

Mary Jane Southall

Isle of Wight County Press – 28 May 1932

DESTRUCTIVE GAS EXPLOSION AT NEWPORT.

HOUSE WRECKED AND OCCUPANTS INJURED.

FATAL RESULT YESTERDAY.

A gas explosion which did extensive damage to the house and inflicted serious injury on two women occurred at Gainsborough, Shide Cross, Newport, on Saturday morning, the residence of Mrs. Southall, widow of a Wesleyan minister. The occurrence is yet another warning to others of the danger of searching for an escape of gas with a naked light.

Mrs. Southall and a domestic help (Mrs. Harding, of 14 Field-place, Newport) smelt escaping gas in the dining-room on the ground floor of the double-fronted house. They endeavoured to find the source of the leakage, and Mrs. Southall mounted a pair of steps to test the connections of the gas pendant with a match. She struck the match and there was a terrific explosion, and when alarmed neighbours rushed to the house they found the two women in a pitiable state, and the lower part of the house in ruins. Mrs. Harding, who was standing by the steps, was hurled through the door into the hall. Mrs. Southall was knocked off the steps, and both women were badly burnt by the flash of the explosion. They managed to escape from the room, and were discovered in a dazed state trying to make their way out of the house. Their hands and faces were badly burnt, their hair singed, and their clothing scorched and torn to ribbons in places. First-aid was promptly rendered by neighbours, and medical assistance was quickly at hand. Dr. A. A. Straton happened to be passing, and he rendered aid, and later Dr. W. W. Jeudwine, Mrs. Southall's medical attendant, completed the dressing of their injuries. In addition to burns, Mrs. Harding had a cut on the forehead. The house was so badly damaged that it was unsafe for occupation. Mrs. Southall was therefore accommodated at the residence of Mr. Frank Yelf, next door, and Mrs. Harding was taken home. Both were suffering severely from shock, and, in view of the damage done to the house, it is marvellous that they escaped with their lives.

A large quantity of gas must have accumulated in the upper part of the lofty room, and it was not until Mrs. Southall mounted the steps and struck a match that it was ignited. This would also account for the women not being overcome by the gas when entering the room, the windows of which were closed. At the moment fortunately they were standing in the centre of the explosion, and therefore missed its full outward force, which was terrific, as the damage clearly shows. Almost every portion of thick plate glass in the dining-room window was blown out, large pieces being hurled about 20 yards across the lawn in front of the house. The door leading from the dining-room into the hall was torn out with its frame

and smashed to pieces, and the wall between the dining-room and the hall was forced outwards, leaving a gap of about six inches at one end. The main outer wall of the dining-room was cracked and forced several inches out of the upright, the heavy stone sill of the bed-room window above being pushed several inches out of position. The inner wall on the opposite side of the room was cracked over the whole height of the staircase behind. In the drawing-room on the other side of the hall a large portion of the ceiling came down, the glass of a china cabinet was smashed, and the bay windows blown out. Even the greenhouse outside the residence at the back did not escape. The blast of the explosion coming through the French lights from the breakfast-room forced the front of the greenhouse outwards, and the roof fell until its collapse was arrested by the vine. The stair carpet was ripped up and paper stripped from the walls. It is very remarkable that the gas lamp shade and even the mantle in the dining-room remained intact.

The force of the explosion shook the houses in the district, and the muffled roar of it was heard half a mile away. The first to reach the house after the explosion were Mr. W. Willisford, who lives near, and Mr. V. Minchin, of Shorwell, who was delivering milk next door. They found the curtains and other light furnishings of the dining-room on fire, and promptly extinguished the flames, thus avoiding further destruction.

FATAL RESULT YESTERDAY.

Mrs. Southall was removed to a nursing home at Newport on Tuesday. Owing to her advanced age (she was 81) it was feared that the shock of her burns would prove serious, and she passed away early yesterday (Friday) morning. Mrs. Harding was also in a rather critical condition over the week-end, but she is now making good progress.

YESTERDAY.

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Newport Gas Explosion Tragedy.

INQUEST ON VICTIM.

The Deputy Coroner (Francis A. Joyce, Esq.) conducted an inquest at the Town-hall, Newport, yesterday (Friday) afternoon into the sad death of Mrs. M. J. Southall, of Gainsborough, Shide-cross, one of the women badly burned in the gas explosion at that house, particulars of which are given in another column. Mrs. Southall passed away early yesterday (Friday) morning at the Holyrood Nursing Home.

Inspector H. Randall and P.C. Lock were the police officers present, and Mr. A. R. Lightfoot (of Messrs. Lampert, Bassitt, and Hiscock), represented the Newport Gas Company.

The evidence of the principal witness, Mrs. Harding, a domestic help, who was also injured in the explosion, was taken at her home at 14 Field-place.

William Percy Wickenden, of High-street, Wootton, a cousin, gave evidence of identification, stating that the deceased was Mary Jane Southall, aged 81, widow of the Rev. G. Southall, formerly Wesleyan minister at Newport. She had resided at the house at Shide-cross for about 50 years, and in spite of her age, was active both physically and mentally.

Victor Randolph Minchin, dairyman, of Shorwell, who was delivering milk nearby when the explosion occurred, described how he and another man rushed into the house and extinguished burning material set on fire by the explosion, and turned off the gas.

Frank Ernest Cox, engineering manager of the Newport Gas Company, said the only possible places of escape of gas in the room were the gas pendant and the fitting or point for a gas fire. It was difficult to say where the escape occurred owing to the damage caused, but the gas pendant was found to be split just above the burner. The last time workmen from the company entered the house was on April 5th, when they made adjustments to the gas-stove and no request had since been received for attention to the fittings. The pendant was of an old pattern, the burner being operated by hanging chains. From the nature of the damage it would appear that the upper part of the room had become well charged with gas. It would be possible under those circumstances for a person to enter the room without noticing a very strong smell of gas. When he arrived at the house soon after the explosion occurred a pair of steps was standing under the gas pendant. There was a burnt match on the top of the steps and another on a table near. He could not swear whether the gas was turned off at the pendant or not. When the gas was again turned on at the meter it was not necessary to light a match to find the escape; it could be heard issuing from the pendant pipe.

Dr. W. W. Jeudwine stated that when he arrived the house looked as if there had been an air raid. The deceased had been put to bed by neighbours. She was rather badly burned about the hands, neck, and face, but the burns were not so severe as to cause anxiety. Later in the day the deceased was removed next door, where she was cared for until she was taken to his nursing-home on Tuesday. Before her removal it was evident that she was suffering from serious kidney trouble, and she gradually sank and died. Death was actually due to uraemia---the failure of the kidneys to operate---and that was undoubtedly caused by the shock of the explosion.

Lilian Gertrude Harding, the domestic help referred to, said she had been employed by Mrs. Southall on Wednesdays and Saturdays for about 10 years. On her arrival at about 9.45 on Saturday morning Mrs. Southall mentioned that there was a smell in the house. When she went to the room where the explosion occurred she could smell gas very strongly. Mrs. Southall reached up to the gas lamp and said it was turned off. She pulled the chain, apparently to make sure, and it came away in her hands. At her request witness then fetched the pair of steps which the deceased mounted in order to examine the gas bracket.

As witness brought the steps she thought she could see a faint line of blue vapour across the room just above the gas bracket. Mrs. Southall said she could not see it and asked for matches. Witness fetched a box of matches and said "You won't do yourself any harm, will you?" The deceased did not reply but looked at her as if to say "You mind your own business." Witness did not remember anything of what occurred after she handed her the matches, except that the explosion followed almost immediately, and she was blown out into the hall. The windows were closed. Deceased objected to the windows being opened, and she had told her that she locked all the doors in the house each night. Miss Denton, who lived next door, told witness that the gas was on in the room the night before.

In reply to the Coroner the witness said she realised to a certain extent the danger of striking a match, but did not realise that there was a dangerous amount of gas in the room.

THE CORONER'S WARNING.

The Deputy Coroner said Mrs. Harding had told quite a clear story of what happened and his verdict would be in accordance with the doctor's evidence. With regard to the cause of the escape of gas, it was fairly easy to suggest it although there was no direct evidence on the point. He thought the deceased left the gas pendant partly or wholly turned on after extinguishing it the night before. This would account for the large accumulation of gas. That theory was supported by the fact that the deceased pulled the chain in the morning hard enough to break it, it being already in the position to which she intended to pull it. She probably intended to light the burner and tried to turn it on when it was already on. Even then the accident would not have happened but for the stupid act of lighting a match. It only emphasised what one would have imagined anyone in these days would realise---that the only safe course to pursue in the event of detecting a smell of gas was to open the windows and doors to allow any accumulated gas to disperse, turn the gas off at the meter, and send for a gas fitter to discover the fault. Mrs. Southall unfortunately did not do this, and foolishly lighted a match. It was a very regrettable fatality, and he sympathised with the relatives.

Mr. Lightfoot said the Gas Company would like to be associated with the expression of sympathy.

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