

Police History Society newsletter 89



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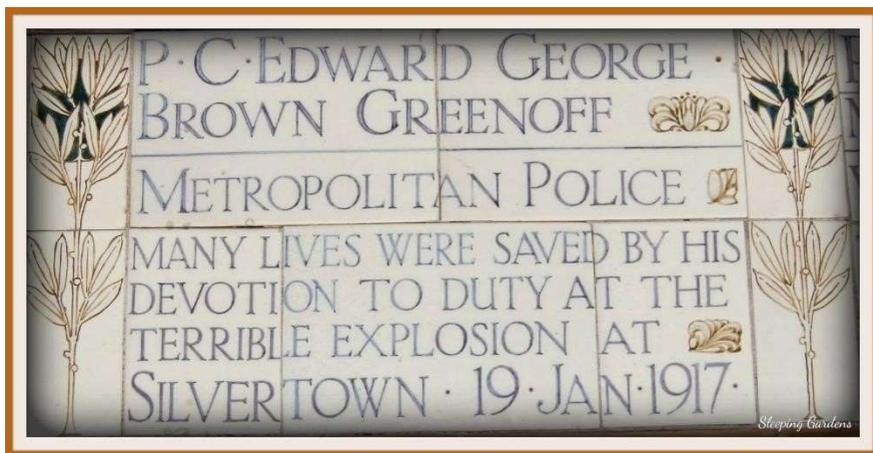


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A police hero

As it nears the 100th anniversary of his death, Tony Moore looks back at the short life of Police Constable Edward Greenoff KPM and the incident that killed him

On the wall of a small garden known as Postman's Park in the centre of London are a number of ceramic tablets. Each one is in memory of a person who lost their own life while attempting to save the lives of others. One of the tablets is dedicated to the memory of PC Edward George Brown Greenoff



The eldest son of Samuel Greenoff, a plumber, and Emily Sarah Brown, Edward was born on 20 September 1886 and brought up, firstly in Kentish Town and then in Finchley. On 7 December 1908, at the age of 22 years, he joined the Metropolitan Police and was allocated warrant number 96389. Posted to K Division, he was given the collar number 389K. Less than three weeks after joining the police, Edward married Ada Mina Thorpe, the daughter of a shoemaker, at Holy Trinity Church in Finchley. The couple went on to have three children, Edward Arthur Cecil (born 1909), Elsie Irene (born 1912) and Albert George (born 1914),

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and were residing at 2 Rhea Street in North Woolwich at the time of his death

On Friday 19 January 1917, Edward said goodbye to his wife and three children, now aged 7, 4 and 2 years respectively. He paraded for duty and was posted to a beat in an area known as Silvertown, an industrial complex which existed between the Royal Victoria Dock and the north bank of the River Thames. In 1893, Brunner, Mond and Company (a forerunner of Imperial Chemical Industries) had built a factory on the south side of North Woolwich Road, nearly opposite the junction with Mill Road, to produce soda crystals and caustic soda. The manufacture of caustic soda ceased in 1912 leaving part of the plant idle. When, during the early part of World War I, Britain was suffering from a severe shortage of shells, the government ordered Brunner, Mond and Company to manufacture trinitrotoluene (TNT) at the unused part of its plant, although it was not designed for it and it was located in a built-up area. This commenced in September 1915 and for just over two years, the factory produced approximately 10 tonnes of TNT per day without incident

However, at some time after 6pm on 19 January 1917, a small fire broke out either in the melt pot or in the corrugated iron structure at the top of the building immediately above the melt pot. Aware of the danger should the fire spread to the TNT, Edward was quickly involved in evacuating people from the area. A fire appliance from West Ham arrived and the crew began coupling their hoses to fight the fire but before this was complete, at 6.52pm precisely, there was a massive explosion as approximately 50 tons of TNT ignited. The blast destroyed a large part of the factory, buildings on the southern side of the Royal Victoria Dock and many houses in the surrounding streets. Debris, amongst it red-hot chunks of rubble, was strewn for miles around. One such chunk hit a gas holder on the southern side of the River Thames sending a fireball high into the sky

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The emergency services were quickly on scene, with the fire service putting out the fires, the medical services treating the wounded and the police trying to bring some order to the chaos that was inevitable after such a large explosion. Sixty-nine people were killed immediately. Ninety-eight were seriously injured of whom four died in hospital. A further 328 were slightly injured

Edward was found by the emergency services amongst the injured and dead. He was apparently crawling along the ground, hurt and dazed. Colleagues took him to one of the comparatively undamaged houses which had been opened as a medical aid centre, where a doctor was already treating casualties, some of whom were initially believed to be more seriously injured than Edward. However, on closer examination after Edward had complained of nausea, it was realised he had a serious head wound. The doctor ordered him to be taken straight to hospital but it was to no avail. Although Edward fought for his life for the next 11 days, he finally died on 28 January 1917. He was a mere 30 years of age and had been a policeman for just over eight years

His funeral took place at St Marylebone Cemetery in Finchley on 3 February 1917. It is reported that more than 800 police constables and special constables from all parts of London, plus the K Division police band, were in attendance. Following the loss of her husband, Ada Greenoff found herself with three young children to support, and on 3 March 1921, she married one of Edward's colleagues, PC Herbert Colwell

On 26 June 1917, Edward was awarded the King's Police Medal for Gallantry. The citation read:

Died from injuries received on 19 January from an explosion at a fire in a munitions factory at Silvertown where, despite the imminent danger, he remained at the scene to warn others and evacuate the area

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Along with another constable from K Division, Sidney Newbury, who was killed in action on 16 September 1918, Edward was commemorated on an ornate plaque dedicated to *fallen comrades* which was originally erected at North Woolwich Police Station. The plaque contained a photograph of each man, encased in an oval glass frame. Rather than an *official* police photograph, Edward was shown in civilian clothes, wearing a large white carnation in his buttonhole, so it was likely that it had been taken on his wedding day

Further reading

Henslow, Miles (1937). *Fifty great disasters and tragedies that shocked the world*. London: Odhams, chapter 31
Price, John (2015). *Heroes of Postman's Park: heroic selfsacrifice in Victorian London*. Stroud, Gloucestershire: History Press, chapter 10