

Herald (Melbourne, Vic. : 1861 - 1954), Wednesday 21 November 1923, page 1

# DEER PARK TRAGEDY

## Cause of Explosion a Mystery

### NOTHING LEFT ON WHICH TO BASE THEORIES

How the three men, Thomas Askew, Frederick Ingles and Christopher Vella, who were killed yesterday by an explosion at the works of the Australian Explosive and Chemical Company, Deer Park, met their death will probably for ever remain a mystery.

Theories may be advanced, but it is considered extremely unlikely that any official investigation, however careful, will definitely ascertain the cause of the tragedy.

Gloom hung over the works today. With the exception of a small batch of men engaged repairing and clearing up the havoc worked by the explosion, the premises were closed down.

Experts were on the scene early this morning and Messrs H. J. Lewis, Inspector of Explosives, William Brown, general manager, J. M. Gird, acting works manager, and J. Hencham, assistant manager, examined what was left of the fatal No. 15 hut. Even today, elaborate precautions were taken to prevent strangers from encroaching on the company's works. At the only entrance aicket was on duty to warn strangers and see that nobody went further than the office door. Even employees were prohibited from going near the scene of the explosion.

#### A Double Problem

The experts are faced with a double problem.

They have to, if possible, determine the cause of the disaster and, secondly, make a pronouncement as to when it would be safe for the work to be resumed again.

There are still some unexploded portions of "off" lying about the grass. It is said, and before the works can be thoroughly ransacked and cleared up, it would be suicidal to resume operations.

In determining the cause, it has first to be ascertained whether the initial explosion occurred in one of the two trucks which were standing inside the earthworks near the door of No. 15 shed, or whether it originated in the mixture of 50 per cent. gelatine which was in the mixing machine inside the shed.

The trucks run on a tramline from the huts in the central nitro-glycerine shed. One truck, it has been clearly proved, was empty. The other contained about 270lb. of explosive material. The mixing machine inside con-

tained about 270lb. of explosive material. The mixing machine inside contained about 200lb. of the mixture.

In both instances precautions, which seem to the layman to be ultra-elaborate, are made to ensure safety. The trucks have iron wheels and gunmetal bearings which make no sparks. They are lined with insulation and completely enclosed.

#### Hole in Ground

The machine itself is of gunmetal, brass, and copper. No sparks can possibly arise from any friction in its bearings.

When the explosion occurred, Askew was inside the hut at the mixing machine. Ingles and Vella were in charge of the trucks. Ingles having the full one.

If either Ingles's truck or Askew's machine exploded first, the concussion would have been sufficient to wreck the whole shed.

Unfortunately, there is now only a hole in the ground, surrounded by what is left of the earthwork, to mark the spot where the shed stood. All evidence which could have thrown any light on the matter, has been obliterated.

At the last explosion at the works on January 18, when three girls were killed, there was sufficient evidence left by the parts of the cartridge machine to indicate that the explosion had started inside the machine and shattered it outwards.

There was, too, a survivor to tell her story.

#### Nitro-Glycerine Shed

In view of the circumstances, theories in the present case seem hopeless. There are no foundations on which to base them, and the experts at the works this morning were the first to admit this fact.

The fact that the explosion was confined to one shed was extremely lucky. About 150 yards away from No. 15 shed is situated the large nitro-glycerine shed, which, had it exploded, must undoubtedly have wrecked the whole works, and possibly portion of the countryside.

Extra precautions are taken in this vulnerable shed and only picked men work there.

In fact, since the last explosion, workmen employed at the factory say that the supervision necessary under

the Factory Act has been tightened and the men constantly instructed to take no chances.

Some of them have been working with explosives for many years, and it is stated that warnings are neces-

sary, as the workers are sometimes tempted to relax their vigilance through abundant usage.

#### Fire Narrowly Averted

Yesterday about 250 persons were employed on the company's premises, including the explosive factory and the chemical manure works. Of these, 25 are girls, and practically the whole staff has been put off pending the report of Mr Lewis, Inspector of Explosives.

What might have caused further explosions, with greater loss of life, was narrowly averted by the presence of kind of two chemists employed by the company.

Shaken by the force of the explosion, several bottles standing on shelves in a laboratory were hurled to the floor and smashed. Included among these were a number of jars of phosphorus which immediately ignited and gave off poisonous fumes.

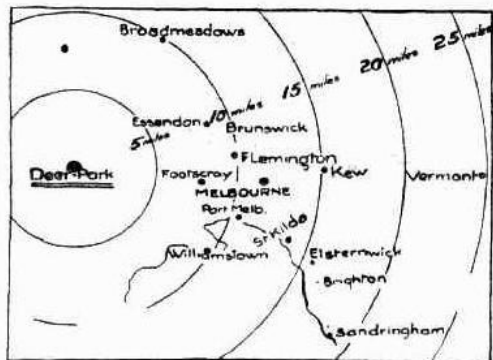
The employees' fire brigade was at a loss for a few minutes as to how to deal with the outbreak until two chemists saved the situation. They extinguished the fire with other chemicals.



Fred Ingles



Thos. Askew



Places Where the Explosion was Heard.

### DEER PARK EXPLOSION

(Continued in Page 1)

#### CHANGED HIS MIND

#### Vella Intended to Take Day Off

Had Christopher Vella not changed his mind yesterday morning he would not have lost his life in the Deer Park explosion.

Vella, who lived with him at Mrs Reardon's boarding house, at 644 Latrobe street, West Melbourne, made this statement today.

They explained that after Vella woke early yesterday morning he expressed the intention of taking a day off to enjoy a "sleep in." A few minutes later, however, he

changed his mind, rose and set out for Deer Park.

Vella, they said, emigrated to Australia from Malta 13 months ago with his father. The young Maltese, who was 23 and single, had been employed at Deer Park for 3 months. His father lives at Malvern.

Several of the Maltese men, who boarded with Vella, appeared to feel their comrade's death keenly. They exhibited indignation, however, when they pointed out that he had been described in a section of the press as a Lascar. Vella, they emphasised, was a Maltese and a British subject, who had served in the Mediterranean fleet and fought for two years as a soldier with the British forces at Salonika.

Chris Vella was a decent, steady young man, who saved steadily out of his wages, and sent money regularly to his mother and four sisters in

his wages, and sent money regularly to his mother and four sisters in Malta, said Mrs Heardon, with whom the Maltese boarded during the last nine months.

She added that boxing was Vella's hobby, and his ambition was to make a name for himself in the ring.

The Maltese stated that Vella's funeral would take place on Friday.



Chris Vella.

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