

WASC 2390

Explosion on
January 18 1940
Memoir by
Doris Day

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by Doris Day

In Loving Memory Of A Dear Dad

Charles Frederic Purkis 1895 - 1940

(Extract From Tape Recorded 28 April 2001)

“At the time of the explosion our family lived in Walthamstow about 10 miles from the Royal Gunpowder Mills where dad worked. I was 12 years old and was at Chapel End School. On Thursday, January 18, 1940, at a quarter to 11, this terrible explosion came – we thought it was a bomb. We all ran in and got under our coats. The warden came and told us the Powder Mills had gone up. Somehow I knew the worst had happened. At home the Vicar of Waltham Abbey came to tell us that Dad had been killed. Mum fainted.

“When the funeral arrangements were made, I wasn’t allowed to go to the funeral as I was only 12. It was a very sad time – had it happened a month later it would have been my birthday, February 18th.

“There were five killed, three of them blown to pieces. The other two caught the blast, but were unrecognisable. There was another explosion in April 1940, killing another five. We tried for years to get stones on the graves; the Government showed no interest, as it wasn’t a military incident. My husband wrote to the Council but there was nothing they could do, as it was a civilian casualty. However, Mrs. Churchill organised a fund. The victims were all in unmarked graves. The graves can be seen in the town cemetery, Sewardstone Road, to the right as you enter, along at the end.

“Mum was pregnant at the time of the explosion. She lost the baby and nearly her own life. I would have had a brother 13 years younger than me. We took flowers every Sunday, walking from Chingford to Waltham Abbey. Mum got £300 compensation.”

To make arrangements to hear the complete Audio Interview, please contact the Royal Gunpowder Mills on 01992 707370.