

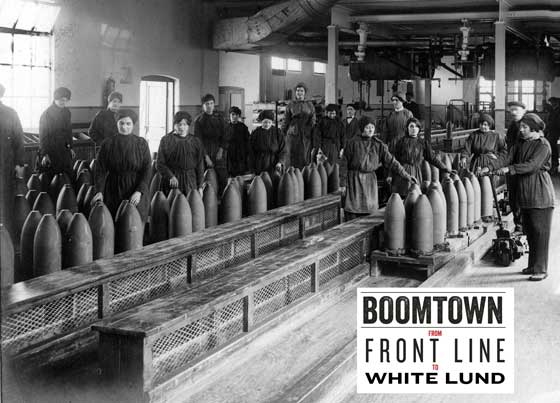
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* **Working at the Factory**
  + Image: Workers at the National Filling Factory, White Lund
  + Isabelle Clarke
  + Image: The King, George V, and Queen Mary visit the Factory, 19 May 1917
  + *Lancaster Guardian,* The Royal Visit (19 May, 1917)
* **The Explosion**
  + Timeline
  + Olive May Taylor
  + Anne (‘Nan’) Spencer
  + Mr K1L, Skerton
  + Thomas Kew
  + Newspaper Reports
  + Skerton Council School Logbook (transcription)
  + Inquest
  + In Memoriam, James Inglesant
  + G. Pedder

**Working in the Factory**



**Workers at the National Filling Factory, White Lund.**

*At its peak in September 1917 there were 4621 employees of whom 64.4% were women, responsible for all the actual filling operations. The total quantity of shells filled up to 1st October 1917 when the factory was destroyed was 2,894,419.*

**Isabella Clarke**

Transcribed from the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive 774 recorded 1976.

*[Grew up in Belfast; came to England via the Labour Exchange, wanting to go in munitions, although she was probably not yet 16.]*

… although we lived in Morecambe we had buses, they wouldn’t be buses in them days but it was something simpler, to take us to the factory because it was secret service work. It was a place called White Lund. […]And this was filling 9.2 gas shells, a munitions factory, it was gas shells, and they started us first on stemming the shells which was - there was a certain amount of powder measured out for you and you had to start on the shell from the bottom to the top and the stem was just like a handle of a brush and of course you had a wooden mallet and then you had to start and hammer from the bottom to the top and you had to get it all in and if you didn’t there was so much left over, but you had to get it all [done?]. Well then I was promoted from stemming the shells to a press operator and of course we weren’t allowed to wear any of our clothes, you had to strip out - for fear of , if you had linen buttons on with tin inside you see and they could have caused an explosion, you had to strip out, we were also supplied with cocoa going on duty and coming off duty and we had our own surgery and doctor, and our feet never t’.. we were supplied with rubber shoes, slippers rather, pumps really and, there were all platforms from the entrance to the factory to the department wherever we worked, your feet never touched the ground, and of course there were soldiers on guard all the way round. Well…

…I was on days as I was too young at the time, I was just 16, and I was too young at the time really to go on nights, I was only allowed day shifts, well my friend, we always had to, if the nurse met us at any time, we were examined, they could always tell by the colour of our eyes if the gas was affecting us in any way. And unfortunately, my friend, we were coming home for our Easter holidays, and my friend was stopped and they noticed that both her eyes and mine, the whites of our eyes was discoloured a little bit but hers was badly, and the Larches was over the road and course the doctor had come over and I come home as usual on me Easter holidays, and then they come and informed me that she had died because very little could stop the gas once it got into your inside, I mean it did affect you. I mean, your hair didn’t go yellow, but as you went to bed as you put your head to the pillow, the pillow slip was pink and er I was fortunate, my friend and I, she was a mother to a sailor??/us later?? and naturally the fish was very fresh, my friend freezed us herring which she cooked for us, and I was a bit greedy and I ate mine and hers with it and it made me sick and she told me that it was the herring, being bilious after the herring that is was that that saved me because I’d had a decent amount. We should have gone to be examined but we never bothered going.

Why did you decide to come and do such a dangerous job?

For the money. Because there wasn’t much of a chance in Belfast to get a decent job. So it was for the money. [My mother was left a widow with the three of us and she only had half a crown from the church for all of us]

… Did you wear a special uniform? And equipment?

Yes, we had to wear pumps, and you had to take all your clothes off [tells story of linen buttons again with tin inside] so you had to wear, same as that, [pointing to something] the sailor’s uniform and only their hats and you had cocoa about three times a day but they reckoned there was something in it for killing the gas.

What about the standard of the factory in which you worked, was it a good new factory, well ventilated?

Well, the factory was built purposely- now nobody ever seen the shells even the people that lived round about but nobody ever seen them coming in or going out, they had their own railway and as they came out of the shop they went down to the wagon, belonged to the railways and were taken out, but nobody ever seen them shells either coming in or going out, they had it organised that way.

What was your attitude towards doing such dangerous work?

I was innocent, I didn’t realise the danger of it, it was as I tell you before, it was just the money I was interested in and I was delighted with the money that I could send home.

Was there a doctor in attendance?

Oh yes, and there was the police place as well, by the gates.

Can I ask you to give a precise description of what you did in both the jobs at White Lund?

Well I went stemming first, that’s putting the powder in the shells first, the 9.2 shells, and after that I was promoted, I was promoted onto a job in the explosion room and there used to be little trap doors and the shells were on a little bogey, and the shells would come through this trap door and you would put the lever on to stop it and you had to go out on the corridor and there was sort of a machine like a compass and you had to work it up to a certain time on the clock and that made room in the shell for the explosion bag to fit in and then you had to turn it back, and when you turned it back then automatically the trap doors went up and you kicked it, you had to release the bogey where the shell stood on, and you had to kick it back to the inspection room and there was an inspector there and they took a gauge and gauged it to see if it was correct and that’s when they’d put the explosion bag into the shell. And they tapped it after that.

Did you enjoy your war work?

Yes, it was a very happy time. And I mean, well everything was very happy, the atmosphere in work and the people you worked with. There was never no strikes, no trouble at any time and if you wanted to know anything, the men [were there] to help you. …

**The King, George V, and Queen Mary visit the Factory, 19 May 1917**



*Lancaster Guardian,* 19 May, 1917 –  
  
**The Royal Visit  -  King and Queen At Lancaster    
Inspection of Munition Works  -  Enthusiastic Receptions**

The executive buildings of this factory cover a floor area of one million square feet, the total area with the boundaries being 400 acres. There are quite 150 buildings, many of them large and substantial, yet the work of filling the shells was in full operation within seven months after possession of the site was obtained. Messrs Vickers were responsible for the planning of the factory, which, both in its equipment and in the care taken of the health of the workers, stands as a model for all similar undertakings. The buildings are arranged in sequence, so that the material enters at one and passes from building to building, through mechanical conveyors, never coming into the open air, and arrives at the further end of the series a complete shell, ready for the Front.  
  
Manifestations of loyalty were begun at the gates, by hosts of girls, clad in blue or khaki overalls, who thronged every avenue and open space, and rushed from one coign of vantage to another, as the Royal party passed along. Their enthusiastic cheering was augmented by syrens of locomotives, and here and there groups of girls spontaneously sang stanzas of the National Anthem. “Are we downhearted?” queried one khaki clad maiden, the reply coming in a vociferous “No” from a hundred voices, followed by renewed cheering. The King and Queen, passing through the series of buildings, saw the powder dried, crushed, and rammed into the shell by the little, active girls, inspected the final application of hydraulic power in the explosive-proof rooms, and witnessed also the stencilling on the completed shell, which seems to have a literature of its own in explaining its contents to the gunners at the Front. The painting department is an enormous building, and their Majesties were much impressed with the immense rate at which the shells were painted. One girl made a record by painting 54 in one hour, this being partly due to the cleverness of the operator and partly to the form of brush used. Attention was drawn to two accessories, the Ambulance Room and the Laundry. In the latter the uniforms of the workers are twice weekly washed, pressed and subjected to fire-resisting mechanical treatment. There are, of course, extensive canteens for men and women; and their Majesties were struck with another phase of the situation. The spaces between all the buildings is being farmed, under a market garden system, for the supply of food material for the district, a total area of 100 acres being thus brought under cultivation.

**EXPLOSION**

Timeline (With thanks to Christine Workman)

**Monday 1st October 1917**  
  
Around 6.00 pm  
Nightshift begins for around 2000 workers.

6.40 pm  
Works firemen completed their regular fire drill.  
  
9 – 9.40 pm  
12” shells filled with TNT mix in Unit 6C. Other shells filled in other units.  
  
10.00 pm  
Supper break.  
  
Around 10.15 pm  
Fire noticed by various eye witnesses - “flames issuing from the roof of No. 6 Stemming House”  
Sprinklers turned on, on runways, and firemen and workers start to tackle the fire.  
  
Workers rushed to Main Gate which, at this stage, is closed.  
  
Change houses opened for workers to escape the danger zone.  
  
Car sent for Mr Stokes, General Manager. Gates opened, workers rushed out.  
  
Cannot contact Lancaster Fire Brigade by phone – the lines are dead.  
  
Around 10.30 pm  
Large explosion heard as far away as Nelson. Multiple small fires developed. Shells exploding.   
  
Site electricity failed – including the electric water pump. Only light is moonlight and that provided by fires.  
  
Petrol powered water pump still working and valve is opened to access Lancaster’s town water supply.  
  
10.45 pm  
Car sent to contact Lancaster Fire Brigade.  
  
Explosions continue throughout the night. Chief Constable in Blackpool records hearing and feeling a violent explosion and contacting Lancaster Police to offer support from Fire and Ambulance staff.  
  
Thomas Kew and Abraham Graham moved railway wagons filled with shells out of the danger zone.  
  
By 11.00 pm  
Lancaster and Morecambe Fire Brigades arrived on or near site. Morecambe’s engine was horse drawn. Seeing the horses were at risk of injury and were frightened by the explosions, the Chief Officer of Morecambe withdrew from the site around 2.00 am to take guard of the town in case of need. At this point White Lund was no place for horses.  
  
11.10 pm  
Firemen, police and workers at Main Gate ordered to take cover – many stayed under the railway bridge. Site too dangerous. Power House workers remain in place.

**Tuesday 2nd October 1917**  
  
2.25 am  
Blackpool’s St John’s Ambulance Association ambulance arrived – having set off from Blackpool at 1.10am.  
  
2.45 am  
William Disberry, Pump Manager, blown through window by explosion.  
  
3.00 am  
Another huge explosion, heard as far away as Burnley.   
  
3.45 am  
The Blackpool ambulance took badly injured workman, William Topping, off the site where he had been cared for in dangerous conditions by Nurse Cope. After this the ambulance was asked to ferry women workers back to their homes/digs in Morecambe.  
  
4.15 am  
Car sent to Lancaster to get railway locomotives to remove wagons of filled shells from site. Two locomotives came, but could not reach wagons.  
  
6.00 am  
Most of the original workers/fire fighters/police relieved.  
  
Dawn  
Preston Fire Brigade arrives and works with Lancaster Fire Brigade flooding the magazines. Low water pressure in main pipe. Firemen fear a broken main pipe.  
  
Rumour of further massive explosions prevents locals returning home.  
  
  
Morning  
Vickers staff arrive. Workers paid off and many leave for home swiftly – sometimes without telling anyone. Many were later moved to other filling factories, including Hereford.  
  
2.40 pm  
Blackpool Fire Brigade and ambulance arrive. Manchester Fire Brigade arrive. Fight fires at Main Gate and Discharge/Change Houses. Water supply low. Over the next few hours the fire brigades start using water from ditches and ponds to supplement the supply from the works one remaining petrol pump.  
  
Preston, Chorley and Barrow fire services flood the TNT Magazines.  
  
3.10 pm  
Blackpool ambulance heads home, relieved by Fleetwood and Kendal ambulances.  
  
Liverpool and Vickers’ Barrow fire engines arrive.  
Fulwood fire engine tackled the Charge House fires. Liverpool and Manchester work at the Bonded Stores.  
  
5.45 pm  
Vickers’ Barrow fire engine tackled burning wagons, filled with live shells.  
  
6.00 pm  
Food and fuel arranged for everyone.  
  
Midnight  
Fire and explosions concentrated in Melt, Stemming and Transit Sheds

**Wednesday 3rd October 1917**  
  
Night time  
Several fire engines worked together to provide a water supply to enable them to tackle the fires remaining in the danger zone.  
  
4.00 am  
Salford Fire Engine arrived after having had an accident on its way.  
  
4.15 am  
The last large explosion. It knocked down several firemen. Acting on the Work’s Manager’s suggested all fire fighters withdrew till dawn.  
  
5.45 am  
Fire fighters resumed work.  
  
Daylight  
All fires under control or out. Locals returned home. Much damage.  
  
8.00 am  
Ministry of Munitions, Vickers and White Lund Managers and Chief Officers of all the Fire Brigades met and passed on Winston Churchill’s (the Minister of Munitions) message of thanks for all the selfless service given by all.  
  
2.30 pm  
Mayor of Lancaster admitted shutting off water supply to site as they thought water from the sprinklers and mains were running to waste. Water supply restored.  
  
7 bodies found [death toll rises to 10]  
  
4.00 pm  
Chorley firemen relieved the Barrow brigade. Barrow and Bolton Fire Brigades leave for home.  
  
Evening  
All fires out. Cooling work. Rained heavily.

**Thursday 4th October 1917**  
  
8.00 am  
Firemen believed the site was now safe.  
  
12.00 noon  
All Fire Brigades, except Lancaster, had left the factory.

<http://www.kingsownmuseum.com/1917-exhibition-015.htm>

**Olive May Taylor**

Still hating the restrictions and abuse from my employers I volunteered for ‘munitions’ as it was called, and at the end of 1916 I was sent to a factory near Morecambe Bay – We were billeted in sea-side boarding houses, but the landladies who took us in wanted us out before holiday makers came in. We slept five in a room and never got enough to eat. On all night shift (seven to seven) we had a few slices of bread & margarine for our main meal which we ate between eleven & twelve. We had to pay the landladies twenty-five shillings out of the twenty-seven we received, and there were no facilities for laundry. We had to walk three miles each way to the factory, which was a filling factory packed with explosives.

Many railway lines traversed the area which was three miles across and nine miles in circumference. Shells of all sizes came in to be filled, many of them nine inches across 9.2s. The filling was a boring and laborious task. A large amount of powder stood by each shell, and this had to be rammed into the shell using a piece of wood & wooden hammer. Often it seemed impossible to ram in any more powder but with the mallet and stem another small hole had to e made into the powder & more inserted. This was called stemming. Many girls fainted in the TNT room but I was not affected, so was often exposed to that deadly poison.

It was in this factory that to my disgust I was told how babies were made. I refused to believe it and told those women in no uncertain terms what I thought of them, remarking, ‘My mum & dad would never do that!’ How those women laughed!

…On the evening of October 1st 1917 a rocket was seen to leave the middle of the works & go over the sea – At eleven p.m. just as went to the canteen for our dinner a fire alarm sounded & we saw flames. We never expected the fire to spread, as each building was separated form the next by a long corridor with water sprinklers. Actually we girls hoped it would last for a while as we would not have to resume work until it was safe. However, the fire did spread rapidly soon huge explosions shook everything. There was quite a lot of panic as the twelve foot high gates remained closed. The police on the gates were never permitted to open them until soldiers surrounded the factory & the line to the camp had been cut. The rush for the gates had the weaker people on the ground, yet others still climbed over them to try & climb the gates while the police tried to hold them back. A few girls were working to dislodge the girls on the ground and carry them to the canteen. I had no hopes of escaping that holocaust, but somehow I was not scared. We were shut in the wing with those explosions for several hours. The buildings had strong walls and weak roofs so the roofs would go up rather than the walls. Truck loads of benzene & dangerous chemicals were exploding. Too, and several people threw themselves into a river which ran at the back of the works. We never knew how many died. At the end of the week with that huge place still smouldering we were paid off and given a railway ticket for home from the Labour Exchange.

Reproduced in Joyce Marlowe (ed.) *The Virago Book of Women in the Great War.* London: Virago Press, 1999

**Childhood memories**

**by Anne (‘Nan’) Spencer, nee Harrington (image from website)**



*In October 1917, Nan was 16 years old. She had been living in Morecambe with her parents since 1916.*

‘On 1st October 1917, I was wakened shortly after midnight by my parents, who told me we would have to go into the cellar, as there was an air raid (this was of course during the 1st war). However, as I got out of bed there was a sudden flare and a terrific explosion and my father realised it was the munitions factory that was on fire and not an air raid. He was on the staff there and thought it his duty to go and see if there was anything he could do to help. We were about a mile from the factory and by the time my mother, brother and myself had put cots on over our night clothes; the girls who worked nights at the factory were running, terror stricken, past our house. My mother tried to persuade some of them to come into the house but they were much too scared and some of them ran right round Morecambe Bay and as far as Kendal. Eventually we joined them and made our way towards the sea front. Every time there was a flare we knew there would be an explosion and dropped to the ground, covering our heads with our arms, as the blast shattered shop windows when we reached the town and glass flew all round us. Many people were badly cut but we escaped, luckily. We came at last to the old stone pier and could go no further; the pier was made up of huge stones and there were hundreds of people sitting there. Fortunately the shells, as they exploded, just cleared us, whistled over our heads and fell into the sea. It was absolutely terrifying and to add to our misery, bitterly cold, and we had very little on. Also, we wondered what had happened to father and were sure he must have been killed. It was a night of full moon, almost as light as day and the shells were visible as they passed over us, huge things about 6 ft. long.

Father had been unable to reach the factory because of blast, which blew him off his bicycle, the only means of transport. Eventually he gave up, returned home to find us gone, so collected warm clothing and came in search of us. He must have passed us on the pier but did not see us as there were so many people milling about.

At daylight mother decided we should go along to the Police Station to see if there was any news and the Inspector there […] told us father had been in twice for news of us. They gave us a warm drink and advised us to wait there, as father was sure to call again after an hour or so he did return and we were so thankful to see him and to put on the clothes he had brought. We went home to find the house in a terrible state; every ceiling down and all window frames at the back of the house blown in, oddly enough with the glass unbroken. The one in my bedroom was lying across my bed.

Fortunately, the room least damaged was the kitchen and mother was able to put a meal together for us. Father then decided to make another effort to get to the factory and this time succeeded. The fire was still raging and Fire Brigades were there from as far away as Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Bradford, Halifax and many other towns. The extraordinary thing was that only ten people were killed but my aunt and Uncle in Manchester were frantic because they could see the fire and hear the explosions (almost 80 miles away) and were told that the whole of Morecambe and Lancaster were in ruins and they were walking on the dead.

Father returned to us as quickly as possible and said we might as well spend the night in the house, as the shells were still going overhead. What he didn’t tell us then was that the fire was only a few yards from the section where the Russian magazines were housed and that these were monsters and lying on their sides, so that had the fire reached them nothing could have saved us from complete devastation. Thanks to the bravery of the firemen, the fire was extinguished on the third morning and we were safe.

We stayed with relatives in Hazel Grove until the house was patched up but left Morecambe the following May.

<http://www.heyshamheritage.org.uk/AnnsStoryLR.pdf>

**Interview with Mr K1L, Skerton**

(Elizabeth Roberts Archive, from a series of interviews conducted in the 1970s).

I always remember when the White Lund explosion blew up mother was working at the Projectile Factory on nights and he was supposed to be looking after us because he was the eldest. There were three loud bangs come at our door in the bedroom and I shouted “Give up Archie don’t act so daft.” I thought it was him playing the fool and it was the first three explosions of White Lune and we landed at Caton Institute. Mother had to come looking for us the day after.

*How did you get to Caton?*

Walked. I always remember … ice cream man, and he had five or six kids and he had them sitting on top of a bassinet and he said, “Me no stop me go on.” And he landed at Hornby.

*Did a lot of people go away?*

“Yes,” you’d go as far away from it as you could, because you didn’t know what was happening. We thought it was a Zeppelin dropping bombs. They could hear it at Bentham. An aunt of mine heard it at Bentham. We slept on the bare floor with just a blanket round us in Caton Institute.

**Thomas Kew**

NEW SCOTLAND YARD: FIRE AT NATIONAL FILLING FACTORY, WHITE LUND, MORECAMBE, LANCASHIRE, ON 1ST OCTOBER, 1917.

[An investigation was held by Col. Sir H. Barlow, who took the evidence of eye-witnesses; his proceedings were checked by further enquiry on the part of Lt. Col: L.C.P.Milman, Controller.]

20 Oct. 1917. P34-36: Thomas Kew says: I am 36 years of age, residing at 11, West View Terrace, Morecambe: home address 31, New Wellington St. Mill Hill, Blackburn. I am a locomotive engine driver. I served my time on the North Eastern Railway, York. I commenced work at the N.F.F., Morecambe, as engine driver about August 1916, and have worked there in that capacity up to the present; a fortnight days and a fortnight nights.

On 1st October I was on days and finished at 6.30 pm. About 10.40 same day I was at my lodgings when I heard the first explosion. I at once set off for the Factory and arrived about 11 p.m. at Roseberry Avenue end. Explosions were taking place all the way down. I met two young women there who were hysterical. I took one to 18, West End Road, the other I left on the Front with some friends.

About four and a half a.m. I went back to the Factory, and went under the Railway Bridge close to the Factory entrance where there were some men taking cover. I stayed there about an hour. After that, about 6 a.m., (I cannot state the exact time) I met shunter Graham. Myself and Graham had been working through the day and we knew that there were several wagons of loaded shells in No. 1 and No. 3 Sidings. We talked the matter over and agreed that if the wagons were not removed there would be some serious explosions as they had already caught fire. The Loco. Shed was against the Power House and we both went there. No. 1 engine was stood on No. 2 Shed road. The lines in several places were strewn with debris and we removed the obstructions off the lines. I then drove No. 1 engine to No. 1 Siding. Explosions were taking place all the time. There were a number of wagons coupled up in No. 1 road in the sidings all full of loaded shells. Four wagons at the back were on fire.

Graham then went back and uncoupled those on fire. I then ran about 24 wagons of loaded shells into safety further up the line. I then had to leave No. 1 engine there. There were about 30 wagons of loaded shells in No. 3 road in the sidings and a few wagons on No. 5 Road of cartridges, which were exploding all the time and on fire. I had to pass those wagons to get to the engine, which were standing on No. 8 road. Graham went another way round and we both got to the engines about the same time. … We had to pass through exploding wagons of cartridges, when we got to a place where I could get material to light up. I lit up and got steam up. Graham assisted me. …when there was sufficient steam up, we proceeded to No. 3 Road in the sidings, and backed on to about 30 wagons of loaded shells, which we hooked on to. Three wagons at the back end were on fire and shells exploding. Graham went back and uncoupled the burning wagons from the others, and we then went forward with about 27 wagons, but on looking back we saw that 2 wagons at the tail end were on fire and Graham and myself went back, and we each got a bucket off the engine and got water from the engine, which we threw on the two burning wagons and in that way extinguished the fire.

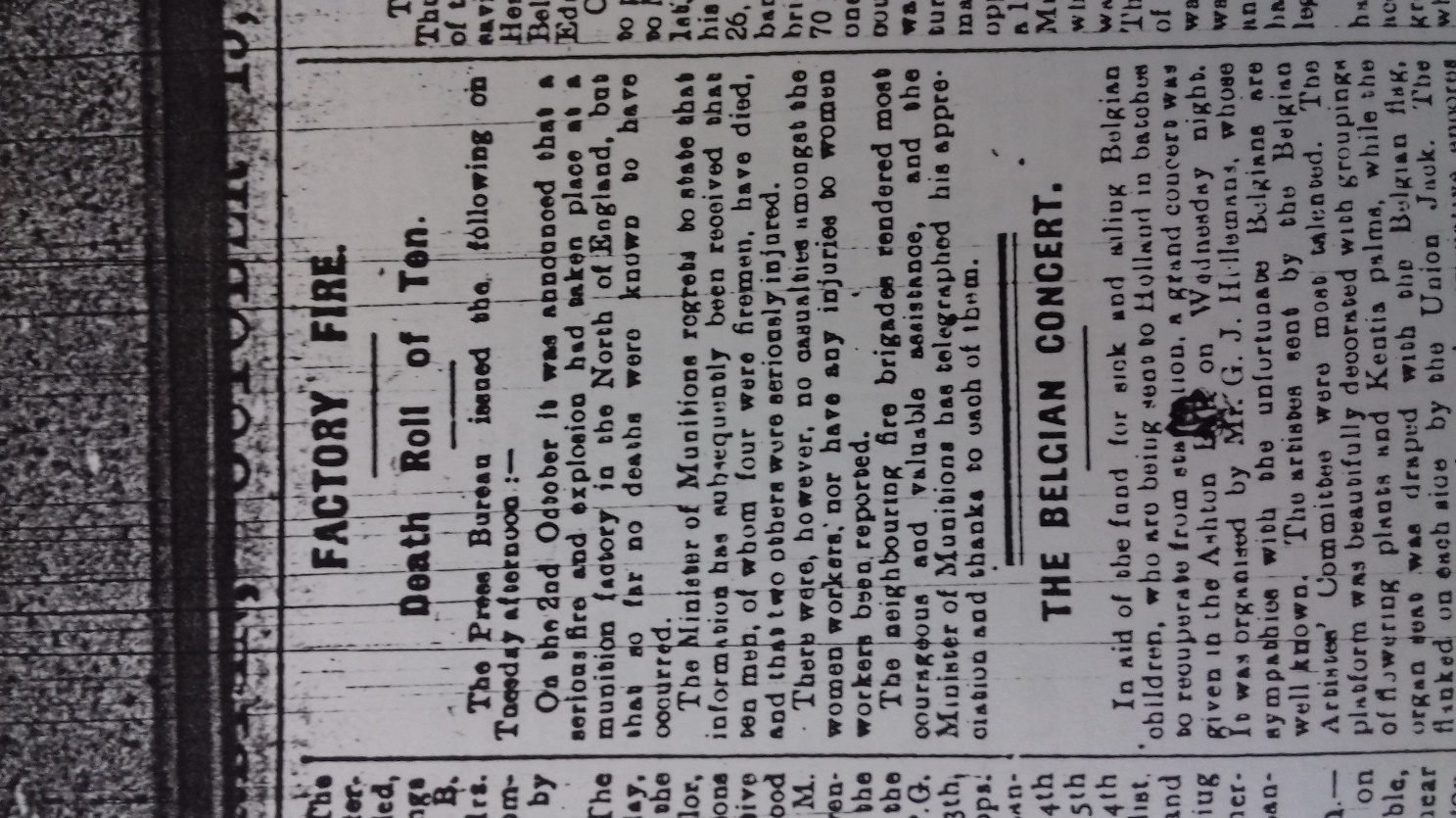
We then got on the engine and proceeded to a place of safety with the 27 wagons, which we left near the canteen. There were explosions taking place all the time. Graham then left me. I then proceeded to the Power House, looked round there, and discovered that the coal hoppers in front of the Lancashire Boilers were on fire. I got a fire hose which was lying on the floor, and someone (I do not know who it was) turned the water on for me and I extinguished the fires. I then went round the engine sheds to see if my engines were all right, and soon afterwards a man named Marshall, who had been in charge of the pumps which supplies the water at the Works came to me and said “A shell has gone through my gravity tank Tommy. Can you do anything with it, as I only have about two feet of water in the reservoir which will only last the firemen about an hour”. I went for Mr. Walker, one of the engineers, he advised me to get a wagon sheet and stop the leakage. However, I went into the stores and got a roll of rubber insertion which I laid at the bottom of the tank, and weighted it down with a flag and some pieces of piping and in that way stopped the leakage, and they put the pump on and it was then all right.

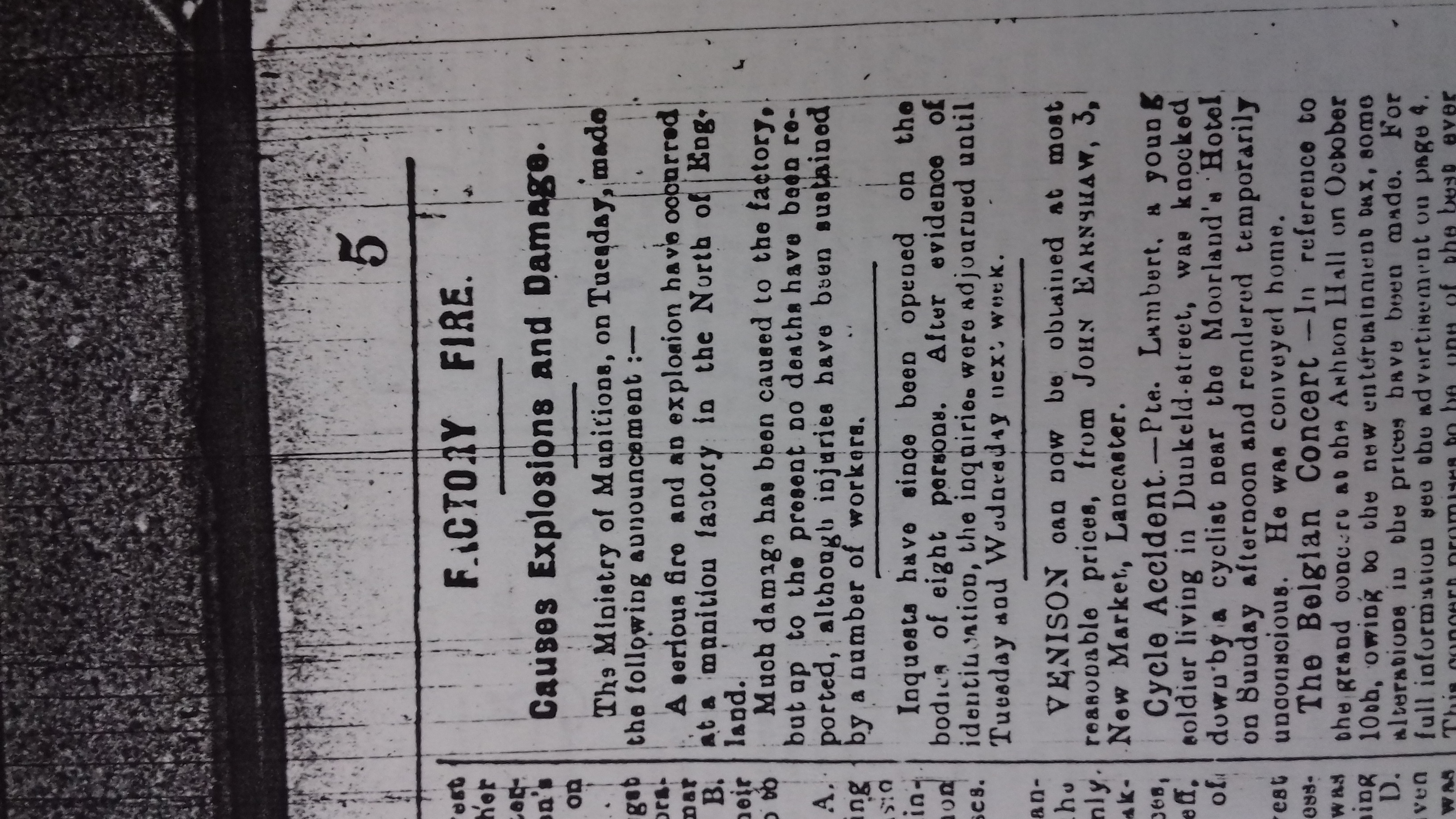
I remained on duty all the time from 10.40 Monday 1st to 12.30 a.m. on Wednesday the 3rd October, 1917.

I have not received any injury but I felt so shook up I got permission to go away and only returned to Morecambe to-day, 10th October.

The National Archive – HO45/10887/350619

**The Explosion Reported**





*Lancaster Guardian*, 6 October 1917

*Lancaster Guardian*, 13 October, 1917.

**Skerton Council School Logbook**

Skerton Council School Logbook. (Infants Dept). (*With thanks to Chris Workman)*

1917

Jan 12th Admitted 14 children during the week. On roll now 242

May 16th School closed this afternoon in honour of the Royal Visit to the Munitions Works. Children assembled at 2pm and marched to the field in front of the Works on Caton Road to witness the ceremony and to see the King and Queen.

…

Oct 1st “ A very good attendance 236 out of 259. There have been 4 admissions”.

Oct 3rd: No school yesterday, owing to the fearful fire and explosion at the Local Munition works, on Monday night, the explosions continuing from 10.30 pm Monday to Tuesday night, much damage being done to property, chiefly windows. People and children out during Monday night and all Tuesday. Only 20 children attended this morning. Registers not marked; children sent home with instructions to attend in the afternoon + to bring as many others as possible with them.

Every effort was made to get a better attendance but only 82 came in the afternoon when Registers were marked.

Many parents have written notes explaining that they and the children are too much upset to attend school today, at least, Skerton greatly affected.

4th Attendance a little better 50 percent.

5th Several children are reported too ill to attend this week others are still out of the district.

Found 23 window frames broken, also our large window fixtures and springs. Average attendance for week lowered to 171.

Oct 8th Several notes from parents excusing children from attending school, stating that they are still suffering from shock.

Oct 11th Three families left as result of effects of explosion. Attendance still unsatisfactory”

Nov 2nd 253 on register, with an average of 203

**Inquest**

Transcript of Mr Gill’s Written Report of the Disaster at the Munitions Factory at White Lund, 1 October 1917.

*Mr Thomas Gill was the editor of the Lancaster Observer.*

Deputy Coroner Explains How Accident Happened.

Major Wilson, Deputy Coroner, held the adjourned inquest of Willing Topping, Westham Street, Lancaster (who died at the Lancaster Infirmary) on Wednesday the 10th October. … Deceased’s story was that he was “playing” water on a burning brick building and that when an explosion took place the wall fell down and partly buried him and that he remained there till found. They were not living in peace times and in wartimes a factory like this [had] to be put up with all speed.

…The fire started in a two-storey building – Block 6c. In the top storey was a melter, in which certain material was melted by head from stead pipes running into the mixer. Then after being mixed the stuff was run into certain shells. The top floor where the melter was was practically empty at the time the fire took place. There was a man up to 9.55 filling shells from the mixer. He said when he left there was nothing in the mixer but what was sticking to the sides of the pan. The heat was kep on, to keep the stuff soft, because if the heat was not kept on it would set hard and be troublesome. The melting pan was a long way off being full and the steam pipe regulating the heat by three different arrangements for safety. Under no circumstances could the heat get to a point that would be dangerous; it could not get within 50 per cent of “danger”. Thus there was not the slightest chance of the heater or boiler or melter being the cause of the fire. On the floor was a pile of material to be used in the mixer and melted after the hands got back from supper. It was among these sacks that was the first scene of the fire. If the jury had heard that the fire originated through the fire being left unattended or through getting overheated he assured them that was absolutely impossible. In some way or other – probably it would never be found how – the fire started in that little pile of material and not in the mixers at all.

All the men whose bodies had been recovered died as the result of the fire…

The Deputy Coroner read the verdict returned at the inquest on the previous day, which he said left the matter open as to how the fire arose. It was a verdict that would not prevent insurance claims being paid by insurance companies.

The jury returned the following verdict – “That deceased’s death was due to injuries accidentally received while carrying out his duties during a fire in a national filling factory, there being no evidence to how the fire originated.”

**IN MEMORIAM**

In loving memory of James Inglesent, who was killed at White Lund, Oct 1st, 1917

I mourn for you dear Husband

But with no outward show;

For the heart that mourns sincerely,

Mourns silently and low.

I often think of days gone by,

When we were both together;

A shadow cast upon my life,

A loved one gone forever.

-From his loving Wife and Daughter Lillian, 11, Rosebery-avenue,

Morecambe.

(*Morecambe Visitor*, 2 October, 1918)

**The theories continue:**

*Lancaster Guardian,* 20 October 1967, clipping in White Lund file, Lancaster Library (transcription).

I was there myself that fateful night. My job in the factory was to see that all the buildings that were on shell filling were kept at a certain temperature.

Tis work took me all over the factory. I had an office in the Shell Painting Dept, which was a two-storey building and I could see all round the factory through the window. That night I was just preparing my supper and went to look through the window admiring the nice clear night: the moon and stars were lovely.

One of the firemen was having a drink of tea with me and all at once I could see flames coming from the Melting-Filling Plant. “I said, “Jimmy, No. 6 unit is on fire. 2 Poor Jimmy Ingleson, he asked me what we shold do. We both ran and left our supper.

He left me at the unction of the road leading to the units and the Power House. That was the last I saw of him. He must have been killed on the road to No. 6 unit. I reported to the shift engineer at the Power House and he sent me back to shut off the main steam valve and to cut off the electric power which was on the main road to the units. By that time with all the units made of wood it was soon an inferno with shells and burning wood fling all over the place.

I was going to make my way back to the power house but it was Hell then and I had to take shelter behind one of the large concussion walls. I was safe from blasts but scared stiff in case anything came straight down on me.

I was recalled to the Army when the inquiry was held and my version I will give you as follows: There was a man who looked after the TNT store whom I swear was a German agent.

He was a little man who had a black patch over one eye and he was always the last to go to the canteen. He was always sat by himself and you could not get him into conversation. I always used to go round the units during supper time and I caught him once coming down the melting-filling plant. It was after he had gone that I found the matches on the hot grid. I informed Mr Stokes the manager and he sent me to Mr Standgroom in charge of the police who laughed at me. “How could he get the matches into the building when everybody was searched?’ they asked. I said he could have concealed them under the patch on his eye. He told me to get out and leave and not to try to be a detective and I said: “You will see one of these days then the place blows up.” If he had planted them there that fateful night he must have been killed. I would like to have known. I could keep on writing but it would take too much of your time and space.

G. Pedder, Lancaster.