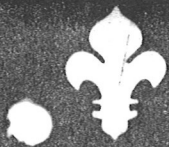
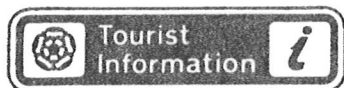


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A Faversham Society enterprise

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Your Ref.

Date 8 May 1984

Our Ref. FGI 6

Malcolm McLaren Esq
Head of Information Services
PERME
Powdermill Lane
Waltham Abbey: Essex

Dear Malcolm

THE GREAT EXPLOSION, 2 APRIL 1916

I have just typed up some reminiscences of this and you may like a copy.

What would be interesting to know would be where to find any official records or reports. Because the disaster took place in war-time there were no Press reports and indeed virtually all we know is contained in these reminiscences.

As you know, over 100 people lost their lives, so it was a disaster by any standards. Have you any idea where I could begin looking for information ?

A prompt reply would be much valued - but then you usually are prompt !

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

ARTHUR PERCIVAL MBE BA FSA
Honorary Director

Please address any reply to me at home:
22 Stone Street, Faversham, Kent ME13 8PU

Mrs Browning:

1916 - the 2nd of April - I was dishing up potatoes - my hubby was home on leave. You couldn't hold anything - it was all of a quiver - and when they went by here, it was dust - matter of fact, I had to take all my curtains down, they were so dusty - never saw anything like it in my life, never - that explosion was terrible, terrible it was - 1916, the 2nd of April.

Sidney Wilson:

I joined the Faversham Volunteer Fire Brigade soon after the outbreak of war and the commencement of Zeppelin raids. On the 2nd of April 1916 we were called to a fire at the Explosive Loading Company's factory at Uplees. There had been a fire there during the morning, but not a great deal of importance had been attached to it, but it was getting out of control and so they sent into the town for the fire brigades. Before we could get started, the first big explosion took place. We had an American-type petrol engine, horse-drawn, but on this occasion we had lashed it to the back of a Shepherd Neame's lorry, and I stood in the lorry looking over the bonnet, signalling to the fellow who was steering the engine behind.

As we passed through Oare village and came up on the Uplees road overlooking the factories a second terrific explosion occurred; and my only recollection of it really is seeing a fan of flame, the lorry momentarily pausing, and the engine coming behind cracking into it.

Eventually we got down onto the site but there wasn't much for a fire engine to do, and we were engaged chiefly in picking up whatever we could find to lead to the identification of the people killed. The Lancashire Territorials, who were in the town at the time, sent a Company down, and naval contingents came from Chatham and various places - doctors from the Isle of Thanet right the way up - and we were there till dusk damping down any small outbreaks of fire and, as I say, picking up whatever we thought would be useful, leading to identification. In the middle of the afternoon, whilst we

were there, the nitroglycerine plant blew up with a terrific blast, and in all we had a most exciting time.

When we got back to the town in the evening - at dusk - we just had time to get something to eat and then a Zeppelin alarm came and we had to go on watch then for the greater part of the night.

Miss Telfer:

We had noticed smells during the morning which told us that there was a large turf fire; and when my father went out to the Adult School he must have heard the rumour that the grass was burning all round the very high explosive sheds down at the back of Bysing Wood; almost on the marshes.

The people had known about it - I gathered afterwards that they had known about it from early in the morning and had been doing their best to save this catastrophe happening, but they were unable - it was very dry, and the thing kept creeping and creeping towards one very large TNT shed. And there, apparently was a lot outside the shed, and so when they saw that they couldn't save it the men started to work to pull away the piles of stuff there. And they got a certain amount away, but one of the first explosions was what was left outside the shed, and then of course that caused - there were two small explosions from the outside stuff and then it crept to the shed, and that burnt, and then the final and big explosion came somewhere about one o'clock.

I think I was just going on to ... walking up Newton Road to duty, to afternoon duty, and this huge ... this very loud explosion happened; and people ran out of their houses wondering what in the world had happened, and ran out and realised that something very serious had happened. And so they offered beds, blankets, mattresses, and they duly arrived during the afternoon, but I went on up to the Hospital and found everybody very busy making some arrangements because they had been rung up to say that there were a lot of men who were injured. And during the afternoon, about 3 o'clock, they began to arrive, and the stories one heard were really amazing.

One man had been blown through a window, clean through a window, and Mrs Andrews, the Surveyor's wife, spent practically the

whole afternoon taking small pieces of glass out of his face. Others we were told to do just whatever we could. We took our scissors and slit up their clothes to get them out. One man had been thrown straight into water, so you had to get him out of his very wet clothes, in which he was shivering, and one just had to do dressings. We were given more or less carte blanche to do whatever we could for them, and beds and blankets and things all seemed to have arrived, and we were just busy, oh, until quite late at night.

From Faversham Mosaic II. (recorded Summer 1966 by Dick Dadson)

(Steve Epps OBE worked first in the brickfields. He was the sole survivor of a party of 6 firemen who fought the blaze, and received the OBE in recognition of the part he played.)

... down the Guncotton, yes. My mate was there - well, he went there in the Army. He said he was earning £2.10.0 a week, and I was getting a pound or a guinea off my uncle Jim - I was driving his horse, down the Brewery. I packed up and went down there. It was in the November of 1914 I went down there, down the Guncotton.

And I was made a fireman; I was in charge of a shop - a charge-hand, and all the charge-hands were supposed to form a fire brigade. You always knew it, you wore a badge with FB on it - fire brigade.

And that Sunday, when that explosion was, 1916, I was on fire duty, and we'd been married just three weeks. When I went away that morning, it was a glorious morning. I got down there at 7.

We'd just settled down to our dinner at 12 o'clock and the fire hooter went. We had to leave our dinner and scramble up and went to the fire. And there was a big place there. There was tons and tons of TNT stacked round this thing, round this shed, all in 56 lb boxes. The stuff inside the shed was already alight. We was chucking it to one side, handing it down - it kept falling all round about you. They were slamming it around, and one old chap - he could see I was a bit nervy - he said, that won't go off unless it's detonated, old chap. I said, right, I feel safe enough.

They'd got no water supply then; we was carrying it in a chain of buckets to put the explosives out. Then we got the hoses going - we got them from the Cotton Powder Company - because this was up the ELC. And we'd just got the water on it - and up she went.

There was six of us there and they were all killed except me. I finished up in a dyke. I had a piece of wood laying on me, I was in hospital for 19 weeks. And they laid me out for dead there.

When my wife came to the hospital the first time, she didn't recognise me. My sister went to the hospital that Sunday night - and the Monday and the Tuesday and the Wednesday - and she didn't recognise me either. She thought to herself, my brother's dead. Then she realised there was one who might be me, and she told my wife that the nurses wanted her to go to the hospital to make sure. So she went up to the hospital.

Of course I'd got a broken thigh-bone, a broken jaw, and four broken ribs and I'd lost the use of my arm and hand on the side where my ribs had been broken. And my wife kept looking at me, and kept thinking 'Is it Steve, or isn't it?' because she couldn't really recognise me properly. And then at last she looked again, and she said 'Yes, that is him'. And they said to her, 'We're ever so sorry, but we haven't touched him yet, because we didn't expect him to live.'