

## HERITAGE CIRCLE

### **Sue and Steve Williams, The Stowmarket Gun Cotton Explosion of 1871**

Sue and Steve Williams presented a fascinating account of the Stowmarket Gun Cotton Explosion of 1871 to the October meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. Their talk was based upon considerable research into a story which had a profound effect upon the Stowmarket community.

On the afternoon of Friday 11 August 1871, there was a series of explosions at the factory of Messrs Thos. Prentice and Co on the edge of Stowmarket. The factory made gun cotton which was a material developed during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to replace gunpowder. The manufacturing process involved treating cotton with a series of acids and other chemicals and then drying it. It was believed to be stable and safe for women and children to work on.

Graphic accounts of the destruction caused by the blasts were immediately published in the media. They circulated across Europe and even appeared in *The New York Times*. They described how wooden buildings on the factory site were reduced to matchsticks and how brick walls collapsed. There was a crater 10 feet deep and 40 feet across created by the explosions. Homes in Lime Tree Place were destroyed as it was very near to the factory but there was widespread damage to other houses and businesses all over the town. A common problem was windows being blown out but there was also some structural damage. The sound of the explosions was heard 30 miles away in Southwold. A local photographer, J Deazeley was commissioned by the government to take photographs of the destruction to provide evidence to the subsequent inquiry.

At the time there was speculation about how the explosions had occurred. There had been a hot summer in 1871 and the 11 August had been a very hot day. It was suggested that this heat could have caused the disaster. However, gun cotton is supposed to combust at a temperature of 300°F. Shoddy workmanship or carelessness might have been a cause as workers had been paid at lunchtime and then gone to the pub before returning work in the afternoon. There was always a feeling that someone had caused the explosion either by negligence or on purpose but no perpetrator was ever prosecuted.

The human impact of the explosions was enormous. Eyewitnesses who rushed to the scene described how terrified women and children fled to the fields after the first explosion. 26 people were killed. 11 men died, including William and Edward Prentice, the owner's sons. Among the remaining dead were seven boys and eight women and girls. The bodies of several victims were never found. Most of the dead were interred in unnamed graves and there were two mass burials of unidentified body parts. A number of people were injured but their fate was not explained. Public subscriptions raised several thousand pounds which was paid to the families of the dead and injured, as well as those whose homes or businesses were damaged as there was no other form of benefit system, other than charity, existed.

Sue and Steve Williams, together with other members of the Stowmarket History Society, have raised money to fund a commemorative plaque for the victims of the explosions and this may be found in the town's Old Cemetery where they were buried.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 25 November at The Village Hall, Rickinghall IP221HD when Mark Mitchels will be speaking about *The Bayeux Tapestry – the story of 1066*. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, [www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net](http://www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net).

Gerry Gurhy