

The Silvertown explosion



For the last three years various anniversary celebrations have been held to commemorate events from WWI. **Tony Moore** describes another incident that hit London 100 years ago

Just under two years before the end of WWI, the east end of London was hit by a vast explosion, the effects of which were felt across the city and beyond. Heard as far away as the Norfolk and Sussex coasts, the orange glow of the fires that burned for some time afterwards could be seen from cities afar. But the explosion was not the result of enemy action – it happened when a large quantity of trinitrotoluene (TNT) exploded at a munitions factory on an industrial complex, which, along with dwelling houses, was part of Silvertown.

A year after the outbreak of WWI, Britain was suffering from a shortage of shells to send to the Western Front and the government ordered a chemical factory to assist in the manufacture of TNT. The factory had originally been designed to manufacture soda crystals and caustic soda, but had ceased production of the latter in 1912, leaving it with spare capacity. For the following two years, the factory purified 10 tons of TNT each day without incident.

But sometime after 18:00hrs on Friday, January 19, 1917, after the main workforce had left the factory, fire broke out in the smelt pot room where crude TNT was emptied through a hopper for melting and dissolving in alcohol. A fire appliance was quickly on scene, but as the firefighters were coupling their hoses, the flames reached the stock of over 50 tons of TNT, and the largest explosion from a single source London has ever seen occurred.

Burning rubble sent flying into the air ignited a gas holder on the southern side of the River Thames, which exploded in a fireball. A total of 900 properties were destroyed and a further

More than 900 homes were destroyed or damaged in the explosion. Some of those who died were firefighters at a nearby fire station that was also destroyed. Other firefighters perished while fighting the subsequent inferno

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70,000 damaged. Sixty-nine people were killed immediately. A dozen people nearest to the blast were never found. Ninety-eight were seriously injured; four died in hospital; a further 328 were slightly injured. The death toll could have been much greater had the explosion occurred at a different time. Most of the serious damage to houses was to the upper floors, but work had finished for the day in the surrounding factories so not many people were at their workplaces and few people had retired to bed.

With the assistance of local doctors, the emergency services set up first aid stations on the street and in the less damaged buildings. The Salvation Army and the YMCA provided refreshments to the injured and the emergency services.

Thousands were left homeless and temporary accommodation was set up in schools and churches. Subsequently, some four hundred children suffering from trauma were sent to the countryside to recuperate.

An emergency committee was established to oversee the rebuilding work and, by mid-February, more than 1,700 men were employed in repairing damaged properties. By August the work was complete. After the war, Brunner, Mond and Company erected a four-sided stone pillar as a memorial to commemorate those factory employees who died fighting in WWI and the 16 killed in the Silvertown explosion. Later, an inscription was added to commemorate those who died in WWII.

The government report remained secret until 1950. It eliminated all accidental causes as to how the fire started except two – the fire was triggered either by a detonation spark produced by friction or impact, or by spontaneous ignition owing to decomposition of the material in or about the melt pot. It also concluded that the factory and its location had been inappropriate for the manufacture of TNT and criticised management and safety practices.

The report also found that the production process was volatile and TNT had been stored in unsafe containers close to the factory. 