

The Effingham Street Gas Explosion

A gasworks explosion killed three men, and injured scores of other people near the centre of Sheffield. Thirty people were taken to hospital and four were detained, but many others had minor cuts and bruises that did not require hospital treatment.



The explosion was in a disused million-gallon petroleum tank in which town gas was once stored below ground level at the East Midland Gas Board works in Effingham Road, Sheffield. The explosion destroyed part of the works ripping off the roof and sending lumps of concrete weighing up to half a ton shooting through the air.

Offices and factories within a quarter of a mile of the explosion were damaged and hundreds of windows blown in. Sixty Cars parked in the road outside the gasworks were showered with debris and damaged.

Some were badly crushed. The police said the tank in which the explosion occurred had a concrete top 3ft thick. It had been disused and filled with water and for 14 days a contractors' work team had been drawing water from it to prepare for the storage of diesel oil.



The dead men were part of a gang of five working on the tank.

One of them, Mr Derek Copson, of Manor Approach, Rotherham, went to buy sandwiches for his workmates just before the explosion.

He returned to be told that three were dead and one was critically injured. Oxy acetylene cylinders were found near the explosion site and one of the bodies had a torch near it.

The dead men were Mr Patrick E. Sleight, aged 32, of Park Road, East Dene, Mr Cyril Kennedy, aged 65, of Newton Drive Clifton and Mr William Donaldson aged 40 of Birchwood Drive, Ravenfield, all from Rotherham. Mr. Harry Smith aged 47, of North Road. East Dene was critically ill.

After the explosion, as shaken workers from factories near by picked their way through the debris-littered streets, fleets of ambulances took the injured to hospital.



Mr Alan Sharp, of Flockton Crescent, Sheffield, was working at an engineering factory adjoining the gasworks when the explosion occurred. Mr Sharp, who had blood streaming from a head wound, said 'There was an almighty bang like a bomb going off. Then there was a shudder like an earthquake and the roof came in on us.

We all dived for cover. I looked over to the gas-works and an orange ball of fire and black smoke. The damage in the street was amazing.

About 60 parked cars were damaged by flying debris and everywhere I looked I could see broken windows and damaged buildings.

Mr David Marples, a welder of City Road, Sheffield. Said: 'Huge pieces of concrete flew through the air, some fell on parked cars and crushed them. I took cover in a doorway and, for what seemed ages, rubble rained down until the streets were thick with it.' Mr John Doran, Deputy Chairman of the East Midlands Gas Board, said: 'I can offer no explanation for the explosion at the moment but we shall carry out the fullest inquiry.'

The Inquest, 3rd May, 1974

Two decisions that should never have been made caused an explosion which killed six men, Dr Herbert Piling, Sheffield Coroner, said yesterday. The tragedy occurred in Sheffield last October at the Effingham Street gas works while a huge underground tank was being converted. Flame Cutting equipment was used on the tank, but it was not realised that it had not been completely drained of a highly inflammable liquid called petroleum flash distillate. The inquest was told that gas board officials were satisfied that all the petroleum had been drained. The tank was then filled with water ready for its conversion to a diesel storage tank.

It was decided; however, to drain the water before the work started and Flame Cutting equipment was permitted because Mr. Tom Ashton, mechanical maintenance official was satisfied it would be safe.

But Mr Alan Savage, senior maintenance engineer, said that while he considered the tank was safe, he was surprised that flame-cutting equipment had been used. He was under the impression it would not be, and thought Mr. Ashton was too. He agreed that there had been a failure of communication.

Dr Pilling said: 'it seems certain that this explosion occurred as a result of these two decisions: to empty the tank of water, and allow a means of ignition within reach of the tank. Clearly we now know with hindsight that it would have been better if these two decisions had not been taken.'

The jury returned verdicts of accidental death on

Mr Cyril Kennedy aged 65, foreman, of Newton Drive, Rotherham,

Patrick Sleight aged 32, crane driver, of Park Road, Rotherham,

Willie Donaldson aged 44, welder of Birchwood Drive Ravenfield