

Irene Tims has kindly provided this photo of her mother-in-law, Violet Tims, in May 1917 meeting King George V and Queen Mary when they visited the White Lund Ammunitions Factory which was situated midway between Morecambe and Lancaster.

Violet (nee Dunmall) was twenty years of age at the time and had not yet met her husband to be. Violet was working in the factory. Tragically a few months later on 1 October there was an explosion at the factory which killed ten workers and put the factory out of commission until after the war ended.



The following Report is taken from the Lancaster Guardian of 26 September 2007ⁱ

White Lund Explosion

NINETY years ago on Monday, Lancastrians were shaken – literally – by one of the biggest disasters to ever happen in the area.

For on the evening of October 1, 1917, an explosion at the National Filling Factory on White Lund was so strong its force was felt as far away as Burnley. Ten people were killed during the night the majority of whom were firemen.

Most of the factory workers were in the canteen on their supper break when the alarm was raised around 10.30pm which probably saved many other lives though in the rush to escape the site, some were injured. The biggest explosion occurred around 3am.

The works fire brigade was unable to contain the fire which spread quickly and there were some staff who put their own lives on the line to save further casualties.

Among them was Thomas Kew who shunted 49 ammunition trucks holding 250,000 live shells out of the danger zone to prevent further explosions.

Shells which had been filled at the factory began to explode with the intense heat. In Morecambe, shells were seen flying overhead into the bay while in Lancaster shop windows were blown in and shrapnel travelled as far as Scotforth and Quernmore.

Some people's homes shook so violently that ornaments fell off their mantelpieces.

Telephonist Mary Agnes Wilkinson was blown off her bike twice as she was called to duty at the exchange in Cable Street. She stayed at her post for 24 hours and was later awarded the British Empire Medal for her devotion to duty.

However, others were not so brave.

Many families were so scared they moved out of the area, fearing more danger, some staying for one night or more.

The day after the explosions the trains leaving Morecambe were packed with women who had been working at the factory and were returning home. Staff were paid off and given an extra fortnight's wages.

The factory was so wrecked by the explosion that it was out of commission for the rest of the war.

The cause of the disaster was never found though some suspected spy action or a Zeppelin air raid.

The National Filling Factory was one of two new factories which had been opened in the area by the Ministry of Munition by the middle of 1916. The National Projectile Factory in Caton Road was mainly turning and filling shell cases delivered from Barrow.

Such was the pride in these factories and the work they were doing for the war effort that both were visited by King George and Queen Mary in May, 1917 when they were presented with a silver plated shell as a memento.

The real shells were transported from Caton Road to White Lund where they were filled with explosives. This factory had taken seven months to develop, covered 400 acres and included 150 buildings.

More than 8,000 people worked in these factories at their peak and three quarters of them were women. They were working in very dangerous conditions though there was little regard for their safety and equal pay for women was never considered.

Every effort was made to check staff did not bring matches, cigarettes or material that might cause a spark into the site.

Staff were searched regularly and were even prosecuted if items were found.

After the war, the White Lund factory began to operate again but disaster struck again on January 14, 1920 when there was an explosion as staff defused and emptied shells. Nine people were killed.

Ninety years on, there are little or no remains of the factory which had such a tragic history as the site is now home to one of the area's major industrial estates. However, on occasion, unexploded shells are discovered nearby – a poignant reminder of the dangers of war both abroad and at home.

ⁱ <http://www.lancasterguardian.co.uk/news/nostalgia/white-lund-explosion-1-1170802>