

12 MAY 1876

**TERRIBLE GUNPOWDER EXPLOSION
NEAR LISKEARD**

Three Men Died

Royal Cornwall Gazette 20 May 1876

About eleven o'clock on Friday morning the 12th inst., an explosion of gunpowder, resulting in the death of three men occurred at the works of the East Cornwall Powder Mills Company, at Herodsfoot, about five miles from Liskeard. The company's establishment consists of between twenty and thirty houses of different sizes, all of them being detached, occupying an area of about quarter of a mile, and extending over some twelve or fourteen acres of land. They are admirably disposed along the bottom of a deep valley, being erected behind a series of mounds, either naturally or artificially formed with a number of trees between them; they are so situated in fact, as to reduce as far as possible to a minimum the consequences of an explosion, such as that which took place on Friday. These buildings have all their different uses in the manufacture of gunpowder, the principal amongst them being a breaking house, a deposit house (in which we understand the bulk of the powder is kept), three pulverising mills, a cooperage, a "corning house," in which the powder is sized, a pack house, cast house, two drying houses, and a glazing mill. These houses give employment to about thirty people, and in each department the greatest precautions are observed in order to prevent accidents. The explosion, resulting unhappily in the loss of life which we have now to record, took place in what is known as the "breaking house." Here two men named Anthony Hocking and William Leyman were employed in the process of breaking up the powder after it had undergone pressing and pulverising. This is recognised as a very dangerous occupation, and one requiring the exercise of great care and caution, as the powder is placed upon a wooden bench and broken up with a hammer or mallet, also of wood, by the men themselves. Although, therefore, the materials used are such to render friction improbable, yet it is evident that the task of breaking is one requiring not only the utmost care, but also considerable experience, as the slightest carelessness on the part of those engaged in it seriously aggravates the dangers attaching to it. At the time of the explosion there does not appear to have been a large quantity of powder in the breaking house - certainly not more than two cwt., which, we are informed is the ordinary working quantity, but the effects of the explosion of this comparatively small amount were extraordinary.

The cause of the accident is only a matter of surmise, but the most likely explanation of it is that a piece of grit or sand had got into the pressed powder, as Leyman stated after the explosion occurred that while he was breaking up the powder he suddenly saw a flash under his hammer and then lost consciousness. His comrade and he were terribly burnt, the building was blown into the air, and the two men were partly buried in the debris. The first effect of the concussion was to take off the roof of the depositing cake house in which, as we have already said, a large quantity of powder was kept, and almost immediately afterwards the burning stuff which had blown up from the breaking house fell through the open roof of this building, ignited the powder, and caused a terrible explosion which was heard for miles round. At Liskeard the windows of several of the houses were shaken, and not only was the report distinctly heard, but many people saw immense volumes of smoke rising from the valley, and it was thus known that a terrible ill-disaster had occurred some hours before any authoritative information had been obtained. At Bodmin also the news was communicated to the inhabitants in the same way. The report of the explosion was heard all over the town, and from the Beacon, where the Royal Cornwall Rangers Militia were at drill, the smoke from the valley was seen as plainly as at Liskeard. The explosion in the deposit house was so great that the building was blown clean out of the earth, foundations and all disappeared, and there is now nothing left but an immense pit surrounded by large trees which have been torn up by the roots and thrown about in every direction. The press house was the next to suffer. Here also the roof was carried away by the concussion and the burning wood and other missiles tumbling into it caused another explosion, although by no means so startling in its effect as the one which had already occurred. Unfortunately, however, a poor fellow named Joseph Jeffrey, who has been in the employ of the company for something like twenty years, here lost his life. He was in the press house at the time, and it is supposed that hearing the first explosion he rushed out to ascertain the cause of it when the powder in this building also exploded and he was knocked down. He was found a short time after outside the door of the press house by George Davey, another of the employees; his clothes nearly burnt off, and his body frightfully charred. Water was thrown over his still burning clothes, and he was removed to a place of safety, where he was able to converse for a short time, but died about two o'clock. In connection with this painful story told. A son of the deceased, having heard the explosion, was making his way towards the scene of the accident, and learned from a stranger, whom he met on the road, and asked for information as to whether any one had been injured, that his father was already dead. Hocking and Leyman lingered on, the one until four, and the other until about six o'clock., when as foreseen by the medical men who attended to them, they succumbed to the frightful injuries they received. That the fatalities should have been so few, considering the nature and extent of the explosion, is little less than a miracle, and several extraordinary escapes are recorded. When the first explosion took place Edgar Lobb and John Verran were at work in the deposit house and

hearing the report, they rushed out and were actually standing between that building and the press house when the two buildings were blown up, and although stones, burning wood, and other dangerous missiles were flying about in all directions they escaped without the slightest injury. The men working in the coopers' shop also ran out into the open when the first alarm was given, but in spite of the danger of their position they all escaped with the exception of John Henry Lobb who received rather a bad cut on the head from a falling slate. Again, at the time of the explosion Mrs. Lobb, wife of the manager, who resides about a hundred yards away from the building, was in the garden with her family and some friends. One of them was holding a child in her arms and the explosion was so great that the child was actually blown out of her arms into a bush close by. They also escaped without injury beyond a few scratches and a bruise or two. Mrs Lobb had her eye cut, but not seriously.

All the Company's buildings are more or less wrecked, the glass being smashed to atoms, doors torn down, and walls shaken. Captain Lobb's house is a perfect wreck. The windows are blown out, the doors thrown open, the roof partly gone and even the beams in the ceiling of one of the rooms on the second floor are broken in two. Chandeliers, gas pipes, and mirrors are all broken and shivered to pieces, the beds are displaced, the partitions running along the sides of the rooms are split from one end to the other, in fact the house is in a shocking state of disorder. Out of doors the same havoc has been caused, the garden and orchard being positively torn to pieces, and nearly everything destroyed

Mr. J. C. Isaac, the secretary of the Company, and Dr. Hingston, of Liskeard, hastened to the spot immediately after the explosion took place, and the latter did what he could to alleviate the sufferings of the dying men, but he saw at once that their chance of recovery was hopeless, and he truthfully prophesied that they could not live throughout the day. The Rev. Paul Bush of Duloe, and the Rev. Messrs. Symes, St Keyne; Bennet, of Liskeard, Dr. Corin, and other clergymen and gentleman of the district also hastened to the scene of the accident to render what assistance they could, and the Misses Fortescue, of Boconnoc, very kindly drove up on a similar errand.

Within the last twenty years there have been two explosions at the Herodsfoot Powder Mills. The last was between seven or eight years ago, when one man was killed.

Jeffery leaves a wife and six children, and Leeman, who it is said married the widow of the man who was killed in the former accident, a wife and two children, besides three step children. Hockin is a widower with one child.

On Saturday afternoon Mr. A. C. L. Glubb, county coroner, having first viewed the scene of the disaster, formally opened an inquiry in Herodsfoot, into the circumstances attending the deaths of the three men. No evidence was taken, the Coroner informing the jury that he did not feel justified in proceeding with the inquiry except in the presence of the Government Inspector, with whom he had already communicated. The inspector would be down in the course of a few days, and therefore he proposed to adjourn the inquest until Thursday morning next at half past eleven o'clock.

Further examination of the buildings which are still standing shew that some of them are so badly shattered and burnt as to be almost beyond repair and to require rebuilding, whilst those that are damaged to a lesser extent will take some time before they are fit again to be used.

The public have very properly been prohibited by Mr. Isaac from visiting the works excepting at a distance. After the explosion it was found that there was a great deal of unexploded powder lying about in all directions, and on Saturday the workmen were employed in collecting this, and removing it to a place of safety.

The escape of Edgar Lobb and John Verran is a marvel to everybody. They were standing between the deposit house and the press house, when the two blew up one after the other, they were not only unaffected by the concussion, which must have been terrific, but they escaped without a scratch. Poor Jeffery might also have saved his life had he been a little more active, but alarmed at the first explosion he seems to have lost his presence of mind, and he had only got as far as the door of the press house when the third explosion took place, and he was knocked down only to be picked up a short time after, burnt in the most frightful manner.

On Saturday afternoon the Coroner gave a certificate for the burial of the three men, and the funeral took place on Sunday at Lanreath. The Rev. R. Buller, at the grave made a most impressive and eloquent address. Considerably over 1,000 persons were present, and the scene on the meeting of the different friends of the deceased was very affecting and heartrending.