

Explosion on Coalpit Hill

Talke's worst and most explosive year was in 1781, long before the mines began adding to the death toll.

In the July of that year, a huge fire swept through the south end of the village devastating nine houses and five barns.

Only one month later on Saturday 4th August, catastrophe struck the north end. 39 cwt or two tons of gunpowder, along with some metal objects that were to become projectiles, was being carried down Swan Bank. The driver was in the Queen's Head for a pick-me-up and Joseph Fallows, a stagecoach driver, had volunteered to take the horse and cart down the hill. Gunpowder had trickled out of the cases and landed on the pavement and a spark from the wheel ignited it, leaving a trail of fire behind the wagon just before the casks took hold and exploded.

All the horses and the driver were killed and two nearby houses were turned into rubble, with many others damaged. £2,387 15shillings 3pence of damage was caused by both misfortunes. The drivers mangled body, along with one of the horses, was forced through the wall of a house completely destroying it, although fortunately no-one in the house was hurt. Limbs and twisted metal were found a good distance away, the pavement was blasted downwards by the explosion's force and the driver's watch fob was later found melted into a solid mass. It is probably kept, along with other twisted pieces of wreckage, in the museum of Sir Ashton Lever's.

This catastrophe could have been much worse had it been a weekday with the nearby Free School open, or a Sunday when people may have been passing the hill on the way to St. Martins for prayer. It also happened just past the market cross, where a fair was taking place.

Gunpowder trickling onto the road was common, and there are other accounts of it exploding just behind the cart and with the driver refusing to go anywhere near gunpowder again.

No-one is sure where the wagon was going to, but it was heavily laden with gun-barrels and powder for war, so maybe it was going to the port of Liverpool, to go on to quell riots in Ireland or fight in the American war of Independence.

Again, times like this bring out the best of observers compassion, and George III demanded collections throughout England and Wales. Perhaps it was from this money that Talke's permanent relief fund was set up which helped out in many later mining disasters. People as far away as Newcastle came to help tend to the wounded. Also many families were left without houses, clothes or possessions, and families of up to 8 people had to share houses with other equally destitute neighbours.

George III

