

# The night explosions rocked Limerick

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

**O**N January 3, 1837, a gunpowder rocked the city centre to its core. In total twenty people lost their lives, one of whom the Chronicle recorded as "died of the absolute 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 at 10 o'clock 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, 1813 house in May's Lane, Thomondgate blew up, as the occupants were trying to dry gunpowder in an iron pot over an open fire.

This was the worst explosion though since 1693, when on February 12, one of the towers which defended the entrance to Merchant's Quay fell down causing stones to land on the 250 barrels of gunpowder contained in the building. There were a reported 210 people killed or wounded "in a shocking manner". Several houses were destroyed and the explosion was felt as far away as Kilmallock.

In 1837, there were at least seven gunsmiths operating in the city. One of these William Richardson, ran his gunsmith on the corner of Denmark Street and George Street (O'Connell Street). He had this business here for over ten years.

On the day in question, Richardson had received some caskets of gunpowder into his store. Richardson himself was not home that and the powder was received by his caretaker Gurde. Gurde slept in the house and was the last person seen entering what happened to ignite the powder is impossible to say as Gurde, the only person near it died immediately in the explosion.

The blast hit at such a ferocity that it 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 adding to the confusion. The Chronicle of January 7, tells us that the flash from the scene was witnessed as far away as 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-manufacturer, whose private magazine of gunpowder blew up, and brought the whole premises to the ground, exhibiting at one glance a scene of desolation, wreck, and ruin, awful to contemplate, but the extent of which was unknown for many minutes, under the cloud of darkness which enveloped every object".

It goes on to tell of the first responders on the scene "Mr. William Roche, M.P., the Mayor, Aldermen Watson, Gibson, &c. repaired to the spot, with the parish watch and policemen. Piquets of the Royal Regt. and 72d depot were brought up soon after". The scene that met them was one of death and destruction though they could not comprehend how much until the cold light of the morning. The Chronicle continues, "Such a deplorable catastrophe as this is not within the memory of the oldest inhabitant".

There were four other people in the house at the time, the house-keeper Bridget Doolan, her husband and a neighbour who were all killed instantly. While a young male apprentice called Robert Teskey, was propelled from his bed into the street. He was injured but not fatally.

Thomas McMahon, a baker, lived next door to Richardson on Denmark Street with his wife Margaret, two sons, a daughter, a niece and their servant Bridget Donoghue. The explosion was so fierce that McMahon's house collapsed entirely, all but one son and the daughter perished. The McMahon's were buried in Kilquane graveyard, Parteen.

A fifteen-year-old Mary Barry, Market Alley was buying a penny worth of bread at the time of the explosion and did not survive.

The other adjoining house 2 George Street a lodging-house, run by a widow, Maria Ryan was also for the most part destroyed. Amazingly, Ryan along with her two sons, a daughter and sister-in-law all survived though a number of them were buried within the house for a number of hours. Her eighteen year old son escaped out a partially collapsed window and held on to the outside of the building until a ladder could be found to rescue him. While the bed on which her younger son was sleeping was forced out of the house, onto the street, where the boy remain in it for the journey un-

## Gunpowder Explosion. 26

Limerick, 9th March, 1837.

**G**ENTLEMEN—We the undersigned beg leave thro' you, to return our sincere thanks to the Directors of your respectable Company, for their extremely liberal conduct in ordering payment of all the damage done to our premises by the melancholy explosion from gunpowder, in the house of Mr. Richardson, on the night of the 3d of January last. You will also be pleased to accept our best thanks for your exertions with your honourable Company in procuring this unexpected and truly liberal payment.

We are, Gentlemen, yours respectfully,

**ALEXANDER RROITHERS,  
THOMAS TRACY.**

**SIKES & Co.**

**ELIZA FERGUSON,  
ALICIA FERGUSON,**

To John Piercy & Son, Agents  
West of England Insurance Company,  
George's-street, Limerick.

March 11.

Some of the damaged caused by Richardson's explosion was paid by private insurance companies while voluntary donations helped those without insurance. This notice was placed in the Chronicle on March 15, 1837

harmed.

Her sister-in-law Catherine Ryan was blown out of the house, landing on a heap of rubbish fracturing her collarbone. There were two servants was also sleeping in the house. One of these Margaret Hynes, was propelled into the hall of William Wilson house, 3 George Street. Sadly, she passed away after reaching Barrington's Hospital. While the other died before reaching the hospital. The other Hanora 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 engulfed with smoke. This was accompanied by a loud noise like a cannon being fired. His wife quickly grabbed her youngest child and called the others 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 opposites to Richardson's was owned by John Ellard, a grocer and wine merchant. Ellard was on his way home when he was suddenly lifted off the ground, thrown across the street and buried under rubble. He managed to extract himself from the rubble but so stunned he did not recognise his son. Returning to his house, Ellard found that several tea chests were blown open and gallons 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 barrels and pistols were sent through his 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 Watchman, was near to the young doctor when he was thrown

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against a wall and killed.

The houses on Patrick Street all shook, their windows shattering, their occupants ran into the darkness of the street, now covered in debris. This street was the home of Anne Ryan the daughter of John Ryan, leather merchant, was struck by flying debris in her home and although she survived the initial shock, the medical treatment at the time could not save her.

There were a number of lucky escapes including Richardson's nephew, who was due to stay in McMahon's house. He had arrived in Limerick that afternoon was out visiting others in the city when the explosion occurred. Another of the McMahon children was delayed at work and luckily missed the ensuing drama at his home.

Two gentlemen who lived at the Crescent had a narrow escape after leaving Cruise's Hotel on their way home. 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, Denmark Street; Patrick Doolan of County Offaly and John Enright a shipping pilot from Carrigaholt who was only seven weeks married. Terence Blake survived for almost a month and was the last official death of the explosion. The only living creature to survive more than a few hours in the rubble was a cat who sprang from a cellar after three days.

The Corporation quickly raised two proposals; firstly, that no gunpowder vender should have casts of more than 25lb on their premises and that only 5lbs should be kept on the retail floor while the remaining should be kept on an upper floor. Also, that no gunpowder should be sold by candlelight.

It was estimated in the Chronicle that the damage to the buildings was near to £13,000. It would cost £1 to replace each shattered 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 details how Richardson had opened another gun manufacturing business on Patrick Street. While being inspected on suspicion of exceeding the legal limit for gun powder in the city limits, he was found in the stable hiding two casts of gun powder under the horse's feet while his servant had absconded with another. Richardson was fined £100 for this and it is hoped that he had his license revoked soon after.

Although the explosion was extreme and the loss of twenty lives horrific, if the accident had taken place during the day that number would have been higher and we would undoubtedly be marking January 3 even today.