

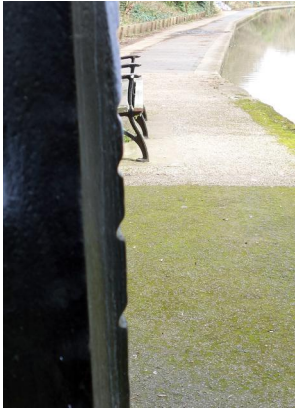
Explosives Acts

When I first was involved with explosives licensing, I was given an elderly copy of the 1875 Explosives Act. The Act was produced by a Col Majendie, a larger than life character, who became the Chief Inspector of Explosives in 1871. He was a member of several Boards of Enquiry into accidents at Waltham Abbey. The Act was produced in something of a hurry because of public concern about a large explosion in a barge on Regent's canal. This occurred in 1874 when a barge, the "Tilbury" carrying amongst other things six barrels of petroleum and five tons of gunpowder, blew up. Damage occurred to houses up to a mile away. It happened just as the barge was passing under the Macclesfield bridge near to the London Zoo. The bridge was later rebuilt using the original iron support columns.



Now, as anyone who has been on a canal boat holiday knows, the ropes that hauled the barges, when horses were used, left deep scores in bridge supports. The columns on the Macclesfield bridge were turned the other way when it was rebuilt and the rope grooves are now on the "wrong" side of the columns. They can still be seen today. Presumably the columns were reversed because the grooves caused extra wear to the tow ropes.

**One of the pillars
showing grooves,
enlargements on next
page**



Canal side



Land side

I suspect that the reason that no new grooves have been formed on the freshly exposed side, is that the change over from tow horses to motorised barges would have occurred around this time. I was surprised that such a comprehensive Act, as the 1875 Act, had come out of nowhere. Also, I was intrigued by the following requirement in the Act “No Gunpowder must be stored within two Miles of any Palace or House or Residence of Her Majesty, her Heirs and Successors”. The same clause did not appear anywhere in our own MoD Regulations. The 1875 Act lasted, with amendments, until 2014. I could not find this requirement in the 2014 Act.

I subsequently discovered that there were explosives acts in 1724, 1772 and 1860 (and possibly there were more). So, the 1875 Act had developed and grown over time rather than being pulled like a rabbit out of a hat. The 1772 Act had a slightly modified requirement about the Sovereign’s residences, as George III was on the throne. The Act in 1724 states “No gunpowder to be stored within three Miles of his Majesty’s¹ Palace at St James or within two Miles of any magazine belonging to his Majesty his Heirs and Successors”. My thought is that the obsession with the Sovereign and explosives was due to the Gun Powder Plot which had occurred in 1605. Presumably the clause about His Majesties magazines was a mistrust of commercial Gunpowder users to store their powder safely.

Also of interest, and possibly it is relevant to the two mile limit for commercial magazines, is a clause in the 1724 Act is designed to prevent quantities of Gunpowder in excess of the legally permitted maximum from being stored. It would appear that unscrupulous persons were simply partitioning rooms and treating them as separate buildings to get around the limits. Under the 1724 Act they now had to consider each separate roof as a storage area for the purpose of the quantities permitted to be held.

The above rather rewrites my preconceptions of explosives legislation in the past. The flowery language in which it is written is quite amusing but they thought carefully about safety problems and did their best to mitigate any risk.

N.B. I am the first to admit to the overuse of capital letters. But I have copied those in my quotes from the originals. So “Not Guilty” this time.

Peter Stone

1 the quote from the 1724 Act “His Majesty’s” was copied accurately. I presume that at some time we changed to "Majesties".