

The Dunvant Explosion 1902



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1902

Compressed powder

The Dunvant Explosion of November 1902 is a forgotten story from Swansea's history. It is a fearful story and its origins lie not only in carelessness and human frailty, but also in the acceptance of dangerous working practices. It is a story which can represent the long grim catalogue of industrial accidents that lies in a thick seam of horror through all of our history – boys crushed between trains, men falling into vats of molten copper or struck by flying metal. There were explosions in the Beaufort Colliery in 1867, in Hendrefoilan in 1869, in Llansamlet in 1870 and in the house of William Jenkins in Dunvant in 1902.

William Jenkins worked as a cutter at the coal face in Caerbryn Colliery, near Llandybie near Ammanford. He stayed there in lodgings and came home to Dunvant at weekends where he lived with his wife Sarah and their three children in a four- roomed cottage at Cross Roads. He was 32 and she was 33.

The explosion happened at 9.30 pm on Saturday on 8 November 1902. William had returned from work and he and Sarah were in the living room with their three year old son John, on a settle beside the fire. The other two children, Isaac nine and Mary Ann seven, were asleep upstairs.

It was an event of 'fearful violence' and the house was effectively dismantled. A large piece of the wall behind the fire was blown out and hurled several yards into the garden; internal walls collapsed and masonry was scattered everywhere - some of the bricks were over twelve yards away from the house. The external walls were forced out by six inches and the one at the back was cracked up to the slates. There was a strong smell of gunpowder everywhere.

William staggered outside but immediately realised that Sarah and the children were trapped inside. He was a mass of

DUNVANT EXPLOSION

Child Killed and Parents Injured.

HEROIC CONDUCT OF THE FATHER.

As briefly announced in our Special and later editions last night:—

The little village of Dunvant, near Swansea, was on Saturday the scene of a terrific explosion, which resulted in the death of a child and in the infliction of fearful injuries upon both its parents. The saddening details of the tale are, however, relieved by a father's devoted heroism. William Jenkins, for that is his name, is a collier, aged 35, working at Caebryn Colliery, near Tirydall, and living with his wife and three children in a four-roomed cottage, situated at the end of a lane which opens opposite the grocery shop of Mr. Jones at Dunvant. It was here that the explosion took place at 9.30 p.m. on Saturday. Exactly what happened it is difficult to say, as both the survivors are in such a critical condition that it has been impossible to question them. It is known, however, that at the time of the explosion Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins were in the living room on the ground floor with their little boy John, aged three years and seven months, who is said to have been on a settle beside the fire. The other two children, Isaac and Mary Ann, aged about nine and seven years respectively, were asleep in one of the bedrooms. It is said that one of the rules of the colliery where Mr. Jenkins worked requires the men to provide their own blasting material, and it is supposed that this may have been placed too near the fire. Whatever may have been the cause there can be no doubt that an

Explosion of Fearful Violence

occurred. The house is dismantled. A large piece of the wall behind the firegrate was

flames. Neighbours managed to extinguish the fires that were consuming his hair and legs but he broke away from them to try to smash his way through the kitchen windows with his bare fists, 'the dried blood on the sash tells how dauntlessly he laboured.' The window panes were too small so he rushed to the parlour window where he succeeded in breaking the sash, though he cut his hands badly. As he cried out in grief for his children Sarah emerged carrying John, with her clothes burning. There were several burns on the child's head, face, arms and chest.



William caught Isaac and Mary who threw themselves from the smoked-filled bedroom. Doctors were called. William's injuries were dreadful as the 'Evening Express' reported. *'It speaks volumes for the heroic fortitude of Jenkins and the*

terrible suffering under which he saved his family, that when his arms were dressed, skin and flesh peeled away to the finger tips.' Sarah took John to a neighbour's house and held him close to her in bed until he died at 4.45 a.m. The distraught parents were taken to Swansea Hospital with severe burns and, in William's case, with severe lacerations.

He was suffering considerably from shock, though Sarah's injuries were more extensive. William died from his injuries on Wednesday morning and Sarah died on Thursday afternoon. Tragically, on the day before her own death Sarah was doubly bereaved, for she gave birth prematurely to a child, who also died.

Before he died, Williams said that the explosion had been caused by 'compressed powder,' which exploded and it soon became clear that he had brought explosives home with him from the mine. Suddenly there was possible cause and effect. Perhaps he had put his box too close to the fire. Perhaps there had been a spark or a crackle. But why had he brought explosives home in a box?

It was quite simple. One of the rules of Caerbryn colliery was that the cutters should provide their own blasting material at work. It was said that in many collieries this was standard practice. Investigations showed that William and his work mate Daniel shared the cost of the explosive reels which they bought at a licenced store in Penygroes. Daniel said William had five reels left in his tin when he went home on Saturday. Normally he kept the box in an out- house at his

lodgings, taking sufficient explosive for the day when he went to work in the morning but for some reason this time he had taken it back to Dunvant. Perhaps he was keen to get back to his family and didn't want to be delayed by putting it away. Perhaps he was concerned someone might steal it if it was left in the outhouse. Who can say? He had certainly never

applied for authority to keep blasting powder of any kind in his house. Why should he?

DUNVANT EXPLOSION : INQUEST.

Storage of Explosives: No Magazine Provided.

At Dunvant on Monday Mr. F. H. Glynn Price, county coroner, held an adjourned inquiry into the circumstances of the death of the child, William John Jenkins, who, together with his parents, William and Sarah Jenkins, succumbed to injuries sustained by an explosion of powder which occurred in a cottage on the Cross-roads.—David Jenkins, said deceased was his nephew. He could not say if his brother William Jenkins was accustomed to keep explosives in his house. He had heard that at the Caerbryn Colliery, where his brother had worked, the men brought their own explosives. He could not say what explosives they used.—Dr. Perkins, Sketty, said the child, when he saw it, was lying in bed with his mother. There were several burns on the child's head and face, arms and chest. The case was hopeless from the first. Death was due to shock.—Thos. Morgan, Llandebie, the manager of the Caerbryn Colliery, at which the father worked, said the only explosives used at the colliery was a permitted explosive, viz., special bull-dog powder. This was purchased by the men. Every charge was examined by the shot-firer, so that no other explosive could be used. Some cutters would use 3lbs. of explosives per week. This explosive could be bought at a licensed store about a mile from the colliery. The explosive was marked up in reels 2in. by 1½in. diameter, and each weighed 20½lb. From his experience, he should say that much damage would result from the explosion of one reel in an open space.—Dr. Jenkins (recalled) stated that the father told Dr. Jenkins and another in his presence that it was compressed powder which exploded.—The jury returned a verdict in accordance with the medical testimony, adding that there was no evidence to show what caused the powder to explode. The following rider was added:—"That all colliery proprietors should be compelled by law to provide a magazine for each colliery where any explosive is used for the storage thereof, and that such explosives should be obtained by those using it direct from such magazine, and that an intimation to this effect be sent by the Coroner to the Home Office, and Mr. Robson, H.M. Inspector of Mines for the district."

To anyone else like the Coroner, it seemed to be completely absurd, but to miners keen to increase their productivity by buying explosives as an alternative to hacking away at the coal face with pick and shovel, it seemed a convenient way of boosting earnings. But it also meant that miners were often carrying gunpowder around with them through the streets.

Thomas Morgan, the manager of the Caerbryn Colliery, confirmed that there was only one type of explosive permitted which the

miners could buy for themselves at a licensed store about a mile from the colliery. Every charge was examined by the shotfirer, ensuring no other explosive material could be used. In the world in which he lived this seemed entirely reasonable behaviour.

It was not a view that was widely shared. The Coroner said the tragedy happened because William had stupidly taken gunpowder home instead of leaving it in the outhouse but it was a ridiculous system for miners to buy their own explosives. It was a most dangerous practice and he felt obliged to bring it to the notice of the Home Office. The jury returned verdicts of Accidental death and strongly condemned the practice of keeping explosives in or near dwellings, adding a recommendation.

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Mock health and safety if you will, but this was sensible, obvious – and too late.

This piece first appeared in my book *A-Z of Swansea*, a story for every letter of the alphabet. It is still available from book shops and on-line retailers.

Go to my website for more information about my other titles – both fiction and non-fiction - and to check on availability.

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