

Account of the inquest and verdict of the jury regarding an explosion at Sedgwick Gunpowder Works transcribed from the Westmorland Gazette 21 April 1883

THE FATAL EXPLOSION AT SEDGWICK
INQUEST AND VERDICT OF THE JURY

The inquest on the bodies of the unfortunate men who lost their lives in the explosion at the New Sedgwick Gunpowder Works on Thursday last, formally opened by Mr S W Watson on Friday, was continued on Tuesday. The jury comprised Messrs. John Howson, foreman, William Chamley, William Dalton, Thomas Park, Thomas Gibson, John Bowness Hayton, James Wright, William Major, Joseph Robinson, Miles Moorhouse, William Varley and Francis James Willacy. At the start of the enquiry on Friday the deaths, which had occurred, were those of James Wilson Shepherd, aged 16, and Henry Cheeseman, 17, and the evidence was to establish identification.

James Shepherd of Force Cottages, Levens, stonemason, said he was the father of James Wilson Shepherd, who lived with me. He was sixteen years of age last August. He had been employed as a cartridge filler at the works of the New Sedgwick Gunpowder Company for about 4 months, so far as I can recollect. I last saw him before his injuries were sustained about half past five in the morning of the 12th instant. He died the same day about half past five in the afternoon. In answer to the Foreman of the jury, my son found no fault with anyone I know of.

Henry Cheeseman of Sedgwick, powder maker, said. I identify the body of Henry Cheeseman now lying at the cottage of the New Sedgwick Gunpowder Company Limited. He is my son and lived with me. He was seventeen years of age in November last. He has followed the occupation as a cartridge filler at the Company for almost two years. I last saw him before he sustained his injuries, which caused his death about eight o'clock in the morning of the 12th instant. I next saw him immediately after the explosion at the works. He died about seven o'clock in the evening on the same day. He was conscious for some hours after the incident and up to the moment of death. I asked him what he was doing when the explosion occurred and he replied, "Sweeping up". He did not attach blame to anyone. He said that all three of them – that is himself, Arthur Cheeseman and Shepherd – were in the building at the time.

By the Foreman; All three were wearing the slippers and clothes

required by the regulations. I helped to cut them off him. I never heard my son make any complaint about the danger of his employment or exercise. I used to go once a day to see how they were getting on in the cartridge building.

The inquest was then adjourned to the next Tuesday at 10.30 but the death of the third victim, Arthur Cheeseman, having taken place, formal evidence of identification to enable the coroner to authorise burial was taken on Saturday as follows; -

Joseph Cheeseman of The Cottage, Sedgwick, sawyer, said,, I identify the body of the above named Arthur Cheeseman as that of my brother. He was twenty-four years of age and was employed by the New Sedgwick Gunpowder Company as a powder maker. He has been so employed about four years. I last saw him alive before he sustained the injuries resulting in his death on Wednesday last. I next saw him on Tuesday, the 12th, immediately after the explosion. He died from the injuries so received at seven o'clock this morning. I was not able to obtain any information from him as to the cause of the explosion. I have been employed on the Company's works a good many years. By the Foreman; -My brother was foreman of the cartridge factory, where the explosion occurred. I think it would be his duty to see to the oiling and cleaning of the machinery. I am not aware that there was any neglect on the part of the deceased, in that respect, and as far as I know the machinery was in proper working order. I never heard deceased complain of any risk or danger attached to his branch of the work. At the adjourned inquest on Tuesday morning the enquiry was continued in the presence of Colonel Ford, R.A., one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Explosives. Evidence was taken as follows; -

Robert Toulmin Leeming, of Kendal, surgeon, said, About noon on the 12th inst. I was professionally engaged about a mile away from the New Sedgwick Gunpowder Company's works and heard the explosion. I was on the works very shortly afterwards. I then saw Arthur and Henry Cheeseman, two of the deceased. I first examined Arthur. He was much burnt, his right thumb blown off, and his hand lacerated. The skull was driven in along a straight line along the forehead, and the brain protruded along that line. He was conscious. He told me that he did not know how it had happened. The injuries were such as would be caused by an explosion of gunpowder. I have this morning had my attention drawn by Colonel Ford to the building and to a table amongst the debris. The table is partially broken, and showed traces of blood along the edge of it. I am of opinion that the wound across Arthur Cheeseman's forehead was caused by coming violently in contact with this table. This wound was sufficient to cause his death in conjunction with his other

injuries. I next saw Henry Cheeseman. He was very much burnt all over his body, but there were no fractures. I next saw Shepherd. His burns were very extensive, and he had sustained three wounds on head but no fracture of the skull. Everything was done for all the deceased which medical and surgical aid could do. I attended all of them up to their deaths. I conversed with Henry Cheeseman, but he could not give any information as to the cause of the explosion. Shepherd remained unconscious until his death.

By Colonel Ford: The explosion sounded as one explosion. In my opinion Arthur Cheeseman must have been standing at the moment of the explosion facing the table.

James Cheeseman, of Sedgwick, cartridge filler, said: I live at Wilsons Cottages, Sedgwick, and was fifteen years of age last July. I have worked for the New Sedgwick Gunpowder Company in the cartridge factory for six months. I was so engaged on Thursday the 12th inst. I was in that building at a quarter to twelve. At that time Henry Cheeseman was standing on the far side of the table in the left hand corner of the building as you entered the doorway, labelling cartridges. Arthur Cheeseman was standing beside the press on the left hand or south side facing the table, his left side being nearest the press, filling one of the mould boxes. Shepherd was standing near Henry close to the table, glueing the labels. I had been in the building from half-past eight that morning. We all had on the slippers and clothing required by the rules. We had all attended properly to our work all of the morning. At a quarter to twelve I went out with cartridges to the stove, which is at a distant part of the works. I took six quarters of compressed cartridges, weighing in all 150 pounds. I returned straight back to the cartridge building but did not go inside. I saw the three deceased again. Arthur was standing close to the left hand side of the press facing me. I was standing on the tramway facing the door. Henry was then on the platform loading my lurry. Shepherd was beside the table with his back to it sweeping the floor and facing the north end. The press was stopped. Arthur was just turning the handle to set the press going as I left with the lurry containing paper cartridges. I took five hundred six ounce paper cartridges and was on my way to the packing shop. The explosion happened just as I had reached half way between the dust house and the packing shop. It sounded to me like two explosions. There was about 1¼ cwt. of powder in the building when it exploded.

By Colonel Ford: When I heard two explosions the last was the louder. I could see the press from where I stood when opposite the doorway.

Three press boxes were in the press. I was at work at the press myself all the morning. The three broken cartridge boxes produced were in use in the press that morning; also the portions of broken moulds which I identify. They would belong to one or the other of the boxes produced. The other twelve moulds produced also belonged to one or the other of the two boxes produced. The cartridge box, one and three-quarter inches, was only used between the top plates of the press.

By the Foreman: James Shaw generally removed the cartridges to the stove. Arthur Cheeseman ordered me to take the ones above referred to. Shaw was in the dust house. Occasionally I did that part of Shaw's work. Shaw had taken fifteen quarters that morning, and this was the first lot I had taken that day. Arthur Cheeseman was my uncle and was foremen of the building, and when Shaw was not at liberty he sent me.

James Lewis, of Sedgwick, engineer, said: I am chief engineer to the New Sedgwick Gunpowder Company, and have acted as engineer there eight years. My duties in connection with the cartridge building are to see to the pumps that work the hydraulic press; and generally to the building. I have had such charge ever since the company commenced to manufacture cartridges. I was in the building on the morning of the 12th before 8 a.m. It was not then working. I mean that the pumps were working, but not the press as they were filling paper cartridges. I remained in the building about three minutes. I looked over the press and machinery. All was in perfect working order. I looked in again a little before 11 a.m. I stood at the doorway. They were then pressing. I stayed about five minutes and saw them complete a press of cartridges. Arthur Cheeseman was working the press. Henry and Shepherd were filling paper cartridges. All appeared to be then in perfectly good working order. From what I have seen of the three deceased, I had every confidence in them as careful, steady, reliable hands. I was in the workshop at the time of the explosion (some 200 yards away). It did not sound to me as a double explosion. I have not been able to form any conclusion as to the cause or origin of the explosion.

By the Foreman: At eleven o'clock I saw Arthur and James Cheeseman and heard Shepherd and Henry talking. On the first occasion I am not quite sure whether all four were in the building.

Samuel McGowan, of Natland, Sedgwick, mechanic, said: I have been employed by the New Sedgwick Gunpowder Company for seven years, and take charge of all alterations or repairs in the buildings where there is machinery. I had to see to the cartridge boxes and machinery when repairs were required in the cartridge factory and to work in conjunction

with Lewis. I had not been in the building for eight days. It was entirely under the control of the engineer and powder foreman, under the rule which I produce. On the occasion when I was last in, it was in the absence of the manager who had directed me to inspect the building in his absence. I was in for about a quarter of an hour. The press was at work. I reported the result of such inspection to Mr. Parker at the office, and that all was in proper working order. I have on several occasions since been at the doorway and looked in. I was there on the 11th. Everything seemed to be then right.

By Colonel Ford: I perfectly understand the working of the press. I have not been able to form any opinion as to how the explosion originated. I was about 300 yards away at the time of the explosion. The report seemed to me as of a double explosion – the last being the louder. There was a distinct moment of time between the two reports, which made me think that two buildings had gone.

By the Foreman: I made the cartridge boxes produced; they are made from the best materials known for the purpose.

Arthur[...]Ford, [...]Colonel Royal Artillery, Her Majesty's Inspector under the Explosives Act 1875, said: I have made a partial enquiry into the circumstances and origin of the explosion in question (with a view to report to Her Majesty's Secretary of State), assisted by Mr Swinglehurst, managing director. I have made a very careful examination of the building in which the explosion occurred and put together the pieces of cartridge boxes and moulds which were collected from among the debris. I have also taken such evidence as appeared to me to be necessary from the people employed at the works. The results of such investigations lead me to the following conclusions; - [1] That the explosion originated in the press and immediately extended to the remainder of the powder in the building. [2] The first explosion was doubtless in the cartridge box produced, which was in the middle third of the press, three boxes altogether being in the press. [3] That at the time of the explosion Arthur Cheeseman, having turned on the water to the press, was in the act of carrying one or more cartridges from a previous charge to the tray in which they were to be deposited in the south-west corner of the building. I am led to this conclusion because (1st) he lost his thumb by the cartridge exploding in his hand, (2nd) that he had his back to the press as he was walking away from it, as otherwise he would not have received the injury spoken to by Dr. Leeming, from the table which was standing at the west side of the

building. [4] Judging from the position in which the bodies of the two younger men were found, and the fact that there was about 170lbs of powder in or near the north east corner of the building at the time, these boys were probably continuing their sweeping up at the time the accident happened. At any rate they were not near to the table where they ordinarily filled the paper cartridges.

By the Foreman; As far as I can see, there is no fault in the machinery and utensils employed. These accidents no doubt lead to scientific modifications and improvements from time to time, but I do not at present see my way to suggest any alterations in that now used. It would certainly be desirable to separate the work of filling paper cartridges from that of pressing, as the operation of pressing carries with it an additional risk for those employed in filling.

William Cartmell, of Newlands, near Sedgwick, manager of the Company said; - I produce the license for the cartridge factory. It entitles us to have in that building 2,000lbs of powder, but we limited ourselves to 800lbs. The license also authorises the employment therein of four hands. Four were so employed. They were all careful, steady, trustworthy hands. There would be almost 170lbs of powder in the building at the time of the explosion. I was in the watch house at the time. The report also seemed to me as of a double explosion as described by witness Gowan.

The Jury unanimously found verdicts of accidental death, and desired to express their satisfaction at the expressed intention of the managing director to provide a separate department for the filling of paper cartridges.

The bodies of Arthur Cheeseman and his nephew, Henry Cheeseman, were interred at Crosscrake Church, on Sunday afternoon, when there was a very large attendance of mourners, and great sympathy was shown by people living in the district and the men engaged at the gunpowder works. Many proceeded from Kendal and the surrounding neighbourhood to witness the funeral, and the church was unable to accommodate the vast assemblage that gathered there. The weather was very cold and inclement during the afternoon. The beautiful burial service of the Church of England was read by the Rev. E. Bannerman, vicar. The other youth, James Wilson Shepherd, mortally injured by the explosion, was carried to Orton for interment, his father, Mr James Shepherd, having formerly belonged to that place.