deposits were almost unknown.

In the early 1940s, however, the crocidolite deposits took form in the minds of governments and the public as deposits with almost unlimited potential. 'I believe that there is a strong possibility of the value of crocidolite production eventually eclipsing the value of gold production in this State', Western Australia's Assistant State Mining Engineer J.S. Foxall declared in 1942.<sup>16</sup> A 1943 Mines Department memo described the deposits as 'one of the finest in the world'.<sup>17</sup> With reserves 'for at least a century' the value of the prospective industry was 'incalculable', Foxall (by then State Mining Engineer) advised in 1946.<sup>18</sup> Certainly it would make Australia self-sufficient in asbestos fibre.<sup>19</sup> This high optimism was repeated by State politicians, included in government promotional literature and disseminated in the press.<sup>20</sup> By 1947 the deposits were publicly presented as 'huge and unique' and of potentially greater value to Western Australia than all the gold 'already won', an extraordinary suggestion. A great, new industry was being established in the northwest by 'vigorous and courageous development'.<sup>21</sup> Expectations

also rose at the national level, Prime Minister Chifley in 1947 noting the Commonwealth Bureau of Mineral Resources' assessment that 'for all practical purposes, the life of the [Wittenoom] mine is unlimited'.<sup>22</sup>

### **J.S. Foxall's crucial role**

The formation of this knowledge of the Hamersley Range crocidolite deposits was almost entirely the work of one man, John Stuart Foxall, Assistant State Mining Engineer (1937-1945) and State Mining Engineer (1945-1952).<sup>23</sup> The asbestos rush to the Hamersley Range gorges between 1936 and 1939 focused the Mines Department's attention on the deposits and resulted in investigatory visits by several staff and the publication of official reports. The first, in 1937, was carried out by F.G. Forman, Government Geologist, and published in the Geological Survey's Annual Report of 1937. Forman inspected Yampire Gorge. He confined himself to some preliminary statements on the geological character of the area and geological comparisons with crocidolite deposits in South Africa's Cape Province. He made no attempt to estimate the likely size of the deposits and ventured just one professional opinion:

It is ... doubtful whether the narrow width of the veins will permit of these deposits being worked economically by underground methods, owing to the large amount of worthless rock material which would necessarily have to be removed in recovering the valuable fibre.<sup>24</sup>

In the following year Foxall inspected the Wittenoom Gorge workings. He described 'wide ribbons' of crocidolite at various heights above the gorge floor, the current workings of the prospectors and the likely use of underground mining in the prospective 'larger scale' operations. Foxall endeavoured to contain his enthusiasm within the bounds of his technical knowledge of the deposits but could not manage to do so.

Although to all appearances the deposit seems to be enormous, yet it is not known how far the asbestos extends into the face of the cliffs, and it is impossible at this juncture to give even an approximate estimate of reserves ...

I am confident that there is sufficient fibre in this gorge alone to warrant preparations for large scale mining operations, provided that a market can be found for the product at reasonable prices.<sup>25</sup>

In 1941 Foxall revisited the Hamersley Range and reported further as part of a Geological Survey bulletin published because of increased interest in the deposits. At Yampire Gorge Foxall reported a high percentage of Grade 1 long fibre and judged that systematic mining, in contrast to the prospectors' primitive workings, would be profitable. In a branch of Wittenoom Gorge he saw seams of fibre that 'should prove a good producer'. At Eastern Creek he noted large floaters of fibre-bearing rock that had fallen to the gorge floor. He judged that 'a large tonnage of highly payable fibre' could be won from working these floaters. He reserved his greatest enthusiasm for the Marramamba deposits in hilly, rather than gorge, country where the deposits would be easier to mine and more accessible by road. He reported fibre of two to three inches (5-8 cms) in length in several seams, the richest cross section containing nine to ten inches (23-25 cms) of fibre in eight feet (2.4 m) of rock. Large areas of the deposits could, he judged, be mined

cheaply by open cutting before underground mining was begun. Altogether the outcrops of fibre spread over 120 miles (193 km) east-west and 4 miles (6.4 km) north-south, suggesting that the fibre seams were continuous over long distances.<sup>26</sup>

Foxall's conclusions on the profitability of these deposits were remarkable in their extravagance.

I am more than ever impressed with the possibility of establishing one of the most profitable industries in Australia, and I am firmly convinced that Roebourne should be and must eventually be one of the principal asbestos distributing centres of the world ...

In my opinion there is the possibility of the existence of hundreds of square miles of productive country ...

I believe that there is a definite possibility of the total value of crocidolite production eventually eclipsing the value of gold production in this State.<sup>27</sup>

He calculated his estimates of the value of the deposits on the basis of sales at £40 sterling per short ton when the average price of Cape Blue (crocidolite from Cape Province in South Africa) in 1938 was approximately £26 per short ton, a price calculated from figures he included in his report and therefore certainly available to him. He was assuming that all Hamersley Range fibre would sell at premium first or second grade prices. He probably judged that estimate a conservative one because parcels of high-grade crocidolite fibre were reputed to have been worth up to £75 sterling per short ton in London in 1937/1938. He displayed no awareness of past fluctuations in the prices of fibre or of the powerful forces that could marshal against new competition and appeared to take for granted the new industry's capacity to match its costs and prices with Cape Asbestos Company's South African product. His ignorance of the workings of even the Australian asbestos industry was starkly evident when he suggested that Hamersley Range crocidolite could replace imported asbestos fibre.

I do not know how much of the annual Australian requirements consist of blue asbestos, nor how much of this fibre might be substituted for chrysotile imports, but the amount would probably make a satisfactory start for a local market.<sup>28</sup>

In fact, none of Australia's imported fibre was crocidolite, Australia's asbestos-cement producers did not favour any substitution for chrysotile because it was the most flexible and easiest to work of the fibre types. There was no Australian market for crocidolite.

It is, of course, easy to be wise after the event when the failure of the Hamersley Range crocidolite industry is a fact of history. Foxall did insist that his report should not be read as arguing that the industry could be established 'without any difficulty'. He identified start-up problems with mining, milling, transport and marketing, all of which would require 'careful handling'.<sup>29</sup> But he did not suggest that they could defeat the successful establishment of the industry.

Why was Foxall so extravagantly positive? Most of his working life had been spent on WA's eastern goldfields, first as underground surveyor (1912-1917, 1919-1921) on the Sons of Gwalia mine at Leonora, a large and complex goldmine which made him knowledgeable about underground mine workings and gold metallurgy. After a catastrophic fire closed the Sons of Gwalia in 1921,<sup>30</sup> he worked for a time in the

Goldfields Water Supply section of the Public Works Department before transferring to the Mines Department to become an Inspector of Mines in Kalgoorlie in 1935, then moving to Perth when appointed Assistant State Mining Engineer in 1937.<sup>31</sup> So Foxall knew about gold mining but not asbestos mining.

This ignorance was shared with his colleagues. Asbestos minerals had been mined only intermittently in Australia and on a small scale; no crocidolite had been mined in any significant quantities. As a mine surveyor and engineer, he was most competent to assess the potential difficulties in developing underground mining of the Hamersley Range deposits; these workings presented some initial problems for the Wittenoom venture but nothing comparable to the continuing milling problems of dust control and fibre quality control. These difficulties were never overcome and Foxall would have had very little inkling of them. On marketing, too, he did not foresee that major problems were likely. So, his overly positive reports were the work of a gold mining engineer and surveyor writing beyond the limits of his professional expertise.

Perhaps Foxall was also influenced by the grand dreams and powerful personality of his host and guide Lang Hancock. Hancock's 'Mulga Downs' pastoral station was approximately 20 miles (32 km) from the gorges and, given the area's isolation and pastoral industry custom, it was the early base for official visitors to the deposits. Certainly, Foxall stayed there on both his visits and had Hancock as his guide on his second visit.<sup>32</sup> He was perhaps persuaded by Hancock's energy and determination, as well as by the scale of his mining plans and developmentalist thinking in relation to the North West. In a reminiscence, Hancock paid tribute to Foxall as the first government official to recognise the value of the Hamersley Range deposits, and recalled that the latter was subject to strong pressure 'to write down the potential as he saw it' and that he faced 'ridicule' from the Commonwealth Mineral Resources Survey.<sup>33</sup> Such responses are not surprising given Foxall's extravagant claims, particularly as they were made by a professional in a key position in the Western Australian public service.

To present Foxall as a singularly ardent developer, different from his professional colleagues, can be supported by archival evidence but is insufficient, by itself, to explain either Foxall's (mis)judgement or the Mines Department's very positive advice to government. Foxall was a senior professional in a department that was deeply imbued with developmentalist thinking. In a State where mineral resources, notably gold at that time, were essential to economic growth, export earnings, population growth and land settlement, the department overseeing the mining industry was responsible for promoting the industry's further development as much as for ordering and regulating it. While the department's job was to provide sound professional advice to government, it responded to the developmentalist goals of politicians, and shared with government the understanding that Western Australia needed new mining ventures to sustain its growth, not least in order to cast off its suppliant status as a claimant state within the federation. Foxall's promotion of a potential new crocidolite industry needs to be understood within this context.

H.G. Raggatt, director of the Mineral Resources Survey branch in the Commonwealth Department of Supply and Shipping and key adviser to the federal government on the prospective industry, took a much more cautious approach to the

subject. He advised that his branch had been endeavouring to persuade Australian asbestos-cement manufacturers to utilise crocidolite fibre in their mixes without much success but that, as the Colonial Sugar Refining Company was to be a producer of both crocidolite fibre and asbestos-cement goods, it would be in an ideal position to demonstrate the worth of such mixes.<sup>34</sup> He was pessimistic about the potential overseas market for long fibre, in 1945 because of an end-of-war glut of fibre and in 1946 because Wittenoom crocidolite prices were too high and quantities too small.<sup>35</sup> Above all, he did not believe that there was room in the industry for two crocidolite producers. In 1945 both Australian Blue Asbestos Ltd and WA Blue Asbestos Fibres Company, which held the Yampire Gorge leases, sought government support for their ventures. Raggatt believed some form of price subsidy might be necessary, even with only one mining company, if government wished to ensure the continuance of the industry.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently he suggested that perhaps a single mining company could operate successfully without government subsidy if government applied pressure on asbestos-cement manufacturers to include a set proportion of crocidolite fibre in their mixes.<sup>37</sup> Raggatt demonstrated much greater understanding of asbestos markets than did the Western Australian Mines Department and his influence probably ensured that government assistance was delayed until only one company remained in the infant industry.<sup>38</sup>

Why was Foxall's extremely optimistic view of the potential of the Hamersley Range crocidolite deposits convincing to the state government and sufficiently persuasive for the federal government to extend its support? The state government believed because it wanted to believe in mining development; but, above all, both governments had been conditioned to their responsibility to find an economic salvation for the North. , one conclusion in Foxall's 1942 report was particularly significant:

The establishment of industries in the North-West has long been a knotty problem for both State and Commonwealth Governments. They will not find an industry more ready to hand than this one.<sup>39</sup>

The Northern Australia Development Committee, a joint government committee established in 1946, strongly supported the new industry's call for government assistance. 'To settle Northern Australia special expenditure must be faced', the committee reminded the Western Australian government.<sup>40</sup> It did not need to do so, Labor Premier F.J.S. Wise declaring that his government was 'intensely interested in any proposal to assist in populating our North'.<sup>41</sup> Without recognition of the powerful discourse of northern development, it is impossible to make sense of the commitment of both levels of government to the Wittenoom venture.

### **The goal of northern development**

By the 1940s this goal was a long-standing one for Australian governments. After federation, a nation occupied a continent, and rhetoric began to frame development as an Australian duty. By the 1920s, national development encompassed a special call to 'develop the North', facilitated by the 1920 Australasian Medical Congress's conclusion that the capacity of the 'white race' to live and work in the tropics was greater than had been previously thought; indeed that a healthy, working 'white race' could permanently

occupy tropical Australia.<sup>42</sup> By the close of the 1920s, a modern public health perspective had established dominance: the health of a tropical community depended on its material circumstances and public health practices rather than on any pre-existing racial distinctiveness.<sup>43</sup>

There was new urgency in the 1930s, with an increasing sense of external threat. In 1937 W.M. Hughes told the first meeting of the National Health and Medical Research Council that 'we can only justify our claim to this great .... country by effectively occupying it. Australia must .... populate or perish'.<sup>44</sup> Even W.K. Hancock who was sceptical of the wisdom or feasibility of 'filling the vast open spaces', believed in 1930 that 'rightly or wrongly, the outside world seems inclined to judge the Australians by their success or failure in utilising this [tropical] portion of their inheritance'.<sup>45</sup> Fears of an aggressive Japan heightened awareness of Australia's vulnerability with its small population, undefended coastline and large area.<sup>46</sup> The experience of the depression had also raised Australians' sensitivity to the fragility of the country's economic prosperity, and caused many to question the adequacy of government planning and the country's economic base. Northern development discourse in its extreme form — 'Australia Unlimited' — dominated interwar Australia.<sup>47</sup> Those who questioned it were, according to Billy Hughes, 'the Knockers of Australia.... Ye of little faith'.<sup>48</sup>

There were, indeed, some challenges. One strongly critical voice was that of the geographer Griffith Taylor. In a series of texts he castigated the naivety, unrealistic expectations and failure to listen of Australian politicians who refused to recognise the disabilities in rainfall, temperature, humidity, soils, and lack of elevated land that affected much of the continent's landmass.<sup>49</sup> Although a few were convinced, Griffith Taylor's challenge mostly provoked anger and rejection.<sup>50</sup> His more geographically and environmentally-informed position was just beginning to contest the truths embedded in northern development discourse in the 1940s, but it did not displace the developmentalist vision of governments, politicians and bureaucrats.

Therefore, with war's ending, governments turned their attention again, and with even greater fervour, to developing the North. The wartime experience of Japanese aggression had sharpened awareness of northern Australia's vulnerability; furthermore, population statistics showed that, despite the many years of northern development endeavours, the population (always excluding Aboriginal people) had fallen since 1901. 'The whole of this vast area is going back', reported a Western Australian government committee appointed in 1945 to look yet again at 'measures necessary to promote the development of the North-West'.<sup>51</sup> The perceived problem of the 'empty North' was growing. Therefore, the apparent promise of Wittenoom's asbestos deposits was welcomed as a great new northern development opportunity, and this context shaped Wittenoom's history as much as did the wider asbestos industry, domestic and overseas.

### **Government assistance to a northern development project**

Before war had ended, ABA advised the Western Australian government of the need for financial assistance. The company stated its intention to establish an Australian asbestos textile industry in order to utilise its top fibre grades and to use lower grades for asbestos-



cement sheets while also developing overseas markets. Until these aims were achieved, ABA's losses 'must undoubtedly be large'; therefore it requested a five-year government guarantee against loss.<sup>52</sup> It followed this request with another; that the Western Australian government apply for import restrictions on grades 3 and 4 asbestos fibre — the grades used in the manufacture of asbestos-cement sheets — and that the use of a specified (and increasing) percentage of Australian crocidolite fibre be the condition on which import licences be granted.<sup>53</sup> While the company was unsuccessful with both these applications, they were the forerunners to substantial postwar government assistance to ABA. ABA saw the non-profitability of its new venture as temporary, the result of initial development costs. Nevertheless, the contrast between a tiny, high-cost operation in need of government protection and a booming world industry was stark and foreboding.

From the outset CSR made it clear that it expected government assistance with its initial developmental costs when it would be operating at a loss, reminding the Mines Department in 1945 of the venture's importance for northern development.

The Colonial Sugar Refining Company Ltd should not be expected to bear all the burden of a project which, in the opinion of many competent judges, is the only means of satisfactorily peopling and developing that portion of the North West of Western Australia in which our activities are located.<sup>54</sup>

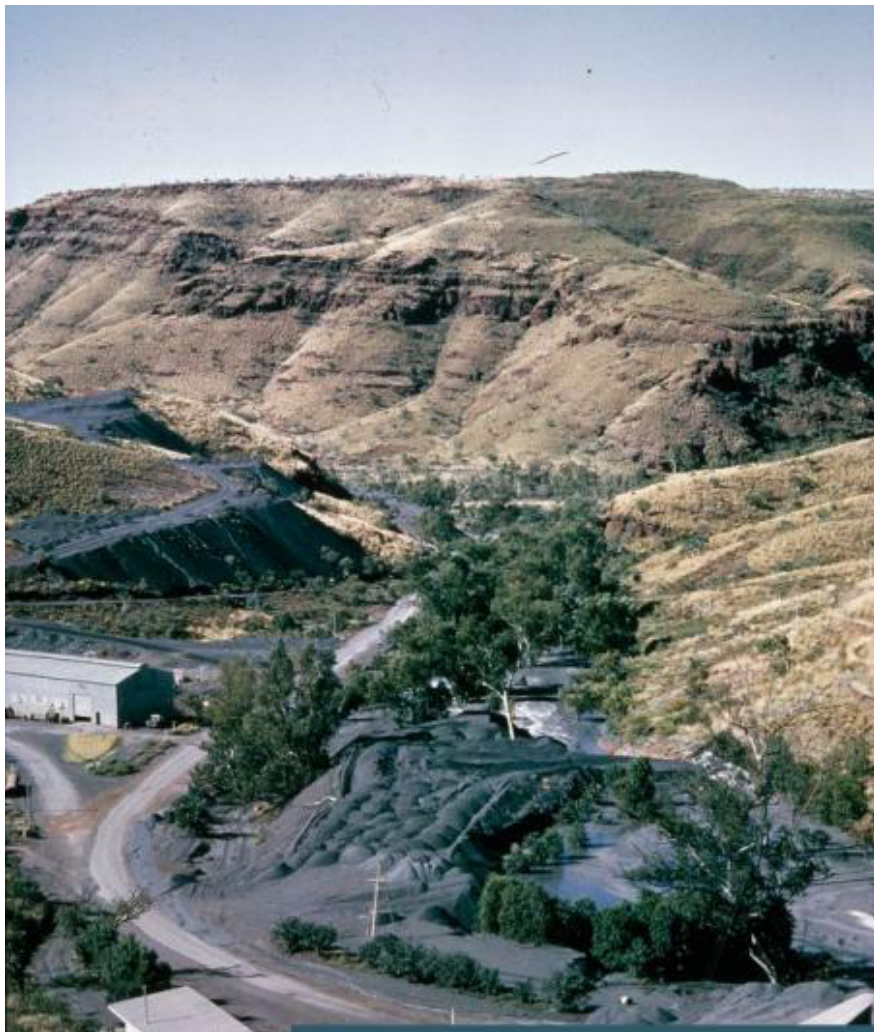
By the middle of 1946 the company had spent approximately £270,000 on the venture and anticipated a total cost of £650,000 to achieve its desired output of 6,000 short tons of fibre per year. It made its position even clearer: for the venture to continue 'a firm and binding agreement' was essential between company and governments. 'At present it would appear that failing agreement with the Governments we may have to close down completely', the State Manager of ABA advised the Mines Department.<sup>55</sup> How much was bluff and how much a realistic appraisal of balance sheets is impossible to tell; and, as government assistance was forthcoming, it was not called on to make good the threat.

Over nine months from late 1946 to mid-1947 agreement was gradually reached between company and governments on a package of assistance to the industry. The biggest government commitment was to the establishment of the town of Wittenoom to be built on the Fortescue Plain at the foot of the Hamersley Range, seven miles (11 km) from mine and mill which were inside Wittenoom Gorge. The State government planned two large new towns in the northwest to meet the needs of the industry: Wittenoom itself and a port town developed at Port Samson to which the small, declining coastal town of Roebourne would be moved. However, Port Samson did not grow because the industry did not expand and prosper as originally anticipated.<sup>56</sup> The Western Australian government agreed to establish the Wittenoom townsite, providing the necessary surveying and a number of government amenities, including water supply, police station, school and hospital. The Australian and Western Australian governments agreed to join in the provision of workers' housing under the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement that was the vehicle for postwar State Housing developments in suburban areas around Australia. A total of 153 houses by 1953 was promised. In early 1947 the cost was calculated at £1,100 a house. Shortages of building materials and very strong demand for

housing in metropolitan areas in this period of postwar reconstruction made the commitment a major one.<sup>57</sup>

The agreement also included substantial assistance directly to the industry to subsidise the high costs of transport to and from the remote area. The State government agreed to upgrade the road from Wittenoom to the coast at a cost of £45,000, and provide port storage and handling facilities at Port Samson at a cost of £8,000; to provide a concessional rate for storage of bags of fibre at the port; and a road transport subsidy of £10 per ton for fracture (explosives) from the railhead at Meekatharra, a subsidy of 50%. Both governments agreed to provide a shipping subsidy of 10 shillings per ton of fibre carried from Port Samson to Fremantle, the State Shipping Service's charge on ABA being a little more than £1-10-0 per ton, a subsidy of approximately 33%. They also agreed to a road subsidy of £1-7-0 per ton of fibre carried from Wittenoom to Port Samson, where the total cost of road haulage was a little over £4 per ton, a subsidy of approximately 33%. The subsidy also applied to goods carried back from the port to Wittenoom (excluding beer, spirits and housing materials).<sup>58</sup> Both governments agreed to share the cost of construction of a £10,000 bulk oil terminal at Port Samson.<sup>59</sup>

**Figure 3:** *View of tailings near the asbestos mine, Wittenoom*



Source: <https://www.commerce.wa.gov.au/worksafe/wittenoom-images>

In addition, the company sought from the federal government a bounty on fibre production and/or tariff duty on fibre imports because it was unable to compete with imported fibre prices. The Chifley government refused to agree but, following Raggatt's suggestion, requested that the company meet with asbestos-cement manufacturers to reach agreement on acceptance of a set percentage of crocidolite fibre in their mixes. Agreement was reached with Wunderlich which was experiencing serious fibre shortages.<sup>60</sup> James Hardie appears to have resisted any concession. As well CSR sought a monopoly of crocidolite leases in the State, a request the Western Australian government formally refused. Nevertheless, it provided a *de facto* monopoly by declaring reserved all ground outside ABA's leases.<sup>61</sup>

ABA operated profitably for only a brief period of Wittenoom's life in the second half of the 1950s. In those years of growth, government constructed another 30 State Housing Commission houses in the town.<sup>62</sup> After 1960, because of loss of overseas markets and rising costs, ABA again operated unprofitably and sought more government assistance. This time it was supplied entirely by the Western Australian government in the form of a drilling subsidy totalling almost \$250,000 in five years and an annual deferment of freight increases for asbestos fibre on the State Shipping Service from 1960 until Wittenoom's closure in 1966.<sup>63</sup> This latter concession became increasingly costly for the government. In 1966 ABA was still being charged \$7.25 per ton, a rate which had not changed since 1957 and one which represented, by 1966, a subsidy of \$11.25 per ton on transport from Port Samson to Fremantle.<sup>64</sup> In all, this freight subsidy together with others to eastern states ports to assist domestic sales cost the State government almost \$400,000.<sup>65</sup> State government support in the 1960s was orchestrated by Charles Court, Minister for the North West, his reasons no different from those of Labor Premier Wise when he agreed to assistance in the 1940s: to support the 'maintenance of a sizeable town in the North'.<sup>66</sup>

The extent of government assistance to CSR's Wittenoom venture was exceptional. No other resource development in Western Australia had received anything like this degree of support, making the State government nervous about its public reception and, no doubt, the likelihood of similar demands from others who considered they could make as strong a case as CSR. The alluring prize which government hoped to win with its investment was a substantial settled population north of the Tropic of Capricorn, an 'empty' space peopled. Liberal Premier Ross McLarty in London in 1951 spoke in expectation: 'A great company has just started recently to mine asbestos in those areas, and we are hoping to have a population of a thousand people up in that region before very long'.<sup>67</sup>

### **A modern town in the North**

From 1947 until 1966 Wittenoom was 'the blue asbestos town' and, as a substantial inland town north of the Tropic of Capricorn, it had no peer in mid-twentieth century Western Australia. Located in the remote, inland northwest, approximately 322 kms by road from the tiny coastal town of Roebourne, and 1,600 kms by road or 1,100 kms by air from Perth, its establishment and seeming permanence was a cause of pride and celebration as

a northern development success. It was presented as a place of progress, a challenge to the region's remoteness and absence of urban life. The 1951 Western Australian government tourist and publicity film *A Town is Born*, celebrated Wittenoom as a successful transplant of suburban life into the outback.<sup>68</sup> The film highlighted the twenty different nationalities comprising the predominantly migrant population, while in 1959 Frank Devine in the *West Australian* told his readers that 'the new pioneers of the North-West are the Guiseppes, Vladislaws and Willems'.<sup>69</sup>

Descriptions of a stable, law-abiding community of families serviced by urban amenities contrasted sharply with images of all-male, rough-and-ready mining camps that had usually described North West mining ventures. The town's schoolteacher in 1954 reported optimistically in the *West Australian*:

It has the foundations on which to build — a modern hospital, a well-equipped school, a flourishing library run by the Country Women's Association, essential supply stores, a new post office, a cool, clean hotel and other amenities in the shape of bi-weekly picture shows, night-tennis, a natural swimming pool (four miles from town), a sports ground and a racecourse.<sup>70</sup>

Wittenoom's image as a settled community of families in a model town centred on government's provision of urban infrastructure (housing, water supply, electricity, sewerage, school, police station, hospital, post office, aerodrome), and the company's provision of a range of amenities (shopping facilities, hotel, cinema, library, sports ground and, for a while, even market garden and chicken run).<sup>71</sup>

Here were the requirements specified by northern development committees on the advice of medical experts as essential for the permanent settlement of the North by (non-indigenous) families.<sup>72</sup> One further suggestion was added in the 1940s which indicated a widening in the bounds of ethnic acceptability: given that these new northern communities would be settled by immigrants as well as by native-born Australians, perhaps the best immigrants would be those of 'the Mediterranean nationalities'.<sup>73</sup>

CSR was therefore able to claim the mantle of northern developer, advertising that it was 'pioneering in the great North West of WA'. A Business Review of the State's development in 1958 acknowledged the company's right to the title:

Wittenoom has shown what business enterprise and a pioneering spirit can do to transform the outback, to win wealth and build permanent communities that provide a proper setting for family life.<sup>74</sup>

Government and business enterprise together presented Wittenoom as the exemplar of the postwar northwest, a place of progress created by modern, efficient resource development. Popular accounts of Wittenoom in the 1940s and 1950s insisted that a new era of large-scale industry using new technology had begun. ABA was said to use 'modern mining methods' and had built a 'modern mill' and 'modern township', all implicit contrasts with the small-scale *ad-hocery* of past northwest mining practice.<sup>75</sup> When the company opened a new mill in 1958, for instance, a spate of newspaper reports celebrated its increased size, efficiency and modernity.<sup>76</sup>

### **A failed northern development project**

Those who worked for ABA and lived at Wittenoom knew that reality did not match the rhetoric. The venture in fact had more in common with old northwest *ad hocery* than it did with the impending multinational mining boom of the 1960s. Wittenoom remained a small, high-cost venture unable to manage the dust it generated, hold its workforce (average length of employment being four months), find long-term markets for its product or maintain profitability. Nevertheless the public image of a modern, progressive industry, a harbinger of the future, was not transformed until the mid-1970s when knowledge of asbestos related disease entered the public domain and some hard truths were reported.<sup>77</sup> Such was the rhetoric of state development, the silence of the company and the power of optimism.

**Figure 4:** *Workers in Asbestos shovelling competition at Wittenoom, 1962. Timekeeper in hat on right of the photograph.*



Source: <https://www.commerce.wa.gov.au/worksafe/wittenoom-images>

It seems clear that the Wittenoom asbestos venture should never have begun. The fact that conditions of work and residence produced an industrial and environmental health disaster of international significance (Figs 3 & 4), was the responsibility of the company CSR, and it has been held to account in the courts. Responsibility for the industry's establishment, however, must be apportioned more widely. The company certainly demonstrated enthusiasm combined with lethal ignorance, overconfidence and ongoing incompetence; but governments – both state and federal – also bore their share of responsibility. Post-depression and postwar political commitment to northern development resulted in sometimes unwise support for new projects, of which Wittenoom proved the most egregious. The WA government was the more enthusiastic northern developer at a time when WA was desperate for economic growth through industrial and resource projects that would 'grow the State' out of its claimant status in the federation. It also believed that government should play an active role as developer alongside

business and sometimes even in its place, should private enterprise be unwilling to participate.<sup>78</sup> In Wittenoom's case, CSR was happy to act as long as its establishment costs were heavily subsidised; and both levels of government did so. The professional misjudgement of government mining engineer J.S. Foxall occurred in this encouraging environment and provided the catalyst which triggered the venture.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For instance, L. Layman, 'Work and workers' responses at Wittenoom', *Community Health Studies*, 7, 1, 1983, pp. 1-18. B. Hills, *Blue Murder: two thousand doomed to die—the shocking truth about Wittenoom's deadly dust*, Crow's Nest, 1989. B.K. Armstrong *et al*, 'Mortality in miners and millers of crocidolite in Western Australia', *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 45, 1, 1988, pp. 5-13; A.W. Musk *et al*, 'Wittenoom, Western Australia: A Modern Industrial Disaster', *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 21, 1992, pp. 735-47; A.W. Musk *et al*, 'The Wittenoom legacy', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 49, 2, 2019; J. McCulloch, 'The mine at Wittenoom: blue asbestos, labour and occupational disease', *Labor History*, 47, 1, 2006, pp. 1-19; A. Di Pasquale, 'Western Australia's Wittenoom Gorge Blue Asbestos Mine: 'Se l'avessimo saputo, non ci avremmo mai portato i figli'', *Italian Studies*, 66, 3, 2011, pp. 353-77; L. Layman & G. Phillips (eds), *Asbestos in Australia: From Boom to Dust*, Melbourne, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Layman & Phillips (eds), *Asbestos in Australia: From Boom to Dust*, ch. 3.

<sup>3</sup> J.S. Foxall, 'The blue asbestos deposits of the Hamersley Ranges and their economic importance', *WA Geological Survey*, Bulletin 100, Part II, Govt Printer, Perth, 1942, pp. 38-39.

<sup>4</sup> J.S. Foxall, report on visit to Hamersley Road Board Asbestos, 19 July 1938. 'Asbestos Part 1', Prime Minister's Dept A461/1 A325/1/2 Part 1, National Archive, ACT.

<sup>5</sup> WA Mines Dept AU WA S20 cons964 1938/0884; AU WA S4066 cons2782 1938/0059; AU WA S20 cons964 1938/1718, State Records Office of Western Australia [SROWA].

<sup>6</sup> WA Mines Dept AU WA S20 cons964 1938/1718; AU WA S20 cons964 1938/1758; *WA Geological Survey*, Bulletin 100, Part II & Appendices 1, 2.

<sup>7</sup> C/W Tariff Board's Report on wall and ceiling boards, 26 November 1935; *CPP*, vol.2, 1934-37, paper 215.

<sup>8</sup> Agreement L.G. Hancock, E.A.M. Wright & others with ABA, 10 April 1943. Plaintiff's Exhibit WV-03951. Motley Rice LLC legal discovery exhibits list, 25 September 2006.

<sup>9</sup> WA Mines Dept AU WA S20 cons964 1941/1254. SROWA; Harry Walker, 'The early days of "Wittenoom Gorge" May 1943 to December 1945', typescript. J. McNulty papers.

<sup>10</sup> Letter, G.T. Chippindall, Director-General, Department of War Organisation of Industry, 22 December 1942; quoted in evidence K.O. Brown, to Tariff Board Inquiry re Asbestos Fibre June 1954, p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> Evidence J.T. Adamson, James Hardie & Co., to Tariff Board Inquiry re Asbestos Fibre June 1954, p. 130.

<sup>12</sup> Letter 13 June 1944; Annexure B, James Hardie & Co. submission to Tariff Board Inquiry re Asbestos Fibre June 1954, p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> Letter 21 June 1944; Annexure B, James Hardie & Co. submission to Tariff Board Inquiry re Asbestos Fibre June 1954, p. 138.

<sup>14</sup> Letter 20 September 1942, Peter Wright to U/S for Mines, WA Mines Dept AU WA S20 cons964 1254/41. SROWA.

<sup>15</sup> For a further explanation of the state of the Australian industry and market, see L. Layman & G. Phillips (eds), *Asbestos: The Australian Story*, Monash UP, 2019, ch. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Foxall, February 1942; WA Mines Dept file 1404/41, AN350 Acc.964, SROWA.

<sup>17</sup> WA Mines Dept file 413/43.

<sup>18</sup> WA Mines Dept press handout, April 1945; file 321/43.

Memo, State Mining Engineer to Under-Secretary for Mines, 5 September 1946, file 789/45.

<sup>19</sup> Report of the Dept of Mines 1943; *Western Australia Votes & Proceedings of Parliament [WAVP]*, vol. 2, 1944, p. 31.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, *West Australian*, 26 December 1944, 17 April 1945, 6 March 1946; *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 14 March 1953; also *West Australian Mining and Commercial Review*, 10 (2) April 1945.



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- <sup>22</sup> Letter 4 July 1947, Chifley to WA premier McLarty; WA Mines Dept file 789/45.
- <sup>23</sup> *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 27 January 1937, p. 1; *West Australian*, 1 November 1940, p. 15; 26 August 1944, p. 4.
- <sup>24</sup> F.G. Forman, 'The Yampire Gorge Crocidolite Deposits, Hamersley Range, North West Division', in *Annual Report of the Geological Survey of WA, 1937*, reprinted in *Geological Survey, Bulletin No.100*, Govt Printer, Perth, 1942, Appendix 1.
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- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51-53.
- <sup>30</sup> *Leonora Miner*, 13 August 1921, 2. *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 20 January 1921, 4; 22 July 1921, p. 1.
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- <sup>32</sup> Foxall, 'Report on Hamersley Range Blue Asbestos', p. 58.
- Foxall, 'The Blue Asbestos Deposits of the Hamersley Ranges and their Economic Importance', p. 40.
- <sup>33</sup> Lang Hancock, 'Start of Blue Asbestos Industry in W.A.', *Australian Mining*, 15 March 1966, pp. 20-23.
- <sup>34</sup> Letter 22 November 1945, H.G. Raggatt to Dept of Supply & Shipping; WA Mines Dept file 789/45.
- <sup>35</sup> H.G. Raggatt, *Mineral Resources of Australia: Summary Report No.17: Asbestos*. Dept of Supply & Shipping, Canberra, 1945; WA Mines Dept file 374/46.
- <sup>36</sup> Report 6 February 1946, Raggatt to Dept of Supply & Shipping; WA Mines Dept file 789/45.
- <sup>37</sup> Memo 7 May 1946, U/S for Mines to Minister for Mines; WA Mines Dept file 789/45.
- <sup>38</sup> 'Trade - Asbestos', file 404/1/50 Part 2; A2910/1, National Archives.
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- <sup>40</sup> Letter 19 November 1946, R.J. Dumas to Northern Australia Development Committee; & Minute 23 December 1946, Dumas to U/S for Mines; WA Mines Dept file 789/45.
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- <sup>55</sup> Letter 13 August 1946, State Manager ABA to U/S for Mines; WA Mines Dept file 789/45.
- <sup>56</sup> Minute 27 July 1945, Minister for Works to Premier; WA Mines Dept file 352/45.
- <sup>57</sup> W.A. Mines Dept file 789/45.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 320/48.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 789/45.
- <sup>60</sup> Letter 18 December 1946, ABA Managing Director to Minister for Supply & Shipping, WA Mines Dept file 789/45.
- <sup>61</sup> W.A. Mines Dept file 374/46.
- <sup>62</sup> Letter 30 September 1960, ABA to Minister for North West, WA Dept of North West file 35/59.
- <sup>63</sup> W.A. Dept of North West file 59/66.
- <sup>64</sup> Minute 10 August 1966, Under-Treasurer to Treasurer; WA. Dept of North West file A21; *ibid.*, file 21/62
- <sup>65</sup> Minute 1 December 1966, Liaison Office, North West, WA Dept of North West file 'Wittenoom General'.
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- <sup>73</sup> *North-West of Western Australia. Report by Committee appointed by Government to Investigate the Measures Necessary to Promote the Development of the North-West 1945*, p. 5.
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