

Senior executive of firm supplying combustible insulation for Grenfell Tower told builders they were mistaking him for “someone who gives a damn”

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The Grenfell fire inquiry has heard more damning evidence indicting those firms who played a critical role in turning the tower block into a death trap following its 2014-2016 refurbishment.

Kingspan Facades, a firm based in Ireland, made the flammable Kooltherm-K15 foam phenolic boards used on Grenfell tower that held enable the spread of the fire over the entire building in a matter of minutes. Kooltherm-K15 was used on a minority of Grenfell Tower’s facade. The bulk of the insulation on the tower was provided by Celotex, a rival manufacturer. Kooltherm-K15 was also sold by Kingspan for use on at least 240 other tower blocks in Britain.

In response to the opinion of specialist consultant Wintech, requested by builders Bowmer & Kirkland in 2008, Kingspan technical Insulation manager Philip Heath wrote internally, “Wintech can go f*ck themselves, and if they are not careful we’ll sue the arse [off] them.”

Bowmer & Kirkland were one of several clients who doubted the suitability of Kingspan’s K15 insulation material and asked in October 2008 whether the product was safe to be used in a project using ceramic stone cladding. When Heath received a forwarded email in which the client claimed that K15 hadn’t been proven as suitable on high-rise buildings, and that Kingspan was relying solely on a single 2005 Building Research Establishment (BRE) test, Heath forwarded the email to a friend, commenting, “I think Bowmer & Kirkland... are getting me confused with someone who gives a dam [sic].”

When Bowmer & Kirkland then asked Wintech for an opinion, the latter found, “Kingspan keep repeating that the product has been tested to BS8414 and therefore is suitable for buildings over 18 metres. What they fail to say is that it is suitable for use only in the configuration as tested.”

This sparked the outburst by Heath.

The previous week, it was learned that three directors of

Kingspan sold their share options before the November 5 testimony concerning their knowledge of creating hazardous products and subsequent dishonest marketing. Since the date Kingspan stocks have declined 12 percent.

In September and October, the directors exercised their bonus schemes to purchase shares, about €76 at the time, for just 13 cents. As a result, chief executive Gene Murtagh netted £3.1 million profit, and two other executive directors, Gilbert McCarthy and Peter Wilson, made £1.8 million and £1.6 million respectively.

It was Kingspan’s disastrous record with fire tests, first heard by the inquiry a few weeks ago, that served as the background for their testimony the following week. The K15 product was altered in 2006, having passed a fire test the previous year, and the new composition was now tested for the first time in 2007. Technical project manager Ivor Meredith recorded at the time, “The phenolic was burning on its own steam and the Building Research Establishment (BRE) had to extinguish the test early because it was endangering setting fire to the laboratory.”

Meredith was criticised for being “very negative” about Kingspan products. When it failed two more fire tests in 2008, the results were kept quiet.

In December 2008, the British Board of Agrément (BBA) sought to change the certificate originally awarded to K15, specifying that the BS8414 test had been done on a “specific construction on masonry walls.” Meredith’s manager told him and a colleague to ignore the email and “let the file gather dust guys.” When asked by Kate Grange QC, “Why was Kingspan not prepared for the BBA to make it clear to the public that there were restrictions on the use of K15 over 18 metres,” Meredith replied, “Because it could limit sales.”

After the Local Authority Building Control (LABC) issued a certificate for K15 as “a material of limited combustibility,” all fire tests stopped. Meredith agreed that

the document was “very misleading,” and that he had been uncomfortable with the phenolic foam: “We were struggling to get the technology to pass, to justify our lie.”

In December 2013, the National House Building Council (NHBC) began to question the use of K15 on buildings taller than 18 metres. Meredith offered to meet with them, telling them to “hold off” contacting customers. Kingspan called in lawyers and threatened to issue an injunction.

By August 2015, struggling with stress, mental health issues and drug addiction, Meredith was sacked for falling asleep on the job and illegally driving a company car. Notes from his disciplinary meeting record him reporting, “Business put me in a very difficult position last year, it was doing my technical integrity no good.”

When fired, he stated, “I have been put in a situation where I have had to maintain performance that perhaps our products don’t deserve.” At the inquiry, he confessed he’d become “embroiled in a deliberate and calculated deceit by Kingspan.”

More contempt for human life was seen in the testimony of Celotex, the manufacturer of the majority of Grenfell’s flammable insulation, which provided the witnesses for the week from November 16-19. Much of the investigation turned on the testimony of the firm’s former product manager, Jonathan Roper. The 22-year-old recent business studies graduate had no technical knowledge yet was hired to rebrand Celotex’s FR 5000 foam board as RS5000 to compete with Kingspan.

He contacted the Building Research Establishment in November 2013 to ask them why Kingspan was able to market its K15 product even though it used different cladding systems when it was tested. After many emails he never received an answer. At the time, he said the Celotex panel “shouldn’t cause us any problems.” Although he told the inquiry he actually “didn’t know” at the time, he added, it “seemed the only logical way our competitors were selling into that market.”

This “uncertainty” stemmed from changes made in 2006. Before that date the use of combustible insulation was banned on all buildings over 18 metres. But insulation manufacturers had successfully lobbied to allow its use as part of a system that passed a BS8414 test, requiring the entire composition to be tested together. Kingspan’s K15 passed this test in 2005, but the company completely changed the composition of its products the following year, continuing to market under the same brand.

Roper soon realised that contractors “do not know enough about the fire test to challenge.” In a slide show for senior executives on November 4, 2013, he explained it was unlikely that Celotex could pass a fire test while using a realistic cladding panel, and explained that they could try to

pass the test in a similar way as Kingspan or simply back out. He asked, “Do we take the view that our product realistically shouldn’t be used behind most cladding panels because in the event of fire it would burn?”

There was a divergence of opinion.

A test was scheduled for February 2014, pairing RS5000 with a cement fiber non-combustible cladding panel. It failed spectacularly, with the panels cracking and flames surging between insulation and panels. Technical service team leader Jamie Hayes testified that he then suggested adding magnesium oxide boards to the area at the top of the rig where the temperature monitors assessing the test were located. They also reduced ventilation gaps in the cladding panels to reduce room for flames to spread. With these changes, the Celotex product finally passed.

When Roper put together another slide show for May 14, 2014 he included information about the failed test and explained the changes made for the successful second test. He was told to produce a new slide show for “general business use,” leaving out these pieces of information. Roper agreed with counsel to the Grenfell inquiry, Richard Millett QC, that this was “wrong” and “downright misleading.”

The testimony of those at the head of the companies involved in the Grenfell inferno reveals a staggering contempt for the safety and lives of people in residential buildings. It raises the question as to why Philip Heath, the Kingspan directors who sold their shares, and the heads of other Grenfell-related firms, are not under arrest and answering questions in police stations—but are instead being allowed to pontificate at a public inquiry that has no powers of prosecution and is set to last for years to come.

These are corporate criminals who insisted on falsifying tests and marketing disinformation. None of the sordid criminality revealed at the inquiry is unknown to the Metropolitan Police, who have had this information in their possession for years. There is more than enough evidence in the public domain to prosecute and jail those in corporate and political circles responsible for the deaths of 72 people.

All those fighting for justice for the victims of social murder at Grenfell must demand an end to the inquiry and the immediate arrest and prosecution of those responsible in corporate and political circles.

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