

RICHARD HILL investigates the tragedy that was 'Blow-Up Bridge'

Blast It!

There are many curiosities on the canals and rivers of the UK. Some are obvious, others less so. In January 2006 I wrote a very short account of a bridge known to boaters as 'blow-up bridge', but remained curious as to the story behind a bridge that has its 'tow rope marks on the wrong side of the columns.

In my research I came across a copy of the *Illustrated London News* at the London Canal Museum that described the story in detail: 'An extraordinary accident, which happened yesterday week at five o'clock in the morning, cost the loss of several lives, much damage to houses and furniture, and a vast alarm to the north western suburbs of London. This was the blowing up of a barge laden partly with petroleum and gunpowder for blasting, which was one of a train drawn by a steam-tug along the Regent's Canal, from Camden Town to St. John's-wood, on the north side of Regent's Park.'

One of the barges, the *Tilbury*, was carrying 5 tons of gunpowder in barrels as well as containers of petroleum.

Explosion

Martin Sachs of the London Canal Museum told me: "A train of barges pulled by a tug was passing under that bridge and an explosion took place. Presumably sparks from the steam tug were responsible". Brian Harvey of the Royal Gunpowder Mills in Waltham Abbey, from where the gunpowder originated,

disagrees and believes it far more likely that the explosion was caused by a lethal combination of petroleum vapour and gunpowder, an explosive cocktail. However 130 years on, it's unlikely that the real cause will ever be known.

Although common for most boats to be towed by horse, towing such bulk cargoes travelling from London to the Midlands, as this train was, it had become commonplace to use steam powered tugs.





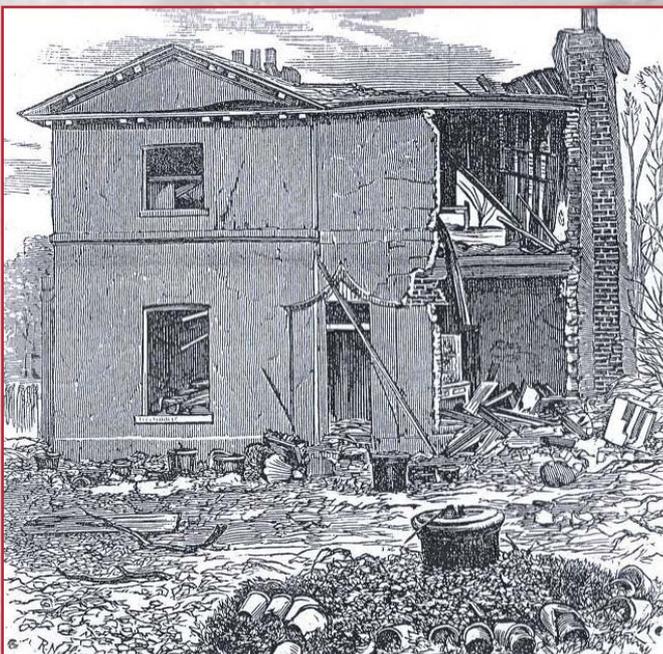
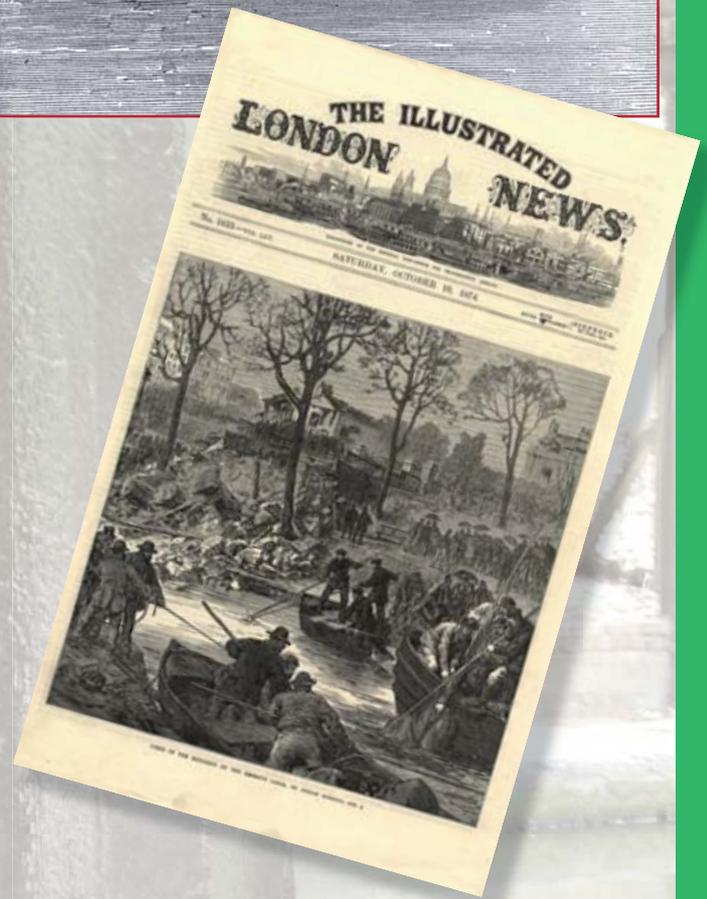
This cargo seems to be collecting cargo from various locations in London and destined for the Midlands. According to the *Illustrated London News*, 'The cargo of the *Tilbury* consisted chiefly of sugar and other miscellaneous articles, such as nuts, straw-boards, coffee, and some two or three barrels of petroleum, and about five tons of gunpowder.' It goes on to say that the gunpowder 'was consigned by Messrs. Pigou and Wilkes' for 'Codnor Park near Nottingham, and was sent for blasting purposes.' Codnor Park was one of a number of coal mines in the area.

The *Illustrated London News* also reported that 'The bridge was entirely destroyed; several of the neighbouring houses were half-ruined, their roofs and walls being greatly injured; and in hundreds of other houses, a mile east or west of the place, the windows were broken, and many fragile articles of furniture. St. John's-wood and Camden Town were thrown into great consternation.'

Devastation

The site of the explosion was a scene of devastation, but damage to surrounding properties was probably limited by way of the canal being in a relatively deep cutting, directing the blast eastward, westward and upwards.

On board the ill-fated *Tilbury* were the steersman, Charles Baxton, who was about thirty-five years of age; William Taylor,



a labourer, of twenty-five; another man and a boy. It's believed that all four lost their lives.

The *Illustrated London News* contains illustrations showing the extent of the damage.

It was reported that; 'The canal was obstructed by a heap of rubbish 20 ft. High' Being a main thoroughfare for cargo

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP:
Macclesfield (or 'Blow-Up') Bridge on the Regents Canal as it is today.

OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW:
The rope grooves, curiously on the wrong side of the bridge support columns.

TOP:
A typical fully-laden gunpowder boat.

ABOVE:
The cover of the *Illustrated London News*, showing the aftermath of the event.

LEFT:
The North Gate Park Lodge after the explosion.



LEFT:
A replica gunpowder boat in the London Canal Museum.

BELOW LEFT:
The submerged remains of a gunpowder boat.

BELOW:
A typical keg used to contain gunpowder.

through London, it was necessary to begin a 'clean-up' operation as quickly as possible.

Two pumping-boats were brought up, and by midnight on Saturday the water was all pumped out of the section of the canal. A hundred labourers worked in relays by day, and continued this work during Sunday. Amazingly, the canal was open again to boats by Tuesday.

The source of the gunpowder was the Royal Gunpowder Mills in Waltham Abbey, This was one of the first sites to manufacture gunpowder, and the site had it's own network of canals for the conveyance of hazardous products around the site. A system of two locks linked these canals to the River Lee.

Restoration

The 174-acre site was decommissioned and decontaminated in the early 90's. Most of the canals are dewatered, but one remains in which lie three of the original 'powder boats' awaiting restoration while another is presently undergoing restoration in one of the buildings open to the public.

A set of critical components that escaped damaged in



the explosion were the cast iron columns originally built in Coalbrookdale, home of the first iron bridge. This means they could be re-used in the rebuilding.

On close inspection, the visitor will notice that the grooves made by the thousands of tow ropes over the years are on the wrong side of the pillars. Turning them round during the reconstruction was a deliberate plan so that the replaced pillar would offer a smooth surface to the towropes.

So on first sight, Macclesfield Bridge on the Regents Canal in London looks like many others, but belies a fascinating history.



RESOURCES

Royal Gunpowder Mills

Beaulieu Drive, Waltham Abbey, Essex EN9 1JY.

Tel: **01992 707370**.

Web: www.royalgunpowdermills.com

Open Every Weekend & Bank Holiday from April to October (Check for times)

Open Wednesdays during Summer School Break.

The author would like to thank Martin Sachs of the London Canal Museum, Brian Harvey of the Royal Gunpowder Mills and Paul from the Canal World Forum.