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TIME OFF

News

EIGHT PAGE WEEKEND PULL-OUT



THE end of Silvertown... Practically every house in London felt the force of the blast. Nine surrounding mills and factories caught fire... rows of houses were flattened.
Drawing by John Burns

The blast that rocked all London

MONDAY is the anniversary of one of the greatest disasters ever to strike London. One terrible night, on January 19, 1917, there was an enormous explosion that rocked the whole capital.

Half-a-dozen streets simply ceased to exist, half-a-million windows were shattered, the blast was heard and felt more than 100 miles away.

STRANGEST STORIES

Witnesses said the sky turned blood red: 74 people died, 1,000 were injured and 1,000 more made homeless on the night Silvertown blew up.

A fire in an East End munitions factory had touched off 40 tons of TNT and blasted a whole community from the face of the earth.

Brunner Mond's, at Crescent Wharf, Silvertown, was small by the standards of the day. Nonetheless the insatiable demand for shells and explosives for the First World War had boosted its workforce to more than 5,000, many of them young women.

The war in France must have seemed distant to them as they streamed home along Crescent Wharf, to begin the weekend break.

Checked

As the last of the workers filed through the gate and hurried away through the dark of that freezing January night, the skeleton night staff took over.

The watchman in his ground floor office checked his records, 20 people were still in the factory, ten men and ten women.

He noticed that one of them was the chief chemist, Dr. Andreas Angel, who carried his un-English name by courtesy of an Italian great grandfather.

A policeman took up his statutory post at the main

gate, stamping in the cold. The watchman checked the alarm clock on his desk.

It was 6.15 p.m.

In those war days the laws governing munitions factories were not as strict as they are now. Brunner Mond's was surrounded by houses, some almost touched the factory wall.

In those tiny back-to-back terraces people were preparing for Friday night.

Some were heading for the pub, others hurried off to see relatives nearby, some settled down to their evening meal looking forward to an evening at home.

In the watchman's office of the doomed factory the alarm clock eased away the time. It was just a shade after 6.45 p.m. when the first small, muffled explosion was heard on the top storey.

The watchman sprinted up the stairs and found to his horror that a fire was already well alight. He sprinted off again to find Dr. Angel.

Breathlessly he told the doctor what had happened.

No one on that terrible night could have been more aware of what was going to happen than Dr. Andreas Angel.

He knew only too well that the fire the watchman described was next door to the explosives store holding 40 tons of TNT.

But he kept calm. Quietly he told the watchman to evacuate the building, then picked up the telephone to call the fire brigade.

It was 6.46 p.m.

Luckily the fire station was in the same street and men were already leaping into action as Dr. Angel put the phone down.

The firemen had been living in fear of that call for years. As hardened professionals they must have known almost as well as Angel what was going to happen.

Shouted

One certainly did. Fireman Joseph Betts could see flames already leaping high above the factory roof. His wife and 12-year-old son lived in quarters behind the fire station. He shouted a warning.

"Get out of it Polly for God's sake. We're all going up in a minute."

Even as Betts and the firecrew ran into the street there were more small explosions and the roof of Brunner Mond's went up in a mass of flames.

It was 6.48 p.m.

In the factory the last stragglers were making their way out.

Dr. Angel called out to them: "Run for your lives."

But he did not run himself. Helped by the watchman, the gate policeman and a couple of others he began turning on the emergency fire hydrants.

As the firemen ran in through the gate an imploring assistant begged Angel to leave but he refused, saying: "The firemen are here. I must help them."

As Betts began running out his hose he saw Dr. Angel in the main doorway, silhouetted against a wall of flames. As he watched, Angel turned back and entered the building.

It was 6.51 p.m.

By now there was panic in the streets. People were running in all directions, some threw themselves flat in the gutter, others knelt praying or sobbing.

The factory was a mass of flames and small explosions were coming faster and faster, the flames rose higher feeding on themselves and licking ever closer to the magazine.

Betts had finished running out his hose and was half turned to see where the rest of the crew were, when it came.

At 6.52 p.m., exactly seven minutes after the first small explosion, Brunner Mond's and Crescent Wharf ceased to exist.

The place was torn out by the roots. All that remained was a crater eighty feet deep and 100 yards long.

Practically every house in London felt the force of the blast. Nine surrounding mills

and factories caught fire as burning debris showered down.

Rows of houses were flattened, boilers were hurled hundreds of yards.

Half-a-ton of machinery hurtled 200 yards and smashed into a shop killing the owner as he counted the takings. Walls half-a-mile away were blown down.

The explosion shook crowds in the West End five miles away, and was heard in Grantham 107 miles away. A broken window in King's Lynn was put down to it.

Dropped

At St. Barnabas Church Hall in West Silvertown the annual children's party was in full swing. The explosion lifted the roof and dropped it back again still in position.

More than 100 children fled to safety seconds before it finally collapsed.

For four hours after the bang the fire was fierce enough to be seen by ships in the North Sea, and over London it turned the sky blood red.

It could have been minutes or hours before fireman Bett's eyes flickered open. He had been blown 200 yards by the blast.

All around him volunteer workers were tearing at the wreckage searching for survivors. Naked men and women wandered dazed among the rubble, their clothes torn off by the explosion.

From the first muffled explosion to the final violent cataclysm it had been just seven minutes, but the loss

of life and damage were enormous.

Everything for half a mile around was almost levelled, every window within three miles was shattered, ceilings and windows were damaged up to 15 miles away.

The final bill for damages came to more than £2 million, an enormous sum for the time. New "model" houses eventually replaced the ruins and life went on again.

But people were still dying from injuries attributed to the explosion six years later.

Fireman Betts never properly recovered and retired from the fire service with a small pension and the King's Medal.

Dr. Angel became a posthumous hero for his brave fight to stem the fire, although it was six days before they could identify him, and then only by his shirt.

No one knows for sure how the fire started, but the likeliest theory is that an electrical fault caused the initial spark.

To commemorate the dead, and the miraculous escape of the children, a memorial hall was built in West Silvertown, with a roll of the dead and a foundation stone laid by Princess Mary.

The memorial hall has since been pulled down and there is now nothing to mark the spot of one of London's grimmest disasters.

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