

UK: Families of missing demolition workers campaign for their rescue

Danny Richardson
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Three men remain missing after a section of the Didcot A Power Station they were preparing for demolition collapsed February 23. During the collapse, one demolition worker died and 53 others were injured.

Michael Collings, aged 53, from the Cleveland area of North East England, died from multiple injuries at the site in Didcot, Oxfordshire. The missing workers are Christopher Huxtable, 34, from Swansea, South Wales, Ken Cresswell, 57, and John Shaw, 61, both from Rotherham, South Yorkshire.

On March 11, an emergency services spokesperson gave an update saying the recovery operation “will take rescuers many weeks, if not months.” A campaign has been set up by the families of the two Rotherham men after rescue attempts were called off within a couple of days of the power station’s collapse.

The collapse occurred at around 4 p.m., and Thames Valley Police declared a major incident shortly thereafter. Local residents reported hearing “loud explosions”, with one stating, “I heard a massive explosion behind me...it looked like a controlled explosion the way it imploded downwards.”

Large plumes of smoke and ash blew across the area, and emergency services made a warning to stay inside and to close doors and windows.

Npower said a partial collapse, not an explosion, caused a section of the building to disintegrate.

Didcot A Power Station, a combined coal and oil power plant owned by RWA-NPower, was switched off in 2013 after 43 years in service, and demolition work commenced. When operational, the power station was able to generate 2,000 MW of electricity—enough to meet the needs of 2 million households. It employed 2,400 people at the height of its capacity.

The demolition contract for Didcot A was given to Coleman and Company in April 2013, and was planned

for completion at the end of 2016. It is the first demolition of a power station the company has undertaken. Its project director, Kieran Conaty, said after the collapse, “We’ve never done anything like this, but we are that type of a company that we learn to adapt, and we tried to bring in some expertise.”

From what has been made public, there was a partial collapse of a large building known as the boiler house, which was approximately 300 metres long and 10 storeys high.

Part of the information on the demolition outlines the various methods to be used during the progress of the contract. It states:

“Progressive collapse—a qualified structural engineer will carry out a full structural survey prior to commencing any demolition.”

“Explosives—a explosive engineer will design an appropriate collapse mechanism based on the structural information available regarding the building demolished.”

The boiler house was a steel-framed building, with the boilers suspended from the superstructure and above ground level, to allow for their expansion. At the time of the collapse, it was being prepared for explosive demolition. This involves cutting into the structure to pre-weaken it before setting the explosives.

According to reports by Coleman, the police and emergency services, the direct cause of the collapse is yet to be determined.

A joint statement March 11 by the Thames Valley Police and Health and Safety Executive (HSE) stated that work to retrieve the three men could not go ahead until the site owners RWE produce “a plan for a safe method of working before the next stage of the recovery can begin.”

Once this is received and approved by HSE,

emergency services are on hand to recover the missing men. No specific timeframe was given.

An article published 24 hours earlier in the *Rotherham Advertiser* noted, “Fire officers said days after the disaster that there had been ‘no signs of life detected’ in the wreckage and this week police were talking in terms of the “recovery of the bodies of the three missing people.”

The article went on to quote Assistant Thames Valley Chief Constable Scott Chilton, who said, “We now move forward to a new phase to answer the engineering challenge presented by the collapsed building and how we safely dismantle the remainder of the building and support the investigation to establish how this happened.”

The families of the two Rotherham men set up a campaign for the missing men’s rescue. The families and supporters are claiming not enough is being done to look for the men and are hopeful they can still be rescued alive. A petition supporting their case has received 1,500 signatures.

A demonstration by the campaign took place outside the Didcot A site on March 13. The Rotherham men’s families and supporters drove to the site and met up with Christopher Huxtable’s family. Children wore T-shirts stating, “Bring our Granddads Home,” and supporters carried placards reading, “Bring Them Home” and “Free the Didcot 3.” At the gates of the station, they repeatedly chanted, “Get them out, get them out!”

Speaking to ITV *News* outside the plant, Gail, Ken Cresswell’s wife, said, “These men of ours have been trapped in here for three weeks on Tuesday and nobody has done a thing to help them. Not a piece of steel has been moved. Nothing. They’re just demolition men from the north according to these. It’s disgusting and enough is enough. We’ve got to have them home. ... They’re hardworking men. They’ve worked down there all this time and this is the thanks they get? Left under rubble all this time.”

Ken Cresswell’s daughter, Sadie, told Hallam FM radio, “Until somebody tells us otherwise, he’s alive and well and he is coming home to his wife, his daughters, his granddaughters. He’s coming home and he’s going to be alive. These hard-working men have been left. We just want to get the word out that they are important men. They’re important to their families.

They’re not just demolition men from up north. They’re our dads. We love him. He’s the most important man in our lives and we want him home.”

John Howley, the uncle of Cresswell, said there had been a “diabolical” delay in getting to the missing men. Howley added, “It is just the uncertainty—you are hoping that they are still alive in there, but you have got to be realistic and think that it has been going on too long now.”

Jade Ali, the partner of Christopher Huxtable, told the BBC, “All these meetings they are having, nothing is coming of out them and we’re just being kept in the dark. It’s just disgusting. We need them out. They’ve given up hope on our men and we’re not going to give up hope. We’re going to keep on fighting till they’re home”.

As a result of their protest, the families were allowed into the plant for the first time since the disaster.

Once Didcot A has been fully demolished, the Didcot B gas-burning power station, which opened in 1997, will continue to operate. It also has had serious problems. In October 2014, 20 fire crews were sent to tackle a large blaze. The cause of the fire was later confirmed as an electrical fault.



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