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The Yemble explosion at the  
Royal Gunpowder Works  
Singular neglect in a Government  
Establishment - Special verdict.

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The Terrible Explosion at the Royal Gunpowder Works  
Singular Neglect in a Government Establishment - Special Verdict

Waltham Cross, Saturday Evening

This afternoon Mr. Matthew Longmore, the deputy coroner for Hertfordshire, opened an inquiry at the White Hart, here, into the circumstances attending the death of Samson Woodham, aged 35, who died from the effects of an explosion which occurred at the Government Gunpowder Works on the morning of Monday last.

The first witness was

Colonel Askwith, who, upon being sworn, said: I am superintendent of the Royal Gunpowder Factory at Waltham Abbey. The deceased, and the three other men who are injured, were employed there as millmen. On Saturday last orders were given to Mr. Adams, the master-worker, that the mills - group six - were to be perfectly cleaned down for the repair of the engine and other machinery by the millmen. All the powder in the mills had been removed on Saturday, with the exception of a small quantity on which the runners rested. The proper method to extricate it is by moving the runners with a wooden handspike, having placed large pieces of hide leather to receive the runners upon, and to prevent contact with the bed. It appears, however, that this was neglected, and was the cause of the explosion. The means by which the explosion took place were, that while the deceased and the other three men were having (sic) at the handspike, the fire was caused by friction in consequence of the leathers not being placed to received (sic) the runners upon. The point of the handspike caused the sparks. At the time of the explosion the men had removed the powder from under some of the runners.

Coroner: About these leathers; why were they not used on this occasion?

Colonel Askwith: I really cannot say. It is a well known rule to all the millmen, that hide leathers should be placed to receive the runners upon.

Coroner: But they were not used, you say. How do you account for that?

Colonel Askwith: I can't account for it at all. The deceased had been employed as a millman at the factory since June, 1855, and well knew his duties. The other men had been employed as millmen for two or three years. My firm opinion is, that had the men taken the proper precautions by putting the hide leather to receive the runners, the explosion would not have taken place. I don't consider there is anything in the construction of the mill unsafe, or likely to cause an accident, with proper precautions. Five mills are destroyed, the roofs are all blown away, and the glass broken. The bed plates of four of the mills were destroyed by the explosion of the other mills in succession. (Colonel Askwith then handed in plans of the mills, showing the mode of construction, and where the explosions took place).

Other evidence having been given

The Coroner thought there could be no doubt that the neglect of the men had contributed to the cause of death. It appeared clear to him that the men ought to have been provided with the leathers, and it was also very clear that, in such a critical operation, unless the very best precautions were adopted, the works would be highly dangerous to the neighbourhood, and to the persons employed therein. If therefore, the jury should be of opinion that more careful supervision should be exercised over the men, to prevent such occurrences over the future, they had better say so by their verdict.

The jury then returned the following verdict:- "We find that the deceased met with his death from an explosion of gunpowder, at the works at Waltham Abbey, caused by not using the hide leathers provided for their use in removing the runners, and the jury would recommend that the foreman be instructed to see that the leathers are used by the men; and any other precautionary measure be adopted that the authorities may deem fit."

Colonel Askwith assured the jury that every possible precaution was adopted for carrying out the manufacture of powder at Waltham with safety, but it could not be foreseen that four men would have been so foolhardy to remove six runners without leathers, or using the ordinary precautions. He would see that leathers were provided for every runner in the establishment.

The proceedings then closed.