

**Edward William Belcher**

**1911 England, Wales & Scotland Census**  
**13 High Street, Newport, Isle of Wight, Hampshire, England**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Relationship</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Birthplace</b>
Esther Belcher	Head	Widow	67	Sweet shop	Pilton near Salisbury
<i>Edward William Belcher</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>Single</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>Accountant Clerk</i>	<i>Salisbury</i>

**Isle of Wight County Press - 24 January 1914**

**STARTLING STREET EXPLOSION AT NEWPORT**

**TERRIBLE DEATH OF A TERRITORIAL BANDSMAN.**

**INQUEST AND MILITARY FUNERAL**

On Saturday night the residents of Newport and crowds of shoppers were startled by a terrific explosion in the vicinity of the Market-place, and not unnaturally, some in the streets, including several soldiers, at first imagined that the capital of the Island was being made the object of an air-ship raid. There were even cries of "Zeppelin", and shopkeepers in the locality complied with a suggestion made by the soldiers that they should put out their lights. One or two in the Market-place gazing skyward even went so far as to declare that they had even seen an aircraft. But all this proved to be imagination, as it was soon discovered that the explosion was not due to an enemy's bomb, but arose in the inspection chamber under the electric-light standard outside the front door of the old *County Press* office, facing the Market at the junction of Pyle-street and St. James's-street, and, unfortunately, it had fatal consequences. The explosion occurred soon after 9 and was plainly heard within a radius of about a mile. The streets were very busy at the time, many people were in the Market and passing up and down St. James's-street near the scene, and several had narrow escapes. Those in the vicinity were greatly alarmed and rushed away from the danger zone, some falling in the scramble, whilst another crowd surged up through the Market to see what had happened. The electric light in a portion of the district was defective, and it was when a fresh fuse was put in it at the pillar-feeder box in St. James'-square to remedy this that the explosion occurred. According to eye witnesses, Bandsman Edward Belcher, of the "Princess Beatrice's" I.W. Rifles, son of Mrs. Belcher, a widow of Lower High-street, was walking up Pyle-street at the time and arrived close by the electric-light inspection chamber at the time of the explosion, which blew high into the air the heavy concrete iron-framed cover of the chamber. This cover went well above the roof of the old *County Press* office, and whilst deceased was staggering under the shock of the explosion and probably looking round to see what had happened the descending cover struck him on the head and shoulder and crushed him into the gutter. Several soldiers close by went to his assistance, but unfortunately life was extinct. Supt. J. W. Gibbs, of the local Ambulance Division, was also quickly on the scene, as was Dr. Shortt, from the surgery of Dr. McKay, and the body was removed into the Corn Exchange for examination and identification. Inspectors Sibbeck and Salter, of the police, were also present. Feelings of alarm then gave place to expressions of sympathy for the victim and his mother. The body was afterwards conveyed to the mortuary connected with the military hospital at Parkhurst to await an inquest. The deceased, who, prior to mobilization with the Territorials, had done clerical work, was well known and much appreciated as a cornet player of marked ability, as was his late father. He was a valued member of the Territorial Band and previously of the St. Paul's and Newport Band, and he formerly rendered much appreciated assistance in the St. Paul's Brotherhood Band. The deceased was on the point of leaving the Territorials, having been certified medically unfit for further service, and he proposed to return home from Sandown on the following day.

At the service of the St. Paul's Brotherhood on Sunday the President (Rev. Charles Collis) made feeling reference to the distressing occurrence, saying that their late brother had at many of their services given them of his best in the glorious and powerful yet dulcet tones of his beautiful cornet, on which he was a clever player, and their sympathy went out to the bereaved in their sorrow.

### THE INQUEST

---was held at the Military Hospital, Parkhurst, on Monday evening by Dr. Stanley Foster, Assistant Deputy Coroner.

Mr. H. J. Jacobs represented the family of the deceased, of whom deceased's brother, Mr. F. C. Belcher, was present. Mr. G. F. S. Stratton (Messrs. Stratton and Sons) appeared for the I.W. Electric-light and Power Co., and Mr. C. F. Hiscock (Messrs. Lamport, Bassitt, and Hiscock) was for the Newport Gas Company. There were also present Mr. F. E. Witcher, T.C (ex-Mayor), Mr. T. Ross Pratt (Town Clerk), and Mr. F. W. B. Waterworth (borough surveyor). The police were represented by Supt. J. H. Gallaway (Deputy Chief Constable) and Insp. Sibbeck. Amongst those also attending were Mr. B. Bolwell (local manager) and Mr. H. E. Corner (secretary) of the I.W. Electric-light Co., and Mr. S. W. Ibbotson (manager) and Mr. Frank King (secretary) of the Newport Gas Company. Capt. Donald Ratsey was present from "Princess Beatrice's" I.W. Rifles.

Mr. E. J. Airs was the foreman of the jury.

The Coroner said they had two things to consider in that inquiry, the cause of the explosion, which seemed to have resulted in the death of deceased, and what degree of responsibility, if any, attached to any one.

Insp. Sibbeck gave formal evidence of identification saying deceased had been stationed at Sandown and was visiting Newport on Saturday night.

Herbert Edward Croucher, clerk at the Newport Post-office, said that at 9.15 p.m. on the previous Saturday he was in the middle of St. James's-street about four or five yards from the electric-light standard in question when the explosion occurred, and a Territorial in uniform, who afterwards proved to be deceased, was at the old *County Press* corner. The explosion was terrific and two or three of the lights on the standard went out. He glanced upwards when the explosion occurred, thinking they were the cause of the explosion. It was then that he noticed deceased standing on the kerb stone at the corner. As he looked up he saw that the cover of the inspection chamber was in the air about on a level with the roof of the old *County Press* office, and immediately it came down with tremendous force on deceased's head and deceased was crushed in a heap in the gutter. He went towards him and seeing that deceased was terribly injured he got on his bicycle. At the same time two or three soldiers came round and took off their coats and put them under deceased's head.—Q. Were there many people about at the time?—There were a lot of people in the Market, but deceased was alone at the time of the explosion.—Q. Was there any one standing by him?—No.

The Foreman: It was reported that he pushed a woman out of the way at the time of the explosion. Did you see that?—I heard that report, but I am sure there was nothing in that.

Supt. Gallaway: If deceased could have looked up would he have had time to get out of the way of the cover?—I don't think so; it came down at such a terrific speed.—Q. Did it come down edgewise?—As far as I could see it came down flat.

John Kelly, prison warder, of Parkhurst, said that just after 9 on Saturday night he was going up Nodehill to do some shopping. He was in the middle of the road, and as he got opposite Ruston's, the

chemist's—about eight yards away from the electric-light standard—he heard a tremendous explosion and some glass came down, he believed, from one of the little lamps of the standard. He thought it was a bomb at first, and when he looked up immediately after he saw the cover from the inspection chamber coming down out of the air. He saw deceased walking up the street immediately under the lamp, and witness said to Mr. Kingswell, who was with him “It will be on that soldier's head”.—Q. You had time to say all that?—Well, I was talking to Mr. Kingswell. The cover came down on deceased's head and he fell to the ground. He went over towards deceased, and Mr. Croucher was there, and the latter then went for a doctor. A soldier picked deceased up and the military picquet then came to his assistance.—Q. You are perfectly satisfied it was this cover which was blown up and fell down hitting him on the head?—Yes, I am quite certain. It was a terrible explosion.—Q. What did you think it was?—I thought it was a bomb at first until I saw the cover coming down, and I think every one else did. Deceased was walking up Pyle-street and was facing towards the chemist's shop when the explosion occurred.

The Foreman: I suppose there was no chance for him to get out of the way if he had looked up?—He was looking to see where the explosion was. They were all looking to see. Of course, if he had looked up he could not have got out of the way. When I saw the cover coming down I said “Oh my God, it will be on that soldier's head”.

Mr. E. J. Mills (a juror): Did you see a woman standing by deceased when the explosion occurred?—No. I saw a woman go over the inspection chamber and up the street immediately before the explosion occurred, but deceased was not near her then. She had got just opposite the private door of the old *County Press* premises when the explosion happened.

Horace Stone, of 8 Clarence-road, Newport, said he was a foreman at the I.W. Electric-light Co.'s works at Newport. On Saturday evening he saw there was a “dip” in the electric lights in certain of the shops and houses and he went to the Market-place and rang up the works to see how things were going on and whether they were affected there.—Q. What did you notice about the lighting?—Just a drop or dip.—Q. Did it remain dropped?—No, it went down for a second; that was about 8.15. I thought there must be something wrong and I rang up the works—Q. Could they explain the matter?—No, they could not explain it, as it was only a section of the lighting in the town. I simply rang down to the works to see if all was well and how they were situated, and then I set about to remedy the fault.—Q. Where was the fault?—That I did not know. I went to our pillar-feeder box in the Market and I discovered there that the fuse that supplied Upper St. James's-street, on one side of the system, had gone. I pulled out the fuse-clip and put in a lighter fuse, and immediately I put in this fuse-clip I saw the lights in St. James's-street come on again and the explosion occurred simultaneously with that.—Q. Are you prepared to offer any explanation of the actual cause of the explosion?—No, I am not.—Q. As to your putting in the fuse-clip, I take it there was nothing in that?—Unless there was an explosive mixture in the box, when the effect of putting in the fuse-clip might have ignited it. The box is of iron, and it is in a brick chamber.—Q. How could anything get in there?—I don't know. The pillar-feeder box is down in the Market against the County Club.—Q. What did you do then?—I proceeded to the County Press corner to see what had happened and found that the cover had been removed from the inspection chamber. I waited there and there was another small explosion, which was practically nothing.—Q. How long after would that have been?—About 10 minutes—Q. Did that second explosion occur in the inspection chamber?—You could not really call it an explosion. It was probably a section fuse melting out. I then disconnected the feed to that box on the other side of the system at the pillar-feeder box.—Q. What was the weight of the inspection chamber cover?—2 cwt. 15 lb. It was not cemented down. It was just dropped into place, because it was taken up periodically for examination. The cover consists of an iron frame filled in with concrete. It would be 2ft 3in. or 2ft 4in. square and would take a tremendous force to blow it out. It would be rather difficult to say how many lights went out, but you could roughly take it to be about one half of the lights on the Shide side of Pyle-street right up through that district. Three lamps on the standard in question were out. I put the fourth lamp out.

Questioned further as to the cause of the explosion, witness said he thought there must have been some explosive mixture there.—Q. Is it possible for the electric light to have caused the explosion?—No, I don't think so. No doubt it was an electric spark that actually caused the explosion, but as regards the explosive mixture I don't know.—Q. The electric light does not explode itself?—Well, not in that sense.—Q. How often are these pits inspected?—Those in the center of the town about once a month.—Q. These pits are only for inspection purposes?—And for the disconnection of a section of the district.—Q. Have you ever heard of such an accident as this before?—No. There was no leakage in the chamber of any electric current.

Asked whether a short circuit could have caused the explosion, the witness said no. Such a quantity of current could not get through to cause an explosion.

By the Foreman: On former occasions he had had to do a similar thing to that which he did at the pillar-feeder box in order to remedy matters in connection with the lighting. He never dreamt of any explosion occurring. He did not think that putting the fuse-clip in would have caused it.

By Mr. W. G. Sibbick (juror): The cover was last lifted four or five weeks before the explosion. The second explosion was not similar to the first.

By Mr. F. M. Walker, B.A. (a juror): The inspection pit was, he thought, hermetically sealed before the explosion.—Q. The last week's rain would do that by washing in the mud?—Yes, it would be sealed.—Q. And that accounts for the violence of the explosion?—Yes.

The Foreman: You have not any idea as to what caused the explosion?

Witness: No, not in the light in which you put it, only that there was an explosive mixture; no doubt in putting the fuse-clip there might have been a spark in the box which caused the explosion.

The Coroner: Where could any explosive mixture come from?—I am not an expert in explosive mixtures.

Mr. Walker: Is it possible for any gas to get into the chamber through the sides?—The sides of the pit are brick.—Q. Then gas could get through?—Well---

By Mr. Hiscock: The voltage was 240 for lighting and 480 for power.—Q. What experience have you had in looking after inspection chambers and electric lighting?—21 or 22 years. Vapours which might arise in the chamber would remain there if the cover remained down, and if the cover had been taken off during the last five weeks it would have allowed any vapours to escape.—Q. Have you ever heard of an explosion such as this before?—Not of the same magnitude as this one.—Q. Have you heard of some of lesser magnitude?—Yes, I have read about them.—Q. If you get fusing of the wire you get the bitumen on the wire getting very hot and melting?—But I don't take it that there was any fusing of the wire.—Q. If there is heating and the bitumen melts does that not produce a vapour?—Yes.—Q. Is not that a vapour which could be made explosive?—Yes, I would say so.—Q. You told us that no doubt it was an electric spark that caused the explosion?—Yes, I surmised that.—Q. With your experience you say that this is what is likely to have happened?—Yes.—Q. If the bitumen melted and caused these vapours in a chamber that was sealed so that they could not escape, that would account for the explosion?—I say I am not an expert on explosives.—Q. But if an explosive vapour had been there and an electric spark came it would be sufficient to cause an explosion?—Yes.—Q. Would it have been the wiser course to have had the current switched off whilst you were doing what you did that night?—No, that is not the practice.—Q. Would it not have been the wiser course to have adopted?—If you are assuming that there was gas in the chamber.—Q. Well, something was in there because we have heard of an explosion?—I have examined the inspection pit since and the cables were quite all right.—Q. Are they in use now?—Yes, but I have taken the disconnecting box and cut it out of it.—Q. Has there been any joined up to the cable?—Yes,

with a copper strip; that was done yesterday. The pavement at one end of the box was shaken by the explosion.

By Mr. Stratton: When you inserted the fuse in the pillar-feeder box where would the sparking actually take place?—Somewhere in the link box—Q. Is the link box hermetically sealed?—Yes, it should be as far as you are in a position to judge.—Q. How is it sealed?—The cover fits down on the outside and the outer edge of it goes into oil to prevent water from getting in.—Q. So that if sparking took place it would be inside that iron box, that is, sealed from the inspection pit?—Yes. The Electric-light Co. had been working there for about 15 years, and there had been no accident before.

The Foreman: Did you notice any smell of gas close to the box?—No, sir.

Supt. Gallaway: Have you ever noticed a smell of gas in that chamber when you have been inspecting it?—No, sir.

Mr. A. J. Sanders (a juror) asked if they were to be considered a special jury of the County Court instead of only a Coroner's jury sitting to ascertain the cause of death. He submitted that they were not there to hear technical points fought out between two companies. He thought they were going too far. If they were going to continue like that they might be there till nearly midnight.

The Coroner said the legal representatives of the Companies had a perfect right to ask questions.

Mr. Hiscock said he had asked the questions he did because the Coroner had said they had to try and find out the cause of the explosion and what responsibility, if any, there was for it.

Dr. John W. Shortt, practising at Newport, said he heard the explosion whilst he was at supper and he hurried to the scent within three or four minutes. He believed deceased was killed instantaneously. He described the severe injuries to the head, shoulder, &c., which included a compound fracture of the skull. The deceased's cap was cut across the crown and the injury to the head corresponded with that.

The Coroner said from the evidence it seemed impossible to arrive definitively at the cause of the explosion, but as far as they could tell there was no one to blame in the matter. Plainly, the fall of the cover caused the man's death and they could not see that there was any one to blame. He felt inclined to leave it at that.

Mr. Sibbick thought steps should be taken to have those inspection chamber covers lifted more frequently.

The Foreman said the jury had come to the conclusion that it was a case of accidental death, and they wished him to suggest that in their opinion the inspection chamber covers should be lifted at least once a week for the safety of the public.

The Coroner: I quite agree with you..

The Foreman said the jury also wished to express their deep sympathy with the relatives of the deceased, and especially with his widowed mother, to whom they would like to hand their fees.

The witnesses also gave their fees to the deceased's mother.

The Coroner also expressed his sympathy with the bereaved.

Mr. Stratton, on behalf of the Electric-light Co., said he wished to express their deepest regret at the accident and to tender their sincere sympathy with the relatives. Without admitting any liability, he added

that they were prepared to pay such expenses as the relatives might be put to in connection with the funeral.

### THE FUNERAL

--took place with full military honours on Thursday afternoon, the first part of the service being conducted at St. Thomas's Church, Newport, and the interment was at Newport Cemetery, the Rev. J. L. Spratt officiating. The streets were lined with sympathising spectators as the cortege passed through from Parkhurst to the Parish-church and thence to the Cemetery. The coffin, wrapped in the Union Jack, with deceased's cornet on top, was borne on a gun drawn by six horses of the East Lancashire Royal Field Artillery (Territorials), and the "Princess Beatrice's" I.W. Rifles provided the firing party and bearers, the former being in charge of Sergt. Fielder, whilst the C (Newport) company, with Cpts. Turner-Clark and Raymond, with the band, under Bandmaster Conian, also attended. The band played Chopin's "Marche Funebre" *en route*, and at the graveside, where there was a large general attendance, three volleys were fired over the grave by the firing party, and the buglers sounded the "The last post" during a hard rain, which intensified the gloom of the occasion. The personal mourners were Mr. F. C. Belcher (brother), Mr. - White, Mr. J. Trickett, Mr. W. Cooke, and Mr. W. D. Peachey (bandmaster of the St. Paul's Band) and Dr. Shortt. The floral tributes were: From his sorrowing mother and brother; Mrs. T. L. Switzer (aunt); Mr. and Mrs. Collinson, Rose, and Elsie (cousins); with sincere regret, from the officers, non-commissioned officers, and men of D Company "Princess Beatrice's" I.W. Rifles; with deepest sympathy, from the Band and Buglers of the I.W. Rifles; with deepest regret, from the St. Paul's and Newport Band; Mr. and Mrs. Cheverton, cousins, and family; Mr. and Mrs. Hale; Miss Greengrass. Mr. H. Parnell carried out the funeral arrangements.

*Transcription by Ian Roach for the Friends of Newport & Carisbrooke Cemeteries © 2019*

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Picture from Brian Greening

(looking up Newport High Street from Quay Street, Holyrood Street on the right.)