The night explosions rocked Limerick

Sharon Slater turns back the pages to rediscover the 1837 gunpowder explosion that killed 20 people

On January 3, 1837, a gunpowder rocketed the city into its own care. In total, only 20 people lost their lives, one of whom the Chronicle recorded as “died from the effects of fright.” The city was quiet on winter’s night with most of the inhabitants either in bed or on their way to bed to catch at night. Little did they know that their night would be disturbed in such a dramatic fashion.

This was not the first gunpowder explosion in the city on November 21, 1833, but one of the towers which defended the entrance to Merchants’ Quay fell down causing stones to land on the 350 barrels of gunpowder contained in the building. There were a reported 100 people killed or wounded in the incident. Several houses were destroyed and the explosion was felt far away in Kilmainham.

In 1834, there were at least seven gunmills operating in the city. One of these, John Richardson, ran his gunnison on the corner of Market Street and George Street (O’Connell Street). He had been there for ten years. On the day in question, Richardson had received some cas- kets of gunpowder into his store. Richardson himself was not on the premises, and the powder was received by his caretaker Geroge. Geroge was a servant in the house and was the last person seen entering what happened to ignite the powder. It was impossible to tell if George or Richardson, the only person near it, died immediately in the explosion.

The blast was a force that destroyed four houses outright and blew out the windows of the buildings in the surrounding area. Even the windows in “the poor house on the Strand at the other side of the river were broken.” It also blew out the public gas lamps, which plunged the city into complete darkness as the conflagration continued. The Chronicle of January 7, tells us that the flash from the scene was witnessed far away at Castleconnell. The Chronicle of January 4, described the scene: “The scene of this appalling calamity was the large house, corner of George’s street and Denmark-street, inhabited by Mr. Richardson, the extensive gun-manufactory...” The private magazine of gunpowder blew up, and brought the whole premises to the ground, leaving at one glance a scene of desolation, wreck, and ruin, with a cloud of dust and an evil smell that enveloped every object.

This goes on to tell of the first responders on the scene. Mr. Roche, M.P., the Mayor, Aldermen Watson, Gibson, &c., repaired to the scene with the police and firemen. Pigments of the Royal Regi- mental depot were brought up soon after the explosion.

There were four other people in the house at the time, the housekeeper Bridget Doolan, her husband and a neighbour who were all killed instantly. A young male apprentice called Robert Teskey was propelled into the hall and died instantly. The house was also burning in the house. One of these Margaret Hynes, was pro- pelled into the hall by Wilson house, a George Street. Sadly, she passed away after reaching Barrington’s Hospital. While the other died before reaching the hospital. The other Horella Grady died instantly.

At the time of the explosion, Wilson was with his family in the parlour about to read a chapter of the bible when suddenly the door burst open and the room was enflamed with smoke. This was accompanied by a loud noise like the explosion being fired. His wife quickly grabbed their child and called the other to follow her out the door. A section of the stairwell had been blown away. They fell into a pile of rubble but managed to escape with only minor injuries.

The house opposite to Richardson’s was owned by John El- lard, a grocer and wine merchant. Ellard was on his way home when he was suddenly lifted off the ground, thrown against the street and buried under rubble. He managed to ex- tricate himself from the rubble but was stunned. He did not recognise his surroundings. Returning to his house, Ellard found that several tea chests were blown open and gasses of spirit flowed into the street.

Ellard’s neighbour, living in Burke’s house, was about to get into bed when several pieces of iron, gun-shot and pikes were soon through the window and lodged in the bed. A large beam was blown in front of this house hitting a young physician, Dr. John Healy of Bank Place, killing him instantly. Michael O’Neill, a Waiter, was near to the young doctor when he was thrown against a wall and killed. The houses on Patrick Street all shook, their windows shattered, their occupants ran into the dark- ness of the street, covered in debris. This street was the home of Anne Ryan the daughter of John Ryan, a leather merchant, was struck by flying debris in her home and although she survived the initial shock, she was killed at the hospital. The time could not save her.

There were a number of lucky evaders, including Richardson’s nephew, who was due to stay in McManus’s house. He had arrived in Limerick that afternoon was spotted not visiting others in the city when the explosion occurred. Another of the McManus children was delayed at work and luckily escaped the ensuing drama at his home.

Two gentlemen who lived at the Crescent had a narrow escape after leaving the Ross Hotel and bed. As they stood on the street, large boards flew over their heads, hitting the path in front of them. There were a number of people who were injured on the night who later succumbed to their wounds.

Others identified were John O’Brien, servant to Patrick Hogan, Hardware Merchant, Denham Street, and Patrick Brick, a watchman. Both survived the explosion.

The Corporation quickly raised two proposals; firstly that no gunpowder vender should be allowed to transport more than 2,000 lbs on their premises and that only 50 lbs should be kept on the floor below while the remaining should be kept on an upper floor. Also, that no gunpowder should be sold by sundown.

It was estimated in the Chronicle that the damage to the buildings was about £8,000. It would cost £3,000 to replace each shatterer pane of glass and some of the houses had up to 150 panes smashed each.

As for William Richardson, did he learn his lesson? It appears from a Chronicle report from January 11, 1840 that he did not. The report de- tails how Richardson had opened another gun manufacturing business on Patrick Street. While being inspected on suspicion of exceeding the limit for gun powder in the building, he was found in the stable hiding two costs of gunpowder under the horse’s feet while his servant was searched with no other. Richardson was fined £200 for this and it is hoped that he had learned his lesson.

Although the explosion was extreme and the loss of twenty lives horrific, if the accident had taken place during the night that number would have been higher and we would not be marking January 3 today.