

On Her Majesty's Service

WASC 531



EXPLOSION AT A GOVERNMENT POWDER FACTORY.

At an early hour yesterday morning, an explosion occurred at the Government Powder Mills, at Waltham Abbey, which resulted in the death of two men named William Maynard and William Napthan, both of whom were married, and in somewhat serious injury to a third, named Albert Wilson. The morning shift entered the factory—where about 500 hands are employed—at five and, as is customary, an indiscriminate search was made amongst them for matches, but none were discovered. Napthan and Maynard proceeded to the breaking down-house, on the Mill Head Stream, where the powder meal is passed between two rollers, and by this method reduced to dust. The men changed their clothing in the shifting-room, close at hand, and then proceeded to work; the machinery in the breaking-down house, which is driven by water power, being started shortly after six o'clock. Napthan, who was the foreman, was 58 years of age, and Maynard, his assistant, was about 43, and as both of them had been employed at the factory about 18 years they were thoroughly experienced workmen. At 25 minutes to seven o'clock, after the machinery had been working only about 10 minutes, a terrific explosion occurred, the report of which was heard for quite 10 miles round. The building, which was of brick, wood, and slate, was blown high into the air. Huge pieces of machinery were hurled into the boughs of neighbouring trees, the great water wheel, which supplied the motive power, was torn up and carried some distance away, trees were cut off close to the ground, and others were entirely stripped of their bark. Major-General Noble (superintendent of the mills), Colonel Barker, Mr. Findlay (the manager), and other officers of the factory arrived on the scene a short time after they heard the report, when they found the place in flames, and the surrounding trees smouldering. The hands worked well, and by means of a good supply of water from the neighbouring canal they succeeded in preventing an extension of the fire to any of the other mills. The three buildings under one roof—the breaking-down house, the pebble-house, and the wheel-house—were completely wrecked, and for some time no trace could be found of Maynard and Napthan. Eventually, however, the body of Napthan was discovered outside the factory premises, it having been blown right across the canal and over the top of a group of tall

trees into the marshes in the Lea Valley. The search party also came upon portions of human remains which are no doubt Maynard's, though they could not be identified. A third man, named Albert Wilson, had a very narrow escape. At the time of the explosion he was changing his clothes in the shifting-house, which is protected from the breaking-down house by a solid wall of masonry about 12ft. or 15ft. in thickness. The explosion threw him from one side of the shifting-house to the other. He received a very severe shock, and was cut by falling *débris*, so that his condition is regarded as not free from danger. The great wall of masonry, interposing between Wilson and the seat of the explosion, is cracked from top to bottom, while the interior of the shifting-house—which this wall was intended to protect—is wrecked.

There were stored in the breaking-down house about 1,400lb. of small-arm powder, intended for use with the Martini-Henri rifle, an order for 5,000 barrels of which was received at the factory this year. When the explosion occurred a great portion of the 1,400lb. was in barrels in the room, and the remainder was undergoing the crushing or "breaking down" process between the rollers. This powder, which is described as more explosive than the ordinary brown powder, has not been made at the factory for about five years, and it is stated that all previous explosions at Waltham were in connection with the manipulation of this fine-grain powder. At the same time, it should be added that the place has for many years past experienced a happy immunity from catastrophes, the last explosion having occurred so long ago as 1870. This may be due to the precautions taken by the authorities, for on all hands the most particular care appears to be exercised in order to avoid danger. The powder which exploded is known as R. F. G. 2, or rifle fine grain 2. At present the officials are unable to account for the explosion. Apparently the bearings of the machinery could not have been over-heated, as it had been running only 10 minutes when the explosion occurred. Among the havoc wrought by the force of the concussion must be counted the damage done to the granulating house, which is situated about 200 yards away, all the windows of which were blown out, and the interior was damaged. All about the grounds there are traces of the explosion, large blocks of burnt and charred timber lying near the pathways at a considerable distance from the scene of the disaster. Neither did the town of Waltham Abbey, some parts of which are about a mile distant—escape. The loud report in the early morning told its own tale to the inhabitants, and the streets were quickly thronged with eager and anxious inquirers, who hurried in the direction of the mills. The women whose husbands were employed at the mills feared the worst, and there were many distressing scenes. The shutters of shops were blown down, and panes of glass and fanlights were forced out. A large plate-glass window in Colonel Noble's house, a mile distant, was smashed; several panes of glass were blown out of the windows at the Cock Hotel, and some of the inmates had narrow escapes. Heavy masonry fell in other places, and in almost every house ornaments were moved from their places. At the residence of Sir T. Fowell Buxton, two miles distant, the stable doors were blown open with a loud crash. The doors of most of the houses in the town shook for some seconds. The report of the explosion was distinctly heard at Ponder's End and Tottenham. A cloud of smoke overhung the town for some minutes after the explosion.

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