

Fourth body recovered from UK factory explosion

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At approximately 9:10 a.m. on July 17, three explosions followed by a huge fireball reduced Bosley Mill in Cheshire, England, to a pile of rubble and twisted metal, claiming the lives of four workers.

Of the 35 casualties at the scene, four were taken to hospital, including a 29-year-old woman who was airlifted to Queen Elizabeth's Hospital, Birmingham. Another two casualties are being treated at the specialist Trauma Unit at the Royal Stoke University Hospital, while a fourth is in the Whiston Hospital, Merseyside.

The dead were named as Derek Moore, 62, William Banks, 51, Dorothy Bailey, 62, and Jason Shingler, 38. So devastating was the blast and fire that it took days for the Fire Service to recover their bodies, adding to the grief and stress suffered by the victims' families.

It was not until July 27, 10 days after the explosions, that the remains of the fourth body, thought to be Jason Shingler, were recovered. Cheshire Police stated that forensic tests would be required, after a post-mortem, in order to identify the body.

The blast damaged the homes of six families, who are being rehoused by the local council, Cheshire East.

The inferno reached temperatures of up to 1,000 degrees centigrade. Chief Fire Officer for the Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service, Paul Hancock, described the "complete devastation" at the scene: "We have a four story building that has exploded from the inside and subsequently collapsed in on itself."

Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service concentrated the search for the bodies in two areas where silos had been packed with wood flour. The search effort required a one-mile cordon around the site, due to acetylene and liquid gas cylinders and 5,000 litres of kerosene in the wreckage.

An eyewitness who at the time was releasing his

racing pigeons near the factory said, "The ground shaking sound was like someone had burst my ear drums, it was that loud."

Others described a wall of flames reaching seventy metres high into the sky and black smoke billowing from the building.

Days after the initial explosion, fire crews were still putting out fires and pumping in water to reduce the temperature. The nearby Bosley River was stained petrol blue from the 5,000 litres of kerosene released by the blast.

According to Paul Hitchen from Urban Search and Rescue, "The scale of the incident ... is unprecedented in this country in the last 10 years." Aerial footage filmed by rescue services and news stations reveals the scale of the devastation.

Part of the Boden group, the company Wood Treatment Ltd makes linoleum products out of wood ground to a powder or flour at Bosley Mill. These are then used to make laminate floor covering. It has been in operation in the picturesque village of Bosley since 1930, and is the sole UK supplier of such materials. The Boden Group also makes bedding for farm animals from these products.

The tragedy raises disturbing questions. It is only the latest and most serious in a catalogue of incidents at the mill.

Not only have there been two earlier fires at the site, in 2010 and 2012, but just two weeks before the explosions, enforcement officers from the local council ordered a clean-up of the factory due to complaints about dust. The council reports that the company complied.

An investigation by the Police, Fire Service and Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to ascertain the causes of the disaster is under way. If evidence of

negligence emerges, this will become a criminal inquiry.

According to Chief Fire Officer Hancock, the investigators are working in very challenging conditions. “Every single brick has to be recorded and photographed,” he said. “It is potentially a criminal investigation.”

The HSE investigated the company in March 2013 and served a notice to improve, stating, “You have failed to ensure that the risk from fire or explosion involving LPG (liquid petroleum gas) stored in your two bulk tanks at the side of the Station Shed North at your premises at Tunstall Road is either eliminated or reduced, so far as is reasonably practicable.”

Moreover the tanks “are not protected by suitable barriers to minimise the risk of damage from vehicle impact; the concrete path has not been fitted with suitable barriers to prevent falls; and combustible materials are stored within the separation distance.”

The HSE reported that the company satisfied their requirements.

Most revealing are the comments of relatives of some of the victims.

Kelvin Banks, the brother of William Banks, told *ITN News* that William had told him on numerous occasions that conditions at the mill “were a disaster waiting to happen.”

“William had bills to pay,” continued Kelvin. “He wanted to get out. He’d been trying to get another job. I think his age was against him.”

He explained how his brother, an engineer, had warned the company many times that a machine was faulty and needed new parts. The machine “was running so hot it was running dry,” and the company refused to purchase a special grease that would have helped, said Kelvin. There were no regular fire drills carried out at the mill, and at times the sprinkler system needed in the eventuality of a fire didn’t work for weeks on end, he added.

Kelvin questioned why the mill was given the all-clear by both the council and the HSE, stating, “If this place was deemed safe by Cheshire council two weeks ago, I don’t know what’s going on.”

Philip Bailey, brother of Dorothy, described the working conditions at the mill. “There’s dust all around because they’re grinding wood flour and if there’s a spark, then it ignites.” It was Dorothy’s job to

vacuum the dust up.

A picture emerges of staff working in extremely hazardous conditions, with a spark from a faulty machine in a highly incendiary environment threatening disaster. As Dorothy said to her brother, “If it goes, it goes.”

The directors of the Boden Group are George and Charles Boden. According to a *Daily Mail* article published two days after the blast, “Outside a home registered to George and Charles Boden, the mill’s directors, a woman claiming to be the cleaner said the brothers would not be returning until ‘a week on Thursday’.”

The Cheshire factory explosion took place just four days after the July 13 deaths of two workers, Daniel Timbers, 29, and Barry Joy, 56, at the warehouse of digger bucket manufacturer Harford Attachments in Norwich, Norfolk. The two men died as the result of an explosion and were pronounced dead at the scene.

An investigation into those deaths is ongoing with Detective Chief Inspector Paul Durham, from the Norfolk and Suffolk major investigation team, announcing on July 16, “Evidence gathered so far suggests there has been a flashover explosion which occurs when you have a build-up of toxic fumes. This combined with some sort of ignition has caused a fireball effect.”



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