

Gunpowder explosion at Brynmawr. 14th January 1870



The above drawing appeared in the London Illustrated News in 1870 and I'm sure like myself many have wondered exactly what happened. We know an explosion took place in Chapel Street and two people were killed but the extent of the story was never clear to me. After some searching I found the story in the Western Mail on January 1870. As I found out, this was not the first and not the last explosion to occur in Brynmawr or in the vicinity. Where possible I have used the actual newspaper report from different newspapers (see below) with some additions to clarify parts of the story.

FEARFUL GUNPOWDER EXPLOSION. LOSS OF LIFE AND GREAT DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY.

A calamitous explosion of gunpowder took place at Brynmawr on Friday afternoon, the 14th of January (1870) between four and five o'clock, which seems to have been caused by the incautious use of a lighted candle in a place where (black) powder is stored. Mr. David Watkins, grocer of Worcester-Street, Brynmawr, has a store at the back of his house in which he has been in the habit of storing gunpowder. At the time of the explosion there was a large quantity of the dangerous material in stock. About half- past four o'clock Evan Havard, an assistant of Mr. Watkins's, was sent to the store. He took with him a naked lighted candle and it is thought he must have been incautious in its use, for shortly after, a terrific explosion took place at the store-house. The result was most disastrous. The store-house itself was entirely destroyed and at least two persons killed, the assistant and a young girl who was struck by a flying stone. A chapel next door was immediately transferred into a ruin-every window being blown out, and the gallery thrown down. (*There was also damage*

to Calvary Chapel on King Street and to the Primitive Methodist Chapel in Orchard Street). All the houses in Worcester- Street had their windows smashed, and throughout the district there are many cases of damage arising out of the explosion. The shock was so terrific that many thought an earthquake had taken place, and people ran out of their houses, thinking such was the case. Nearly every shop in Beaufort-street, which is 200 yards away from the scene of the explosion, has suffered, more especially the large shops of Messrs. Ashton and Horlick.

The explosion was heard at Abergavenny and the appearance was like that of a brilliant meteor. In addition to these particulars (which appeared in our Second Edition of last Saturday afternoon) we learn that the damage done is estimated at £3,000. The assistant it is known took with him a lighted candle, which when he got into the store-house was by some means, it is believed, extinguished. The lad then, it is supposed, struck a match for the purpose of relighting the candle, and in doing so caused the explosion of three or four casks, each of which contained about 100lb of powder. He was blown to pieces, and some parts of his body were subsequently found on the housetops at a considerable distance from the scene of the explosion. A little girl who was also killed was named Catherine Ann Leek, about three years of age and who was playing near the place at the time. She was struck by a stone and killed on the spot. Five other persons who were near, some walking in the streets and some in their houses, were more or less injured by the concussion and falling of stones and pieces of timber, one had a leg broken, another head fractured and a third a shoulder dislocated. All are expected to recover.

On Saturday crowds of workmen were busily engaged in repairing the roofs of the shattered houses to shelter their occupants from the rain that was falling. The inquest upon the deceased Evan Havard and the young girl Leek was opened on Wednesday afternoon before Mr. Davies. The only witness examined was Evan Jones, a fellow-assistant of Havard's, who had cautioned the latter just before the explosion against taking a candle and the latter had blown out the candle and gone to the store. Havard must however have procured another light in the store. Witness was not certain how much powder was in stock at the time but knew of four barrels containing 100lb each. Deceased went to get 12lbs. for a customer. They received ten barrels-half a ton of powder at the end of December. The inquest was then adjourned until Thursday the 27th.

The Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth 22nd January 1870
The Cardiff Times 22nd January 1870

The report of the inquest into the incident will appear at a later date on this web-site. Something similar also happened at a shop in Clydach, again I've used the actual newspaper report:

GUNPOWDER EXPLOSION NEAR BRYNMAWR. A MIRACULOUS ESCAPE. GREAT DAMAGE TO PROPERTY.

On Thursday, about on o'clock, a dreadful explosion of gunpowder occurred i at the shop of Mr Philip James in Clydach, which is about three miles from Brynmawr. Mr James, who is a grocer and draper, is in the habit of keeping gunpowder in a tin canister under the counter for the purpose of supplying small quantities to the miners working in the neighbourhood. At the time mentioned Mr James was at dinner and the shop was in charge of a young man named David Williams. During the absence of the former a woman named Mrs Kenfig entered the shop and asked for 1 lb. of powder. The assistant went to the canister, took the lid off and then struck a match. The match went out and the woman called to the young man not to repeat his dangerous trick. He, however, did so. This time a spark fell into the powder, and a terrific explosion took place, blowing both shop windows clean out and sending the contents of both window and shop into the road. The noise was heard for a great distance, and an alarm was quickly raised. Happily the fire had hardly time to start and a few buckets of water were sufficient to extinguish it. The back part of the shop was blown clean cut, and the roof considerably damaged. The young man had a miraculous escape from instant death. He is, however, terribly injured over the whole of the front part of his body and his face is much disfigured. Dr Browne, who was immediately sent for, describes the injuries as not of a serious character. It is though unlikely Williams will recover for some time. Our reporter is informed that there were only 81bs of powder in the canister. The damage done is estimated at upwards of £100.

Eifion Lloyd Davies 2017.

Gunpowder explosion at Clydach. (South Wales Daily News 15th July 1887)