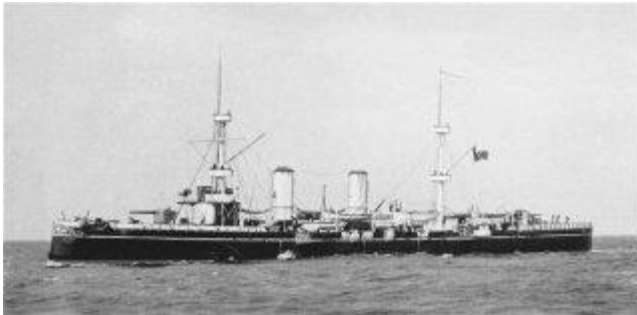


Explosion on the Tyne George Robson

The July 2008 Society Journal (No. 10) featured the article '*The Cobra Trail*' which traced the events surrounding the sinking of *HMS Cobra* in September 1901. An inquiry placed the blame for the tragedy firmly in the court of Sir W G Armstrong-Whitworth and Co. Ltd. The company secretary, John Meade Falkner, took up an invitation from *The Monthly Review* to compose a passionate and well-argued article staunchly defending his company. But this was not the first occasion JMF had faced such a task.

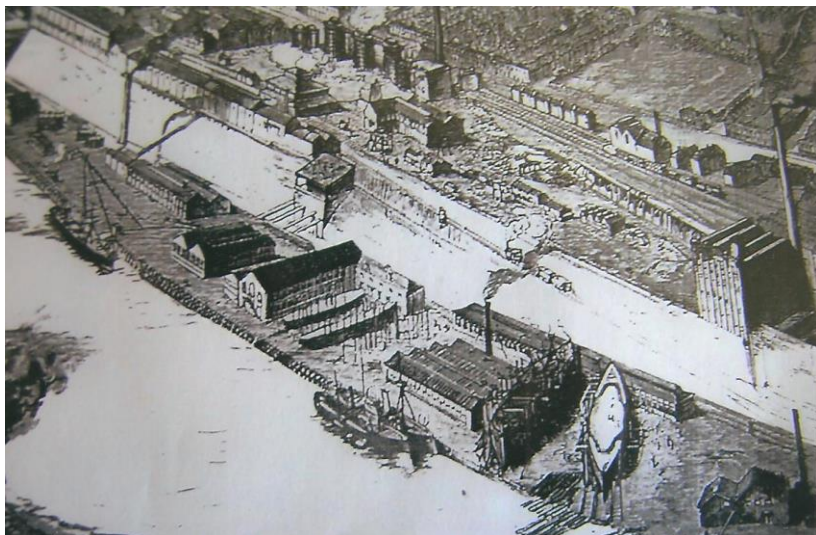
Eleven years earlier, on 3rd October 1890, an explosion on the Tyne had killed a man and severely injured another man and a boy, all three carrying out tasks as employees of the firm. On the morning of that day George English, a company inspector at the ordnance department at the Elswick Works, proceeded downriver accompanied by a boy called James. Almost at the mouth of the Tyne, at Jarrow Slake, there was a wherry (a light shallow rowing-boat) containing a barrel of gunpowder, seventy pounds in weight, and a number of Hotchkiss shell cases. Another man by the name of Dewdney was already aboard the wherry and the task of all three was to fill and charge the cases ready for them to be taken aboard the Italian warship *Piemonte** which was anchored nearby.



The Italian cruiser *Piemonte*

The work had been planned to be carried out on the deck of *Piemonte* but with his decks strewn with ship's paraphernalia, the captain had pressed for the work to be done on the wherry alongside

his vessel. Ignoring his written instructions, English agreed to do this. Within minutes of commencing the task there was an explosion. English and the boy James received serious injuries but Dewdney was killed, his trunk later found without head, arms or legs.



Elswick Works in the 1890s

As was later to be the case with Cobra, the tragedy was followed by both an inquest and an inquiry. The inquest, overseen by Mr Coroner Graham, was delayed to allow the recovery and attendance of English and the boy James. It elicited that:

Dewdney was screwing up the base plug of a shell with a key when the explosion occurred.

Although cautioned against taking matches on board the three had not been searched as per regulations.

When filling the shells with powder all three wore felt slippers over boots and when putting the fuses in wore uncovered boots and standing on pieces of felt.

Regulations demanded the wearing of specially-designed magazine boots.

All three wore ordinary clothing whereas regulations demanded clothing made of special flash-proof material.

Colonel Ford, Inspector of Explosives from the Home Office, said it was necessary for a company to have a licence to deal with powder in this way but that Armstrong's had no such licence. The company had applied for a licence in 1887 but had come to nothing owing to difficulties with the Tyne Commission. Even if a licence had been granted, the operation should never have been undertaken on a wherry. The jury at the inquest returned a verdict of accidental death on Dewdney but the material collected during the inquest was passed on to the board of inquiry which was to be chaired by Colonel Ford.

The inquiry's outcome was damning in apportioning blame to Armstrong-Mitchell, as the company was by that time called. There had been no licence to manufacture quick-firing ammunition by Armstrong's yet it was being done surreptitiously. The projectiles were destined for the Italian navy yet no firm had been licensed to make such material for any foreign government. In fact it would be difficult to meet with a more flagrant example of deliberate contraband manufacture, such manufacture being, moreover, conducted in opposition to the salutary restrictions imposed, after careful consideration, in the interests of the public, and with an entire disregard of the conditions for the safety of their workpeople. It is unintelligible that men of experience should have carried on the manufacture in such a reckless manner. It was found that the firm could not have been ignorant of the conditions of manufacture of such ammunition or the requirements necessary to prevent accidents, and it was noted that Armstrong's had been fined £250 less than twelve months previously for a breach of regulations. There was also a censure of the harbour master for his culpable inactivity to alter the state of affairs of which he had certain knowledge and censored too were the Commissioners of the River Tyne as the local authority.

The conclusion of the inquiry was:

Blame to be apportioned for the loss of life and injuries sustained, Sir William Armstrong, Mitchell and Co. (Limited) are held most seriously responsible.

Instructed by the Board to do so, JMF as company secretary composed the following riposte to the editor of *The Times*:

Sir, - Your article of the 15 inst. Gives us the first intimation that Colonel Ford's report is published, and that we may at length (11 months after its date) be permitted to see it. At the trial we demanded its production. It was refused to us by Colonel Ford's counsel on the grounds of privilege. Except for this refusal we could have met Colonel Ford in open court, and should have disposed at once of the main framework of his elaborate indictment, and corrected many, or most, of his errors of fact and deduction. As it is, the report is published to the world after this opportunity is lost and after Colonel Ford is out of the witness-box.

We may at once state that in a very long and very large experience of explosives of every kind and under every condition of novelty, experiment, and ordinary use, this is the first fatal accident that has occurred in our service. We may also say that the accident did not occur in consequence of the special nature of the ammunition or of any breach of regulation laid down by the inspectors of explosives. It was admitted by Colonel Ford himself in the witness-box that the accident was one that might equally well have occurred in any duly licensed factory. Had Colonel Ford come openly to us, as he ought to have done, before he made his report, he would have been disabused of the theory of deliberate and calculated evasion of the law and illicit manufacture of some secret British explosive for the benefit of a foreign Power, which he has so ingeniously elaborated. Had he not refused our application for a copy of the report at the trial, he would not have done us the further injustice of depriving us our right and title to deal with the whole of his accusations while he was in the witness-box. This publication of the report after the trial is a deliberate renewal of the main charge against us of intentional evasion of the law, in spite of the fact that the Judge ruled distinctly and in terms in our favour on this point.

When the accident occurred the two men and boy were at work ten or 12 miles from the factory under a foreman of ours. That foreman was for many years a most valued non-commissioned officer at Shoeburyness. He had a wide experience, and we fully trusted him. He had written instructions from us to take the ammunition in wherries to the Piemonte, an Italian warship in commission, then lying of the powder buoys in the river Tyne.

After delivering on board he was to remain while the crew made it up, rendering any assistance required. This operation is perfectly

legitimate on any vessel of war, but not elsewhere, except in a licensed factory. The captain of the Piemonte was in a great hurry, and had his deck cumbered in the confusion of leaving. He desired our foreman to make up a part of the smaller ammunition on board a wherry lying alongside instead of on the Piemonte. Unfortunately, the foreman's zeal outran his discretion, and he consented to do so, thus disobeying our instructions and turning a perfectly legal into an illegal operation. This is the infringement of the Explosives Act complained of. For his disobedience he had paid a terrible penalty, and we must accept the legal responsibility for our servant's acts. We are perfectly ready to abide by the verdict found at the trial, that we had unintentionally infringed the complicated regulations of the explosives Act. We leave it to Colonel Ford to reconcile his privileged report to his superiors with the result of the open trial, at which he appeared on behalf of the prosecution.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

(for Sir W. G. Armstrong, Mitchell, and Co., Limited)

MEADE FALKNER, Secretary.

Newcastle-on-Tyne, Sept. 18

JMF must have known when given the task of defending his firm that the prospect of completely absolving Armstrong's was bleak. He spotted that his chances of delivering a successful riposte to the inquiry's findings lay in ignoring the details and concentrate on claiming an abuse of process. He does not mention at all the absence of a licence to both allow the manufacture of quick-firing ammunition and the delivery of such to a foreign power. He does not mention the inadequate clothing and footwear worn by the victims.

Instead JMF protests against the lack of openness in the inquiry, especially as regards the few opportunities given to the firm to put its case. He deflects the breaches of regulations by apportioning blame to an individual employee's decision - making and his ignoring of written instructions. He also points to the captain of *Piemonte* putting pressure on English for the operation to take place on board the wherry instead of on the decks of his ship. Recognising that overall responsibility for the tragedy inevitably had to fall on the firm whatever the arguments, JMF ends his letter by pointing to complicated regulations and lack of intention before again claiming the lack of fairness in the way the inquiry was conducted.



Jarrow Slake (the site of the Explosion) and the Tyne, probably just after the Great War

The family of Dewdney and both English and young James received more than ample compensation from Armstrong's. Indeed the boy was to resume his employment with the company following further recuperation.

At the company's Annual Meeting - held at the Elswick Mechanics Institute in Newcastle on 30th September 1891 - Chairman Lord W. G. Armstrong made his address following the notice of convening the meeting read by Secretary Mr JM Faulkner (sic.). A large part of this Chairman's address was devoted to confronting the explosion of the previous year and the adverse publicity that followed. The lengthy, detailed and strong defence of the company was very much based on the arguments set out by JMF in his *Times* letter. Lord Armstrong ended this section of his address with:

The manipulation of explosives must necessarily be attended with a certain amount of danger; but during an experience of thirty years the Elswick Company have continually dealt with explosives without occurrence of any serious accident except this solitary one at Jarrow,

which has been seized upon as an occasion to calumniate the company. (applause).

The *Newcastle Daily Journal* evidently supported the arguments and the interests of the company, for the following day - 1st October 1891 - this appeared as an editorial:

In the long run, probably, the Elswick firm are not seriously injured by these repeated and baseless attacks from which they suffer; but they must be exceedingly annoying to men who are in a high-minded way labouring to do their duty. The worst of them is the evident fact that they proceed for the most part from pure malevolence, and are connected with the spiteful attitude of a clique that cannot forgive them for their success.

It certainly did transpire that the accident proved, in no small part thanks to John Meade Falkner's perspicacity. to be a hiccup in the dramatic expansion of the firm which was soon to absorb other companies, open manufacturing bases elsewhere in Britain and abroad and become the conglomerate that more than any other was to bring prosperity to Tyneside and equip Britain for its engagement in the First World War.

* The *Piemonte* had coincidentally been built by Armstrong's only two years before in 1888. Designed by Phillip Watts, it was an early attempt at a very fast cruiser. It could achieve a maximum speed of 21 knots and gave a displacement of 2500 tons. It had 22 guns of varying dimensions and three torpedo launching devices. It served in the Italian navy until May 1920 when it was sold for disposal.