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Explosion

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Gunpowder Explosion Shakes Houses Nearly Three Miles Away

NARROW ESCAPES OF WORKMEN AS BUILDING IS WRECKED

FLAMES SHOOT UP 200 FEET AT GOVERNMENT FACTORY

HOUSES three miles away were shaken, and people ran into the streets in alarm, yesterday, when several tons of cordite which was being dried in a building at the Government Royal Ordnance Factory, Waltham Abbey, Essex, became ignited and exploded with a deafening roar.

The explosion followed an awe-inspiring sheet of flame which shot 200 feet into the air, shattering the building and hurling fragments of brickwork and burning debris for a distance of from 50 to 100 yards.

Some 300 men were working in different departments at the time, and others who were just going off shift and coming on night duty had miraculous escapes.

People Run Into Street in Alarm

The glow from the blinding flash of flame lasted for half a minute and could be seen reflected in the sky for miles around.

The cordite was being dried in a stove, similar in shape to a kiln, about 12 feet high and 20 by 25 feet in length and breadth. There are about 40 stoves situated 200 feet apart, and around each is a high earthen mound completely encircling it and rising to a level with the top so that an explosion cannot spread outwards.

The explosion occurred at a time when the shifts were changing. About 20 men who normally would have been working near the stove were going out of the factory gate, and men replacing them on the night shift were in an out building donning special safety clothes.

Three or four minutes later and some of them would have been near the stove. An official had just been taking the temperature of the stove, and he had a marvellous escape.

Quick Measures.

Several men had also been inside the stove a few minutes before, but there was no loss of life and no-one was injured.

Swift measures were taken to prevent the spread of the fire which followed. The factory brigade were quickly on the scene and put out the fire which had broken out in the timber roof of the building in which the stove stood. Enfield brigade also sent an engine to the factory but it was not required.

Men working in other departments were shaken. A peculiarity of the explosion was that in houses some distance away the effects were felt more than in some parts of the works. Telegraph wires and cables leading to the factory were damaged.

People Leave Homes.

The shock of the explosion shook houses at Cheshunt two or three miles away and in the immediate district people left their homes in alarm when buildings vibrated. Windows were shaken in the town at Waltham Abbey, a

mile and a half away and people ran into the market square.

Ancient Waltham Abbey also was shaken and people on a new housing estate three quarters of a mile from the works felt the explosion severely.

Hospital Affected.

Waltham Abbey War Memorial Cottage Hospital was violently affected and nurses said that they saw the sky lit up. At Waltham Cross a L.N.E.R. signal box was shaken but not damaged. The factory is equipped with its own hospital and nursing staff who would have been ready to deal with any casualties.

It was variously estimated that there were between 50 and 150 tons of cordite in the stove, although one workman stated that he understood that there were only about two tons.

Waltham Abbey is one of the seven Royal Ordnance factories. It consists of powder mills and the small arms factory. This was stated to be the first explosion at these works since the war.

The other factories are at Hereford, Nottingham, Irvine, Enfield, Birtley and Woolwich, the latter being the largest.

Official Statement.

The War Office in an official statement said: "An ignition occurred in a cordite stove. This quickly developed into an explosion which shattered the building.

"Precautionary measures adopted, however, prevented communication of the resulting fire to surrounding buildings. The fire was got under control by the factory's fire brigade in a very short time. There was no loss of life and no one was injured and employment will not be interfered with."

A worker at the factory told a Press Association reporter: "I was about 200 yards from a land stove in which cordite was drying.

"Suddenly there was a terrific 'blow' which even at this distance made me duck my head to avoid the blinding light. A second later there was an ear-splitting explosion and I saw the roof of the land stove shatter. A great glow shot up to a height of 200 feet and burning pieces of debris dropped almost on top of me."

One workman told a Press Association reporter: "As the cordite blew up there was just one big flame lasting about half-a-minute. The explosion blew the brick stove to pieces."

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