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THE PICTORIAL TIMES
22 APRIL 1843

THE EXPLOSION AT WORTHOM ABBEY
PHOTODUPLICATION
AND FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

Visit to British Museum
Newspaper Library.

Description by K. N. Jarrold
of his search for cuttings
concerning explosions at
RGP7.

and

Manuscript from:

The Pictorial Times

22 April 1843.

The Explosion at Waltham
Abbey

and four photographed illustrations

Transcribed from "The Pictorial Times",

Vol.I, pp.85-6 (22nd April 1843)

THE EXPLOSION AT WALTHAM ABBEY

The absorbing interest felt in this deplorable catastrophe, some particulars of which appeared in our late edition of last week, has spread through the country. The noise caused by the explosion was heard at the distance of thirty-five miles. The report was heard much further in a north-west direction than in any other, the wind being favourable to the transmission of sound in that direction. The quantity of gunpowder in the place at the time is supposed to have exceeded 4000 lbs. in weight, and the amount of property destroyed is estimated at nearly 12,000 l. The mills are literally a heap of ruins, as our illustration shows. It having been announced that the inquest on the bodies of the deceased would take place at ten o'clock on Saturday, a large concourse of persons had assembled at the station-house, the place fixed on for the purpose, long before the hour appointed for commencing the proceedings; and when the coroner (Mr. Lewis) and jury made their appearance, the place was crowded to excess. Mr. Jessop of Waltham Abbey, Deputy-solicitor to the Crown, was in attendance to watch the proceedings on behalf of Government. The Coroner having shortly mentioned the nature of the occasion, and the points which they would have to try, he proceeded to call various witnesses. Henry Castell, a labourer employed in the mixing-house: Knew all the deceased. The bodies which the jury had seen he believed to be their bodies. He could give no information as to their death, but heard an explosion somewhere about three o'clock on Thursday last, when he was at Pain's Island, a quarter of a mile from the building that was blown up. All the deceased answered the call at one o'clock, after which they went in the direction of the corning-house. Robert Walker, carpenter, in the storekeeper's office: Saw all the deceased alive on Thursday, at one o'clock, with the exception of Mr. Sadd. It was usual for witness to call the names over at one, and he did so himself on that day. The reason why Mr. Sadd did not answer to his name was, that he was a master workman. The whole of the men who answered to their names he saw going up the walk to the corning-house, but no further. The six men who were killed were working in No.2. corning-house. Heard the explosion about a quarter to three. Went to the spot and the (sic) saw the ruins. Sarah Adams: Lives in a cottage about 150 yards from the corning-house. About ten minutes past three saw Mr. Sadd going across the meadows to the corning-house, and saw him enter. Believes that was the hour, but she had no clock. He had scarcely got in when she heard the first report. The second blew out the window and split the door. She looked out and saw No.1. corning-house in a blaze, and directly after Mr. Finlay came down and rang the bell. That is all she knew about the occurrence. Benjamin Stroud, labourer in the powder-mills: Saw all the deceased, with the exception of Mr. Sadd, alive about ten minutes after one on Thursday. Saw them at the one o'clock call, when they went on their way to corning-house No.2., where they were employed. About three o'clock he heard an explosion. He ran out, and saw nothing but a cloud of smoke, but when it cleared away he saw the building was gone, and knew the consequences. Went to the ruins, and saw part of the body supposed to be that of James Luck. William Adams, workman in No.1. corning-house, deposed that the deceased Sadd was master workman, Essex was frame-house or calling-house man, Luck was pressman, Cole was corn-house man, Newland was superintending as foreman in the reel-house, Dudley and Brown were corn-house men, the latter doing Bratsman's duty at the corning-house. Did not recollect seeing the deceased alive that day, but they were generally employed at No.2. corning-house. Witness was himself in No.1. corning-house on Thursday afternoon, with Mr. Austin and Robert Dickson, when the first explosion took place, which shook the building he was in. Immediately he said, "That is an explosion; let us make our escape". He ran out and was followed by Mr. Austin and Robert Dickson. He looked back over his shoulder, and saw the fire coming up in torrents from the house he had left, which blew up in about a third of a minute afterwards, and he saw Mr. Austin. When about fifteen yards from the house, he turned

about and saw a board knock Mr. Austin down. In a few minutes afterwards he went to the ruins and saw the shoulders and arms of a man whom he thought to be Luck. He saw another man, whom he took to be Newland, in the reeling-house. The other five men were thrown over the river, and he did not see them. Saw Sadd about eight minutes before the explosion, when he left him going towards the corning-house, where he had previously told him he was going. Has been employed in the powder-mills thirty-seven years. Cross-examined by Mr. Jessop: Believed Sadd said he was going to meet Captain Tulloh at the corning-house. During the whole period that he had been employed there had never known but of one explosion attended with loss of life. This took place in 1811, when eight lives were lost. There was nothing unusual in the rapidity of the works. Had often worked at No.2. corning-house himself, and knew it to be an old-fashioned house with nothing modern about it. Every precaution was taken to prevent accidents. Visitors going to see the machinery had goloshes put on their feet. Sadd generally went to that place once a day, so did Captain Tulloh and Mr. Austin. The machinery was examined once or twice a week, and the cog-wheel soaped to prevent friction. Was engaged in a building where machinery had been lately erected for granulating powder on a new system. This machine was introduced at the expense of Government, and for the purpose of saving human life. It was being conducted under the superintendence of Captain Tulloh. The works were always carried on while he had been in the Ordnance employment in the same way that they were when the deceased met their deaths. They could not have worked hurriedly, for they were making rifle powder, which required a a (sic) slower process than the common description of powder. Every precaution was used to prevent accident. Visitors coming to inspect the gunpowder mills were always supplied with goloshes, which they put on their feet when they entered the building to prevent the possibility of the introduction of grit or sand. Indeed, ever since Captain Tulloh had had the superintendence, nothing could exceed the care or attention that was paid to prevent accidents. So satisfied was he with the precautions, that he (witness) should not have the slightest objection to work in the same mill, under the same management, were the works rebuilt. He was persuaded that there were fewer accidents at the Waltham Abbey powder-mills than at any mills in the country. There might have been about 1500 pounds of powder in the reel-house, 500 pounds in the corning-house, and 2000 pounds in the press-house. Mr. Thomas Austin deposed that he was superintendent of the machinery at the mills. He inspected the machinery once a month, under the direction of the commanding engineer. The last time he inspected it was on the Monday week previous to the explosion, when it was found to be in its usual working state. He heard no complaints from the men at the time, although it was their duty to shut off the machine whenever anything defective appeared in it, and to report the fact to the proper authorities. On the day of the explosion witness had gone up to the granulating mills, by the direction of Captain Tulloh, to take the dimensions for a sliding-clutch, a technical term for an instrument to throw the gear out of work when it was found to be out of order. In his opinion, there was no possibility of increasing the speed of the machinery in No.2. house, where the unfortunate occurrence took place. He (witness) had been in the service since 1807, and never knew so much care taken as while it had been under Captain Tulloh. It was impossible for the machinery to go too fast without the men immediately knowing it. Captain George St. Vincent Whitmore, commanding the Royal Engineers, deposed to the fact that a formal report was made to his office monthly of the state of the machinery, and the report he received on the 3d instant was perfectly satisfactory. This witness corroborated the evidence of Mr. Austin. Captain Alexander Thomas Tulloh, Royal Artillery, and inspector of the Royal Gunpowder Establishment at Waltham Abbey, deposed that he was in the corning-house No.2. almost the whole of the day previous to the explosion, when everything appeared to be in working order, and the men had no complaints to make to him, although he repeatedly inquired if they had any. Had made an appointment with Mr. Sadd to meet him on the very day the explosion took place, and was only prevented doing so by his being obliged to remain at home to write an official letter. Had never heard any complaint from Mr. Sadd of the men not doing enough work, and there was no reason in a government concern to do anything in a hurry, as might be

the case in a merchant's concern, where an order might require to be made up within a given time. He considered that an electric shock in passing through might have ignited the powder. Colonel James Cockburn, director of the Royal Laboratory at Woolwich, corroborated the evidence of Captain Tulloh and Captain Whitmore as to the satisfactory state of the machinery, and the precautionary measures taken to prevent accident. It was his duty to inspect the machinery and premises periodically. The Rev. John Lewis Capper, resident clergyman of Waltham, had frequently visited the powder mills, and deposed to the precautions which were taken to prevent accidents. These precautions were so excellent, that he never felt the slightest timidity in passing through the works. This closed the evidence. The coroner then briefly addressed the jury, who retired for a few minutes, and then returned with a verdict of "Accidental death," accompanied by an expression of their unanimous and decided opinion that the manufactory appears to have been conducted by Captain Tulloh, the inspector, with every possible precaution for the safety of the men employed under his superintendence. The deceased were all married men. Mr. Sadd has left a widow and one child; John Newland, a widow and eight children, most of them, however, are grown up; Edward Essex, a widow and two grown up children; James Cole, a widow and four children; James Luck, a widow and one child; John Budly, a widow and one child; Samuel Brown, a widow and two children. The interment of the bodies, with the exception of that of Mr. Sadd, which was removed to a family burial-ground at some distance, took place on Saturday afternoon, at five o'clock, in the parish churchyard. An immense number of persons assembled to witness the solemn scene, and a feeling of the deepest sorrow for the fate of the unfortunate men filled the minds of all present.

The first explosion that took place at these mills happened in the spring of the year 1801, when nine men and four horses were destroyed. The men in this case were for the most part married men, whose wives and families, we are happy to say were all pensioned off by the Government. The spot where this explosion took place was within a very few yards of the building which exploded on Thursday last. The second explosion took place in 1811, when eight men and several horses were destroyed. The families of the deceased were in this case also pensioned off by the Government. The spot where this second explosion took place lies about a quarter of a mile from Waltham Abbey, on the southern side. Some smaller explosions have taken place between 1801 and the present time, but the buildings blown up were small water-mills, containing but a very small quantity of powder, and that in an unfinished state, of that description known as green charges, so that the force was but slight compared to what it would have been in a more finished state. In none of the minor explosions were any lives lost. Horses have since been discontinued, and the works are now carried on by means of machinery.



RUINS OF THE POWDER MILLS AT WALTHAM ABBEY, SKETCHED ON THE SPOT.



THE FUNERAL IN THE CHURCHYARD OF WALTHAM ABBEY:

1843



THE FUNERAL PROCESSION TURNING POWDER-MILL LANE.

