

Stories on the Powder Factory Explosions Four fires over six years and nine lives lost

2nd story for the Feb 1887 [Explosion](#).

3rd story from the Advertiser of 2015.

A history of fires and explosions at the Job's Gully premises owned by Mr Arblaster.

Mr Arblaster first built his factory in 1884 which burnt down in November 1884. It was rebuilt in 1886 and was destroyed by an explosion in February 1887 when eight lives were lost. The factory was once more rebuilt but blew up at third time in November 1888 when a lad was killed. It was built again, but on 11 December 1890 was once more wrecked by an explosion.

1st Fire in 1884

Bendigo Advertiser (Vic. : 1855 - 1918) Tue 25 Nov 1884 Page 3

SERIOUS FIRE AT EAGLEHAWK.

ARBLASTER'S POWDER FACTORY DESTROYED.

(FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.)

Monday, 24th November 1884.

About six o'clock this evening a fire occurred at Job's Gully, which resulted in the total destruction of Mr Joseph Arblaster's patent safety powder factory, together with its contents. How the fire originated is at present a mystery.

When the fire broke out there were only two boys working in the factory, and they assert that there was no fire in any of the rooms at the time. One of them, a son of Mr Arblaster, states that whilst he was in the room where the pellets are manufactured, he accidentally capsized a tray of pellets, and he considers it must have fallen on some wax matches which caused it to explode and communicate with the remainder of the explosives.

The boys just emerged from the building when the powder, consisting of about forty tins, and a quantity of pellets exploded. Young Arblaster had a miraculous escape from being seriously, if not fatally injured, as he was in close proximity to the portion of the factory where the powder was stored, and the force of the explosion precipitated him violently to the ground, but fortunately he escaped with a few slight burns on the hand.

The factory, which is situated near the Gully, at the rear of the slaughter-yards, was only erected recently. At the time of the fire a strong wind was blowing, consequently the house was speedily enveloped. The local fire brigade did not turn out, nor did the

bell ring. Mr Arblaster estimates his loss at £150, not a penny of which is covered by insurance.

2nd fire was the February 1887 fire in which 8 people died.

3rd fire was in 1888 in which one person died - P Meurer
MEURER Phillip William 16 yrs 11 mths 21/11/1888 22/11/1888
buried at Eaglehawk Cemetery - yes this boy escaped the 1887 explosion.

Bendigo Advertiser (Vic. : 1855 - 1918) Wed 21 Nov 1888 Page 3
ANOTHER EXPLOSION AT ARBLASTER'S POWDER FACTORY.
AN EMPLOYEE SERIOUSLY INJURED.
(FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.)

Eaglehawk, 20th November.

Quite a sensation was caused in Eaglehawk this afternoon when it became known that another serious explosion had occurred in Mr J Arblaster's powder factory in Job's Gully.

The first intimation of the occurrence was conveyed to the burgesses by the ringing of the fire-bell. The local brigade turned out promptly, but it was soon ascertained that the fire-reel would be of no use on account of no water plugs being placed so far down as the factory.

(Editor's comment - this happened in the 1887 explosions well. Why was it not fixed?)

The origin of the explosion is, so far, a mystery. It appears that a lad named Phillip Meurer, about 17 years of age, residing with his parents in Sailors' Gully, was working in the pressing room. He was attending the machine which is used for pressing the powder into pellets or cartridges, when by some unaccountable means an explosion took place.

The manager (Mr Goodridge) and the proprietor (Mr Arblaster) had been speaking to the lad about two minutes before, when everything appeared to be safe, but they had hardly got outside when an explosion took place. Mr Arblaster ran towards the building, and met Meurer rushing up with his clothes all on fire. His wearing apparel was pulled off immediately and oil poured all over his body, which was fearfully burnt.

By this time a large number had been attracted to the place, amongst whom were Dr M'Kee and Sergeant Gleeson. The sufferer was placed in a cab awaiting outside, and it was intended to take him to one of the surgeries in Eaglehawk, but on account of the timely arrival of Dr M'Kee this was unnecessary. Dr M'Kee bandaged the sufferer's head and face, and did everything to alleviate his sufferings, the young fellow bearing up most heroically. He then ordered his immediate removal to the hospital.

The poor lad presented a most pitiable appearance, as on every part of his body the skin was hanging in shreds. His hands especially were terribly burned, and when sitting in the cab he begged piteously to be taken away. Meurer was accompanied to the hospital by Mr Arblaster. The latter states that there would only be about 2 lbs of powder in the

pressing-machine, about 10 lbs in the box which he fed from, and 50 or 60 lbs in the mixing bin. Altogether there would not be more than 60 or 70 lbs of powder in this particular compartment where the explosion took place. The lad stated to Mr Arblaster that he saw the fire originate in the press.

The terrible explosion which took place at this factory on 23rd February, 1887, will long be remembered. At that time eight of the employees died from the injuries they received, including a son of the proprietor. Since that time every precaution has been taken to prevent further accidents, good substantial stone walls having been built between each compartment, and these are 14 feet high, 3 feet thick at the base, and 18 inches on the top.

Misfortune, however, appears to cling to the proprietor, who has, during the last few months, gone to considerable expense in effecting improvements and providing for the safety of his employees.

The building in which the explosion took place has only been erected about three months, and is composed, principally of galvanised iron. The machine is close to the door, and it was asserted by some persons that the extreme pressure of the sun on the iron building might have caused the explosion, but Mr Arblaster states that this could not possibly be the cause of it as it takes intense heat to ignite the powder.

The force of the explosion partly lifted the roof off and also shifted the eastern wall about 2 feet. The doors were blown open, and some pellets which had been placed outside on trays were ignited and smouldered away. No great damage was done to the property, but that which is most regretted was the serious accident to Meurer.

Much sympathy is expressed on all sides for the parents of Meurer, who are highly respected in the borough. The lad, it might be mentioned, had a narrow escape at the last explosion, but every trust has always been placed in him, as he was considered to be a careful lad by his employer. In an interview with Meurer at the hospital he states that he cannot definitely account for the explosion, beyond an impression that it arose from friction of some sort in the press. He was feeding the press, and the first intimation of an explosion was a flash from the press. The other powder ignited, and his clothes caught fire.

There is little to add to the particulars furnished by our Eaglehawk correspondent. Mr Arblaster has been especially strict in his precautions against accident, and all the precautions enjoined by the very stringent regulations appear to have been rigidly observed. The employees were not allowed to wear metal buttons, and on entering the building had to change their boots for nailless slippers.

A suggestion that perhaps Meurer was smoking may be passed over, inasmuch as the youth has the reputation of being most careful and trustworthy, and moreover we understand that he did not smoke. Moreover, the fearful experience he had in the last accident should suffice to give him caution.

Mr W H Grainger, the local inspector of explosives, visited the factory yesterday, and inspected the room. He retained the keys prior to a further inspection. We understand that it is likely that Mr F Dunn, chief Government inspector, will be sent up.

Mr Arblastor's experience since starting the factory has been a most unfortunate one. First he was burnt out through the alleged carelessness of an employee in using a match. Then the fearful calamity of February, 1887, resulting in the loss of eight lives, took place, and yesterday's accident completes the list. So far as can be seen, every precaution against accident was used, and these concurrent disasters appear to be ascribable to "bad luck."

On inquiry at the hospital last night, we learnt that Meurer had been very seriously burnt, but the shock to the system was not very great, owing no doubt to his being a very strong and healthy young man.

*

Bendigo Advertiser (Vic. : 1855 - 1918) Thu 22 Nov 1888 Page 2

EAGLEHAWK,
(FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.)

Wednesday, 21st November.

THE POWER EXPLOSION.

The untimely end of the young man Meurer (17 years) was received here this morning with extreme regret. On interviewing Mr Meurer last evening he spoke cheerfully of his son's condition, stating that whilst in conversation with him at the hospital he spoke quite rationally, and his only objection was being placed in the hospital. The father states that seeing him last evening he was in good spirits, and the lamentable news of his death this morning was quite a shock to the family.

The unfortunate occurrence has been the subject of conversation today in the borough, and much sympathy is expressed on all sides for the bereavement of the parents. The explosion is a great misfortune to Mr Arblastor as he had been to considerable expense lately in making certain improvements necessary for the safety of his employees.

*

Bendigo Advertiser (Vic. : 1855 - 1918) Fri 23 Nov 1888 Page 3

THE FATAL ACCIDENT AT ARBLASTER'S POWER FACTORY

Yesterday afternoon Mr Wyatt PM, held an inquest at the Bendigo Hospital on the body of the young man Meurer, who died from injuries received from the explosion which occurred on Tuesday.

Sergeant Fahey conducted the case for the police. J T Arblastor deposed that he was a powder manufacturer, and Meurer was engaged by him. Just prior to the explosion, he said to Meurer "Phil, this press works slowly. Call at my house tomorrow and I'll give you some work to do there, and Adam and myself will put a fresh ring on it."

The packing of the press leaked, and the water escaped, the press going slow. There was no danger in a loose ring, it merely made the press slow. He then left and went about 60 yards away, when he saw the fire, but did not hear a report. He ran towards the room, and saw Meurer with his clothes on fire. Commenced to tear his clothes off, and threw a bucket of water at him, but only a little went on him. Goodridge, the manager, and witness pulled the lad's clothes off and covered him with oil. They then wrapped a blanket round him, and sent him to the hospital.

He could only surmise that the explosion resulted from friction, but did not know how. To Mr Danne, Government analyst and inspector of explosives: Did not examine the

men every time but sometimes he did, and also made them turn out their pockets, but he had such confidence in his employees that he trusted them generally.

He considered Meurer's clothing suitable, except the shirt, which was of linen. He had a copy of the Government regulations, but did not post them at the works, as he had rules of his own posted up. The shovel referred to in the evidence was never used. It had been made for use, but when he saw it had iron rivets, he would not allow its use. He instructed the men to put the cotton waste in the fire every day, none ever went in the pellet room. They always used a wooden shovel. The amount of powder in the room at the time of the accident was about 30 lbs. The mixture was taken to the pellet room on a wooden trolley, with iron wheels and axle on wooden rails fixed by iron nails and wooden pegs. It was not taken into the room but to the door.

Robert Adam, metal turner and fitter, deposed that he was assistant enginedriver at the works. He heard a slight report and ran out. Saw smoke from the press room, and stopped the engine. He then went round and saw Meurer with his clothes on fire running about 10 or 50 yards away from the press room. Got some blankets to wrap round him. There were no flames then, his clothes were only smouldering. Mr Arblaster showed him a copper ??? blade and an old wooden handle shod with ??? and said, "Could you make a shovel out He did so. It lay in the engine room ??? weeks, but they never thought to use it. ??? know who took it away, or whether it was When he went to work there Mr Arblaster gave him the rules, and said if he did not observe them he could not work there. He was very often searched but not always.

Charles Meurer, father of the deceased, deposed that he saw his son in the hospital. He was 16 years and 11 months old, and had been employed at the factory three years. Had no cause to complain of the manner in which the factory was worked.

Thomas Goodridge, manager of the works, deposed: Had been there four years. Had no experience in European factories, but was taught by a chemist. When in the storeroom 80 yards away he heard an explosion, which was progressive rather than instantaneous. The powder being used by Meurer was wetted, and there was no dry powder about. He had left the room about two minutes before the explosion.

Saw Meurer come out with his garments smouldering. The shovel described by Adam he had taken in from the engine room to use himself. Meurer's duty was to use a small copper shovel, and the large shovel (referred to by Adam) would be useless to him. The iron rivets in the long shovel would go nowhere near the bottom of the bin.

Dr Bartley deposed that Meurer died from shock caused by burns. The Coroner summed up the evidence, and suggested that neglect of some sort had been shown.

The jury returned a verdict of death from burns caused by an explosion, the cause of which was unknown.

*

4th fire 11 Dec 1890

Bendigo Advertiser (Vic. : 1855 - 1918) Fri 12 Dec 1890 Page 2

POWDER EXPLOSION.

The JOB's GULLY FACTORY AGAIN, ABOUT £150 WORTH OF DAMAGE.

Truly a peculiar fatality seems to attach itself to the Job's Gully powder manufactory, of which Mr J T Arblaster is the proprietor. Since the erection of this factory which was about six years ago, it has been our unpleasant duty to record the occurrence of no less than three serious accidents; one of which, it will be remembered, resulted in the fearful death of three or four persons (correct 8), as well as the entire destruction of the works. About half-past three o'clock yesterday afternoon a fourth explosion occurred at the ill-fated factory, which, though a good deal of damage was caused, was not attended by either loss of life or injury to limb.

At about the hour mentioned, the residents of Eaglehawk, as well as many people living at California Gully, and in the northern parts of the city itself, were astonished to hear a loud report in the direction of the works, followed immediately by vigorous ringing of the fire bell in the "look-out" at the Eaglehawk Fire Brigade depot. Directly afterwards a dense cloud of smoke was to be seen darkening the sky just over the site of the factory. All who witnessed this at once jumped to the conclusion that another shocking catastrophe, involving, perhaps, the lives of several fellow beings, had occurred at the works, from which flames were by this time issuing.

Crowds of people were soon to be noticed hurrying from all directions to the scene of the explosion, anxious to learn the cause and result of the unusual report which, combined with the fire that was burning, most unmistakably betokened that another dread accident had occurred. Their apprehensions, however, for the safety of the employees were dispelled upon learning that everybody had escaped without injury, and that the explosion was not attended by such serious consequences as they had feared. For some time past Mr Grimmell has been the licensee of the works, and has been acting as manager for Mr Arblaster, who has employed his time in travelling. In addition to Mr Arblaster and Mr Grimmell, there have been only two men engaged at the factory lately. These two men and Mr Grimmell were employed in the manufacture of explosives as usual yesterday afternoon, Mr Arblaster being at Sandhurst.

There are three principal departments in connection with the factory, a separate building being allotted to each. The first of these structures, that nearest to the Mount Korong Road, was the incorporating room, and it was in this department that the explosion occurred. In this room, which was about 18 feet long by 16 feet wide, and constructed of galvanised iron with the ordinary wooden framework, the operation of incorporating all the ingredients into the powder was curried on Mr Grimmell was in sole charge of this department, and at charge of this department, and about dinner time ha discharged the two barrels used in the process of incorporation, after which he recharged them, putting 25lbs of powder in each of them. He then went to attend to other work, and everything went well till the time stated, when by some means that can only be accounted for by conjecture, the powder in the barrels exploded. The force of the explosion lifted the roof, ignited the building, and destroyed the machinery in operation in the room at the time.

The building was entirely demolished, the employees being afraid to make an attempt to save anything, as they feared the possibility of a second explosion in the dry house,

which was situated next to the incorporating room on the one side, and the engine house and the press room on the other. This, however, was prevented by the wisdom shown by Mr Arblaster, a little over three years ago in erecting blue stone walls three feet in thick ness at the base, two feet thick at the top, and 14 feet high between each of the buildings, but for these walls the whole of the works must inevitably have been completely destroyed yesterday and the lives of the whole of the employees thereby greatly jeopardised.

As already intimated, no definite statement can be made as to what caused the explosion. Every provision it is possible to conceive had been made by Mr Arblaster and his manager, who is a most careful and experienced workman, to prevent accidents, and ensure safety to the employees. With this object the walls referred to were erected shortly after, and made to avert accidents. The incorporating room was lined with half-inch boards to prevent dust getting outside, but despite all these precautionary measures the explosion occurred, causing about £150 worth of damage.

The powder before being put into the barrels was carefully picked, and consequently no friction arising from this source could have caused the explosion. The only way in which it could have happened was by the bearers used for working the machinery becoming heated and thus igniting the loose particles of powder. There is no insurance whatever on the factory, owing to the difficulty that has been experienced in inducing companies to take up the risk at a reasonable premium.

The occurrence was reported to Mr M G Roche, inspector of explosives, who communicated with Mr C Napier Hake, chief inspector. Mr Roche will visit the factory today and make an inspection.

*

Bendigo Advertiser (Vic. : 1855 - 1918) Wed 17 Dec 1890 Page 2

The Late Explosion at Arblaster's Powder Factory.

Mr C Napier Hake, chief inspector of factories, accompanied by Mr M G Roche, the local inspector of explosives, visited Arblaster's powder factory yesterday, and inspected the scene of the late explosion. The officials held an inquiry and made an examination of the debris, so as to trace if possible the source of the explosion.

Mr Hake, after, due inquiry, arrived at the conclusion that it was probably caused by the bearings of the shafting in close proximity to the incorporating barrels becoming overheated. The force of the explosion was expended on a stone wall dividing the incorporating room from the drying room, where over a ton of powder was situated. Directions were given for the new incorporating room to be erected a greater distance away from, the other buildings on an improved plan, to be approved of by Mr Hake.
