

Low Moor Explosion 21st August 1916 – 2016 Commemoration Events

It had long been the intention of the Low Moor Local History Group to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the munitions explosion in some way. To this end we had been collecting references and contacts for many years and this helped up in the research and events of the past year. What follows is a summary of what we did.

Reprinted Publication – The Low Moor Explosion – a mystery explained

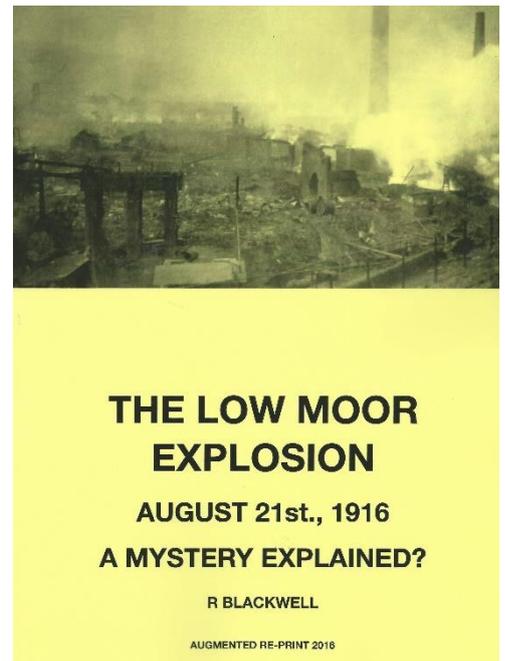
Ronald Blackwell, a lecturer at Coventry Lanchester Polytechnic wrote a book in 1986 about the explosion because of his interest in the technical side of the disaster. Low Moor researchers, John and Colleen Nicoll, assisted him with local research. This publication has long been out of print and with his permission we set about have a re-print published.

With his agreement we also added the following items which help to tell a fuller story.

- Ronald Blackwell's article first published in 1987 in volume 3, pp. 11-20, of the third series of The Bradford Antiquary, the journal of the Bradford Historical and Antiquarian Society. This gives a revised list of the dead which corrects some errors in the book.
- A list of the dead compiled in 2016 by Barbara Reardon and Mary Twentyman, members of Low Moor Local History Group, which adds two "new" names and includes what they believe are the correct spellings, ages, addresses and occupations of the people involved.
- We also added the transcription of a citation submitted to the Secretary of State recommending that Superintendent Robert John Forbes* of the Bradford Fire Brigade receive recognition for his bravery.

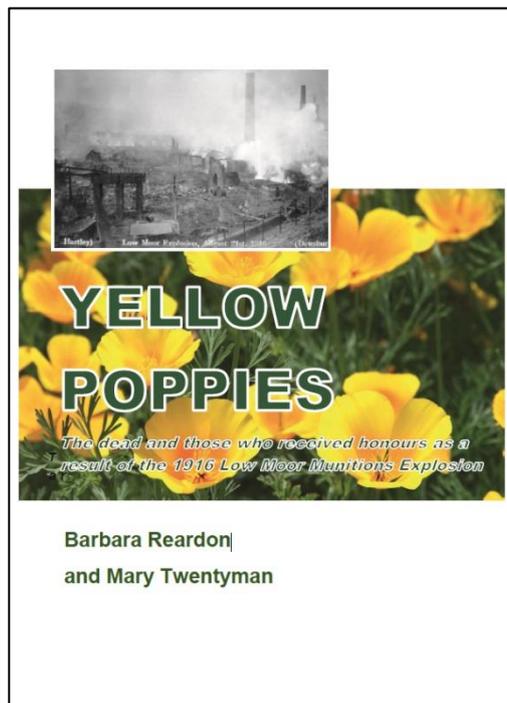
*Note: The heroism of Robert John Forbes did not come to light during research in the 1980's, possibly because he and his family emigrated to Australia in 1920 and his contribution was forgotten by those surviving.

The re-print has since sold out, but we still have copies of the 2016 additions costing £1.00. These were intended for people who already had the original 1986 book, but wanted the updated material.



New Publication – Yellow Poppies by Barbara Reardon and Mary Twentyman

Since the 1980s new sources have become available, most notably census data and the ability to search some newspapers digitally, and sources will continue to appear as the one hundred years embargo passes. This new book gives biographical details of all of those who died and also those who received national awards for their bravery. It contains many photographs of the people and places mentioned.



Illustrated Talk – The Low Moor Munitions Explosion



This talk was originally prepared for the 5th May 2016 meeting of the Low Moor Local History Group and also included the launch of the two books mentioned above. A capacity audience of over 100 people came to hear Geoff Twentyman, Mary Twentyman and Barbara Reardon tell the story of the events that unfolded on Monday 21st August 1916.

Since that time the talk has been given to several other Antiquarian and Local History Groups in the area.

Musical Presentation – Low Moor 1916 – 10th June and 9th September

Written by Mary Twentyman, this was a presentation by the Low Moor Comical Company, in words, images, music and song commemorating the people involved in, and the events surrounding, the explosion.

- The action started on New Year's Eve 1915
- We met some of the occupants of Low Moor as the Great War begins to affect their lives.
- We learnt a little about the area and the country in general from the local school children
- The men of Low Moor were engaged in a variety of occupations and they were keen to share their stories with us
- As conscription came in for the first time families faced painful partings
- July brought sadness to the area as the Battle of Somme claimed its casualties
- We looked forward to a wedding and some went on their holidays – but things were about to change when a series of explosions wrecked the area.
- The events of Monday 21st August 1916 were revisited and their tragic aftermath examined along with a commemoration of those who died.

The Low Moor Comical Company comprised : Edna Barker, Ken Hudson, Sandie Hudson, Geoff Twentyman and Mary Twentyman who played all the parts. Barbara Reardon was the narrator and Sharon Haigh looked after the technical bits.



It is hoped that another performance of **Low Moor 1916** will take place in Bradford Cathedral during November of 2017

The Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, the Rev Geoff Reid and Mrs Chris Reid came to the first performance. £650 which represented the profits from both performances was given to the Lord Mayor's Fund – for Young Minds. The Lord Mayor invited the members of the company to tea and cakes at City Hall on 27th October when the cheque was presented.



Memorial Plaque – Unveiled 10th August 2016

In 1924 a memorial to the six firemen killed was erected in the form of a statue at Scholemoor Cemetery. In 2003 it was transferred to Birkenshaw Fire Headquarters.

In 2002 a plaque in memory of all the casualties was erected in Victoria Park, Oakenshaw. But there had never been a memorial naming ALL those who died.

On 10th August 2016 a plaque was unveiled by Councillor Sarah Ferriby on the Spen Valley Greenway near to the site of the explosion, which is now underneath a land fill site. Many descendants and relatives of those who had been killed or assisted in the rescue, were present.



The plaque was financed by the Low Moor Local History Group from profits from the reprint of Ronald Blackwell's book. This had been his original aim in 1986 but had not come about. A grant from a local firm also assisted in off-setting expenses.

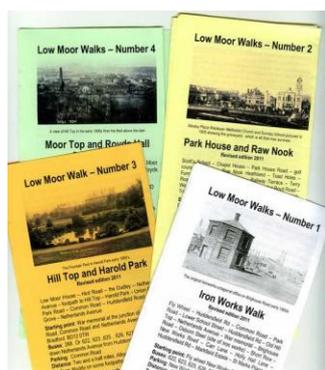
Heritage Walk – 10th August 2016 and 11th September 2016

Following the unveiling of the above plaque a short guided walk to the site of the explosion followed.

This was repeated in a longer form as part of the Heritage weekend in September and over 50 people joined Geoff, Mary and Barbara as they told the story again near the place it happened.



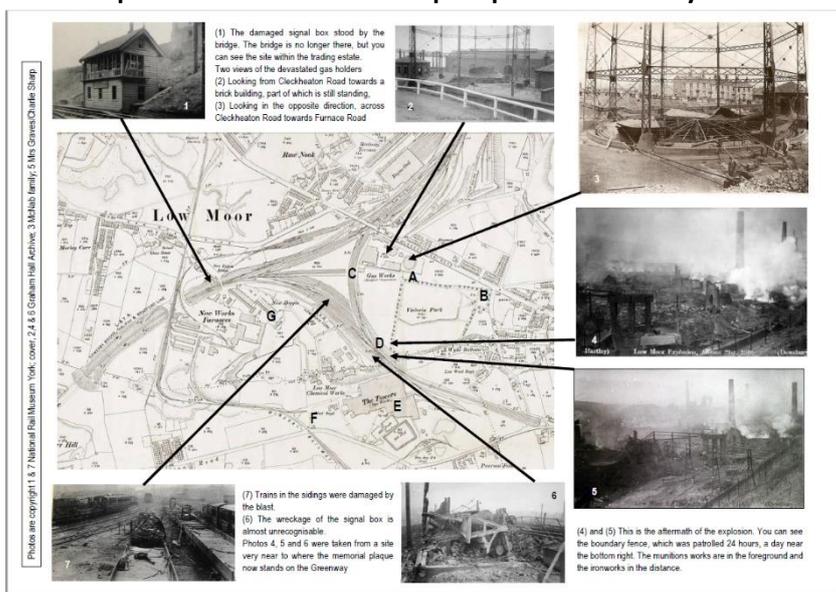
New Walks Leaflet



Low Moor Local History Group has issued a series of four walks around the district and these can be picked up at our meetings or downloaded from our website

A new walk telling the story of the explosion has been prepared this year and added to the website.

We are grateful to BASF who have supported us by printing paper copies of all our leaflets.



A Trio of Banners

Low Moor Munitions Explosion
Monday 21st August 1916

An accident waiting to happen



Low Moor is 2 miles south of Bradford centre. The community grew up around the Low Moor Iron Works founded in 1790 as a partnership, Hird, Jarratt, Dawson and Hardy; as the Low Moor Company it went on to become one of the biggest and most famous iron works in the world. It made cannon and shot for the French Wars and when peace came it was there at the beginning of the railway age.

Stephenson specified its iron for his engine's tyres. It manufactured rails for collieries and mines. The superstructure of Brunel's ship the Great Eastern was made at Low Moor.

The families of its founders became millionaires; one of them was ennobled as the Earls of Cranbrook; it brought prosperity to its middle managers and around its works, amongst the slag heaps and coke ovens, grew the communities which made up Low Moor, Wesley Place, Raw Nook, Hill Top, Morley Carr, Carr Lane, and Moor Top.

By 1916 its glory days were over and it would soon be taken over by Robert Heath & Sons of Biddulph in Staffordshire and in 1928 the company was declared bankrupt. But during the first World War it had a temporary reprieve when orders came in for shell casings.

Low Moor was a busy rail junction for the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway with a station, shed, yards and sidings. Across the Cleckheaton Road rail bridge stood the North Bierley Gas Works taken over by Bradford Corporation in 1900.

The Woodside dye works of J and M S Sharp Ltd stood off Wilson Road, Wyke. Alongside and below it was the railway junction and sidings. Tucked into the hollow below was the Low Moor Munitions Company and next to it the New Begin site of the Low Moor Company. It was said it was an accident waiting to happen.

On the sunny Monday afternoon of August 21st 1916 James Broughton and Sam Wade were moving some picric acid barrels when a spark ignited the magazine, leading to a fire and small explosion. The works fire brigade tried to tackle the blaze but soon realised they needed help and a call was placed to Central Fire Station at Nelson Street at 2.33pm.

Low Moor Munitions Explosion
Monday 21st August 1916

A tragedy whose story could not be told



(1) The damaged signal box about the bridge. The bridge is no longer there, but you can see the site within the trading estate. The ruins of the decomposed gas holders.

(2) Looking from Cleckheaton Road towards a brick building, part of which is still standing.

(3) Looking in the opposite direction, across Cleckheaton Road towards Furnace Road.

(4) Tracks in the slings were damaged by the blast.

(5) The wreckage of the signal box is almost unrecognisable. Photos A, S and G were taken from a site only used to return the memorial plaque now stands on the Greenway.

(6) and (8) This is the aftermath of the explosion. You can see the boundary fence, which was travelled 24 hours, in the bottom right. The munitions works are in the background and the remnants in the distance.

Because there was a war on, news of exactly what had happened could not be made public. (LWG) It was simply stated in newspapers that there had been an explosion at a Yorkshire munitions factory and there had been a considerable loss of life. It was not until after the war, that the full story could be pieced together in newspapers and those who had acted bravely could be recognised. (LLM)

It is believed that 40 people died as a direct result of the explosion and over 200 were injured, mainly by flying glass and debris.

The munitions factory was destroyed and never re-opened. The gas holders were destroyed, but eventually re-commissioned. The Woodroff dye works was badly damaged and later re-built. The Low Moor Ironworks at New Begin had damage to roofs and windows but soon continued production. Railway carriages and stock in the sidings were destroyed but once the area was declared safe, trains could run again.

The City Engineers and Surveyors Department estimated that there had been £40,000 worth of damage to property. Windows and doors were blown out over a considerable area and roofs were stripped. A number of properties were so badly damaged that they had to be pulled down. Many families were homeless for months and had to stay with relatives and friends.

Low Moor Munitions Explosion
Monday 21st August 1916

An event that changed lives forever

It is believed that 40 people died as a direct result of the explosion:

- 6 firemen from the Bradford Brigade
- 1 Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway fireman
- 1 policeman
- 2 employees at the Woodroff dye works of J and M S Sharp's
- 28 Employees of the Low Moor Munitions Company, including its manager John Majerus
- 1 local woman died of shock following the explosion
- 1 other employee of the Woodroff dye works died in the November following injuries sustained in the explosion.

John Majerus aged 54 was the manager of the Munitions Factory. Originally from Luxembourg he had trained as a chemist in Belgium but had worked in the UK, first in Huddersfield, since at least 1888. On the day of the explosion he had taken charge of the works fire brigade as his son Victor, the usual leader, had been on holiday in Bradford. After the initial explosion he was feared dead, but later in the afternoon he crawled from the rubble and seemed to be alright. He was taken home to 700 Huddersfield Road, Wyke but died the following day.

Charles West aged 35 of 6 Cart Gate, Bankfoot. He was charge hand at the Munitions Factory and was killed assisting firemen in putting out the blaze.

Frank Van Dender aged 25 years was a Belgian refugee employed at the Munitions Factory. The month after his death his wife gave birth to a baby girl, Elizabeth. After the war his wife and their three children returned to Belgium.

George Sutcliffe of Wesley Place, at 70 years was the oldest victim. He had spent most of his working life on the railways eventually becoming an engine driver. He was supplementing his pension by working as a dining room attendant at the Munitions Factory when he was killed by the blast.

Acting Police Sergeant Harold Reveley aged 35 of 698 Wakefield Road was killed whilst assisting the firemen.

Six Bradford Corporation firemen died. **Fred Normington**, (photo) Joseph Edmund Bines, Knighton Pedmore, Charles Suggitt, Edgar Shaw and Eli Buckley. There was a civic funeral which processed from the Central Fire Station at Nelson Street and large crowds lined the streets. (photos) They were buried in a communal grave at Scholes Cemetery and in 1916 a statue was erected in their memory which has since been moved to Birkershaw Fire Headquarters. (photo)

Superintendent Robert John Forbes (photo) of the Bradford Fire Brigade received the Albert Medal Second Class (photo) for his bravery in saving some of his comrades from certain death when he assisted them to safety following the blasts which wrecked the Hayhurst. His health was ruined by the effects of the explosion and he left the brigade and emigrated, with his family, to Australia in 1921.

The motorised fire engine **Hayhurst** was blown up and parts of it were recovered some distance away. The burnt out wreckage was towed back to Nelson Street and photographed with some of the survivors. (photo)

Two of the managers at the Low Moor ironworks also received the M.O.B.E. **Thomas Foster** manager of the Coke Ovens and **Thomas Lennox Poole** manager of the Blast Furnaces. (photos)

In 1917 **Sydney Simpson**, who had been in charge at the Low Moor telephone exchange received the Medal of the Order of the British Empire along with his three assistants **Doris Hird**, **Catherine Mortimer** and **Agnes Pearson**. (photos)

In 1920 seven of the firemen who had attended the explosion and who were still employed by the brigade, received the M.O.B.E. They were **Everett** No 18 **Harry Bailey**, **Fireman** No 19 **Joseph Prince**, **Fireman** No 7 **Thomas Henry Jowett**, **Fireman** No 23 **Harry Masheder**, **Chief Officer** **James Scott**, **Fireman** No 28 **Walter Stelling**, and **Fireman** No 35 **Ernest Whitaker**.

Three banners were prepared from our instructions by Pride Design of Buttershaw and these were on display at our events. The banners also spent time at Wyke, Wibsey and Bradford Local Studies Library during the summer and appeared at City Hall over Heritage Weekend. They now have a permanent home at "Under the Clock" the police museum in City Hall.

We are grateful to Bradford Council for a Community Chest Grant which went towards the purchase of the banners.

Organised by the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service

Sunday 21st August 2016 – Memorial and Thanksgiving Service

A memorial and thanksgiving service to mark the centenary of an explosion at Low Moor Munitions Company near Bradford which claimed 40 lives and seriously injured 60 others was held at St Paul's Church in Birkenshaw.

During the service at West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue headquarters a memorial to the victims was rededicated.



Chief fire officer Simon Pilling said: "It was a devastating event that took the lives of 40 people and injured up to 100 others.

"We felt it was fitting to mark the centenary here at fire service headquarters as we've been able to relocate the statue from Scholemoor Cemetery to here, where we have renovated and restored it."

Among those attending the service was David Crosby, from Vancouver, whose grandfather, Knighton Pridmore, was one of the firefighters killed in the explosion.

An exhibition marking the centenary also opened at Bradford City Hall.

Our reflections looking back

It's been a busy year – too busy at times! But we feel we have achieved what we set out to do – to bring the events of that day in 1916 to the attention of the local and wider community. In the past the contribution and sacrifice of the fireman had been the most remembered outcome of the explosion. We wanted to also highlight the effect it had on local people and the local community who lost friends and family and many were homeless for a considerable period as repairs to property were made.

An unexpected outcome of this project has been the contacts we have made with the families of those who died or were involved in the rescue. For most of them it was an event which was not spoken of and they had little notion of what had happened. We have been privileged to accompany them on a journey of discovery into the past. We have made some good friendships and along the way have found some answers and laid to rest some ghosts. Thank you to all of you – you know who you are.

Geoff, Mary and Barbara

