

NEWS

To people of the Highland town of Nairn, Ion Petrow and his family are part of what made their community tick. A successful businessman, he and his wife Helen – a doctor offering alternative remedies – have been valued members of the Nairnshire Farming Society and he was a stalwart of the local Rotary Club.

In its early years, the Nairn Book and Arts Festival benefited from sponsorship by the Nairn family firm, CJ Petrow International Ltd – described by Companies House as “agents involved in the sale of timber and building materials” and in the “wholesale of metals and metal ores”.

But unknown to festivalgoers, almost 9,000 miles away in Johannesburg, another Petrow family business – CJ Petrow & Co (Pty) Ltd – was shipping asbestos to the developing world. For as well as being a pillar of the community, Petrow is a director of one of the world’s biggest traders in the deadly mineral, estimated to cause 107,000 deaths annually.

A solicitor acting for Ion Petrow said his client was not involved in the day-to-day running of the South African business. There is no suggestion that any of the UK companies in which he has a connection has ever traded in asbestos or that CJ Petrow and Company (Pty) Ltd has undertaken any trade with the UK.

For many Scots, asbestos and its lethal effects represent a chapter from the nation’s industrial past best forgotten, when shipyard and other workers suffered painful, lingering deaths after their lungs were exposed to its deadly fibres.

Chrysotile, or white asbestos, is used for thermal insulation and fire protection in asbestos-cement, friction materials, gaskets, seals, textiles and composites. It became the last variant of the mineral to be outlawed in Britain 20 years ago and asbestos is now banned, in all its forms, in 66 countries across the developed world.

Every month thousands of tons of the substance are shipped by or on behalf of CJ Petrow & Co (Pty) Ltd from Sverdlovsk Oblast, an asbestos mining area in the Russian Urals, to the handful of developing countries that still tolerate its use.

Most of it ends up in India, the world’s second-largest consumer of asbestos behind China, where it’s used by the construction industry to make roofing sheets and as insulation for brake linings. Other shipments go to Sri Lanka, Thailand and Indonesia. India, Brazil, Russia and China account for almost 80% of the asbestos consumed globally every year.

Last month, health experts warned of “an impending public health crisis of an unprecedented scale” in countries which continue to produce and use asbestos.

A study by the Zhejiang Academy of Medical Sciences in Hangzhou, China, published in the journal JAMA Oncology, said malignant pleural mesothelioma, a rare but highly aggressive cancer linked to long-term asbestos exposure, will increase for decades to come and called for an immediate ban on its use.

Petrow, 68, whose father founded CJ Petrow & Co (Pty) Ltd as a “marketer of mineral fibres” in South Africa in 1954, has not lived in Nairn since 2016, but CJ Petrow International still operates there.

The CJ Petrow group now extends to 15 companies, employing 850 people and with offices in London, Geneva, Athens, Singapore and Tokyo, involved marketing and distribution of security equipment and electronic consumer goods, spice milling, chemical and food products and commodity trading.

A website for Singapore-based CJP International Pte Ltd lists Nairn’s CJ Petrow International as one of several “associate companies worldwide”, involved in the trade of “sawn timber, medium density fibre-board, steel products (debars, wire rod and hot and cold rolled coils and sheets) and food ingredients and spices”.

The group headquarters is a two-storey office building in Johannesburg, where CJ Petrow & Co (Pty) Ltd – listed as one of several South Africa-based companies in the group and involved in “mineral fibre trading” – is based.

Data obtained by The Sunday Times from Russia’s customs and excise service reveal that, in 2015, CJ Petrow & Co (Pty) Ltd was responsible for 741 shipments of chrysotile asbestos, totalling 65,324 tons and valued at \$38.7m (£30.8m), to India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Mexico. Between August 1 and September 28 last year, it arranged 104 shipments, totalling 3,283 tons of asbestos and worth \$1.33m destined for India, Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

PETER TURNLEY



A worker at an asbestos factory in 1994. The mineral is banned in the UK

Worldwide Cargo Logistics Solutions LLP – operating out of a virtual office in London – arranged 36 shipments of asbestos totalling 2,965 tons and valued at \$1.39m, destined for China, India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia in August and September last year.

In 2015 the company, incorporated two years earlier by two corporate entities registered in Cyprus and the British Virgin Islands, arranged for 17,727 tons worth \$9.85m to be transported in 146 shipments to China, Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Kenya.

None of the limited partnership companies responded to our inquiries. There’s no suggestion that anyone at the addresses where they are registered knew about their activities.

Despite a report by the World Health Organisation that all types of asbestos cause lung cancer, mesothelioma, cancer of the larynx and ovary, and asbestosis (fibrosis of the lungs), chrysotile is not listed as a hazardous substance by the Rotterdam convention on the prior informed consent procedure for certain hazardous chemicals and pesticides in international trade.

The UN-backed convention, effective since 2004, is a multilateral treaty promoting joint responsibilities over the importation of hazardous materials, which requires exporters to properly label, include directions on safe handling and inform purchasers of any known restrictions or bans. Signatory nations can decide whether to allow or ban the importation of materials listed in the treaty and exporting countries are obliged to make sure that producers within their jurisdiction comply.

As long ago as 2006 the convention’s chemical review committee called for chrysotile to be included in its list of “hazardous substances” that includes other variants of asbestos. Its recommendation was blocked by Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Zimbabwe, India and Syria, meaning that chrysotile can still be traded without these restrictions.

The International Chrysotile Association argues chrysotile is less dusty and more easily eliminated from the human body than other types of asbestos.

Despite being banned by the Supreme Court of India in January 2011, chrysotile continues to be used widely due to a lack of enforcement and ignorance of its lethal effects, according to Dr Abhishek Shankar, chairman of the clinical cancer committee of the Asian Pacific Organisation for Cancer Prevention.

The UK is said to possess one of the highest rates of mesothelioma in the world, a statistic attributed to the fact that the UK government banned asbestos use long after other countries did.

Asbestos is still found in buildings built or refurbished before 2000. Most mesotheliomas develop more than 35 years after first exposure, so almost all recent cases are due to exposure before 1980, when asbestos was widely used.

Phyllis Craig, chairwoman of Clydeside Action on Asbestos, said: “As Scotland’s largest charity representing many hundreds of Scottish families who have lost loved ones to an asbestos disease we are appalled to learn that a company registered here in Scotland is trading in this killer dust. This vile trade in asbestos has cost the lives of tens of thousands of British men and woman and left a legacy of generations of devastated families. To think that British-registered companies are profiting from this global epidemic of asbestos disease is an outrage.”

A solicitor acting for Ion Petrow said that CJ Petrow & Co (Pty) Ltd was a private company incorporated in 1954 in South Africa in accordance with the laws of that country. The letter said: “The Rotterdam convention defines products which are considered hazardous. Chrysotile is not referred to as a hazardous raw material in this treaty. The latest Rotterdam convention meeting was held in May this year and chrysotile is not included in the list of hazardous products.”

“None of the United Kingdom companies with which our client has a connection are in any way associated with CJ Petrow & Company (Pty) Ltd, nor do these companies trade in asbestos or any related products (including chrysotile).”

“The UK has not imported any asbestos or asbestos-related product in at least 10 years. It follows from this that the concerns of Scottish campaigners cannot and should not be linked to our client and his British registered companies which are in no way related to the concerns of the campaigners to whom you refer.”

Revealed: the Scottish links to asbestos trade

The deadly material is banned in Britain but companies registered in the UK are involved in shipping it to developing nations, says *Carlos Alba*

Other records show that on January 30 and May 15 this year, the company shipped a further 54 tons of chrysotile fibre from St Petersburg to Charleston, South Carolina, from where it was transported by sea to Mexico.

Import data reveals that in February, 2,128 tons of “chrysotile raw asbestos”, worth \$1.21m were shipped from Russia by or on behalf of CJ Petrow & Co (Pty) Ltd to the Indian ports of Nhava Sheva, near Mumbai, and Mundra.

Despite the dangers, more than a million tons of asbestos continue to be used around the world annually, according to the US Geological Survey. Russia is the largest producer, responsible for 650,000 tons, with 220,000 coming from Kazakhstan and 100,000 tons each from Brazil and China.

In 2015 almost half of the asbestos mined in Russia – 313,000 tons – was

traded by UK-registered companies, including one based in Scotland, according to Russian customs documents. That company – Astrade Solutions LP, a limited partnership registered at a virtual office in Leith – is not connected to the CJ Petrow group.

All UK-based companies listed in the documents protect their identities behind the screen of limited partnerships, businesses that, under an obscure reserved corporate law, operate without paying taxes, publishing accounts or declaring publicly who owns them. The CJ Petrow companies are not limited partnerships and Ion Petrow’s solicitor said there is nothing secretive about CJ Petrow & Co (Pty) Ltd.

Trading in asbestos is not unlawful in the UK and there is no suggestion that any of these companies are engaged in illicit activity. Nor is there any suggestion any

UK-registered company has imported asbestos into the UK.

Astrade Solutions LP, registered at Duke Street, Leith, since October 2013, was established by two offshore companies based in the Seychelles – Winton Associates Ltd and Carberry Investment Ltd – both of which are owned by Veaceslav Platon, a Moldovan businessman convicted in Moldova in March 2017 of embezzling \$42m as part of a £1bn banking fraud. Described as a general trader, Astrade had no website or phone number and there’s no public evidence of its commercial activities. In the six years since it was incorporated, it has published no annual accounts or returns.

According to Russian customs data in 2015, Astrade Solutions LP was responsible for 106 shipments of asbestos, totalling 34,636 tons and valued at \$13.6m, to Cuba and Vietnam.

Between August 1 and September 28, 2018, the company arranged seven shipments totalling 1,397 tons and valued at \$488,025, for use in Vietnam.

Over the past 17 years, the biggest trader in Russian asbestos has been Minerals Global Trading LLP, another limited partnership formerly based at an industrial estate unit in Wood Green, London. A man who answered the phone said the unit was no longer used as an address for limited partnerships. According to Companies House records, Minerals Global Trading LLP recorded a total income of £90,177 in the year to August 31, 2015 and £104,506 for the same period the following year.

Reported to control Orenburg Minerals, Russia’s biggest producer of asbestos, and Kostanai Minerals, Kazakhstan’s main

producer, it arranged the export of 263,660 tons of asbestos, worth a total of \$71.4m for use in India, Indonesia, China, Mexico, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in 2015.

The company, which declared its principal activity to be as a “trade agent for construction materials and receiving commission” was registered in July 2002 by two Panama-based companies. The same year it appointed two new corporate members, Marshall Islands-registered Primcross Inc and Formond Inc, both of which were later linked to a “mirror trading” scandal involving Deutsche Bank in which \$10bn was secretly funnelled out of Russia. In April 2015, Primcross Inc and Formond Inc applied for Minerals Global Trading LLP to be struck off. Campaigners believe the company is now trading under a different name in another country.

Another UK limited partnership,



Phyllis Craig, front, of Clydeside Action on Asbestos, said victims were appalled

“British-registered companies are profiting from this epidemic”

Vodafone rejected estate owner for £50 contract

Mark Macaskill

With an international property portfolio that includes a fairy-tale estate in the Scottish Highlands, few would consider Laurent Hild a credit risk. Yet a row broke out between the Frenchman and Vodafone, after his estate was refused a £50 monthly contract for faster broadband.

Hild’s 22,000-acre Tressady estate, near Lairg in Inverness-shire, is a popular stopover for tourists since the launch of the North Coast 500, a driving route that snakes around the Highlands. It offers several luxury holiday lodges – but guests have complained about slow internet access.

The good news, staff told Hild last month, is that Vodafone has the answer – a wireless router, the GigaCube, that transforms its 4G and 5G networks into superfast wi-fi with customers encouraged to “effortlessly upgrade” with a range of flexible contracts.

The bad news was that the estate was rejected by Vodafone’s credit control department. According to Richard Seaman, who helps Hild with the day-to-day running of Tressady estate, Vodafone staff declined to explain the decision and suggested they reapply in three months.

“Apparently, the computer said ‘no’,” said Seaman, a partner with Edinburgh

property agents Goldsmith & Co. “It’s absurd and Vodafone should be embarrassed. We offered to pay them up front but even that was not good enough. Do they honestly think we can’t afford the contract?”

In a strange twist, Vodafone pays Hild an annual fee to lease a mobile phone mast on Tressady, but as the row has escalated, the estate threatened to scrap the agreement.

In a written complaint to Nick Read, Vodafone’s chief executive, Seaman informed the telecoms giant that it was banned from the estate and would not be permitted to carry out maintenance on the mast.

Hild, chief executive of

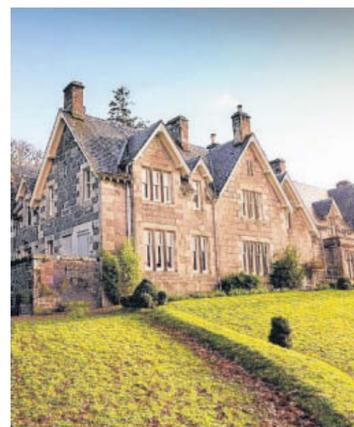
French firm Finances et Terroirs Hild, said: “We have done all we can to assist various telecoms companies that use the mast site on the estate. We have paid for our mobile phone services diligently every month since 2013 so I simply could not believe it when Vodafone would not allow us to have an additional service and pay a further £50 a month, without any explanation.”

“In France the telecoms companies value their relationships with mast site providers. This does not seem to be the case in Scotland.”

In 2016, Vodafone was handed a £4.6m fine by Ofcom for serious and sustained breaches of

consumer protection rules or mis-selling, billing blunders and poor complaints handling. Earlier this year, it was named as the broadband provider with the most complaints in Ofcom figures covering the third quarter of 2018. With 27 complaints per 100,000 customers, they were well above the industry average of 15.

On Friday, Vodafone appeared to resolve the dispute with Hild within hours of being approached by The Sunday Times. They said: “We have contacted the customer and resolved the issue which was due to administrative error. We are sending him a Vodafone GigaCube to provide him with broadband connectivity.”



Developer Laurent Hild wanted a £50-a-month wi-fi upgrade on his Tressady estate

