

SKILL AND COURAGE OF MEMBERS OF N.F.S.

Tributes to the N.F.S. for their handling of a gasworks fire in a North of England district are contained in reports submitted to the Home Office.

Their skill and courage in face of extreme danger in tackling this unusual outbreak, it is shewn, prevented the total destruction of the plant and the district being deprived of gas.

Surrounded by low lying sulphur fumes, and in imminent danger of an explosion, which they averted, the men wearing breathing apparatus, fought the fire throughout the night of 21/22 August. It was caused through the spontaneous ignition of a 50-ton mass of sulphur compound in one of three large purifying tanks.

Aware that the fire was unusual and highly dangerous, the Fire Force Commander consulted the works management immediately he arrived and was told that the adjacent tanks holding coal gas under pressure could not be emptied. Air taking the place of the gas would form an explosive mixture which would be certain to ignite from the intense heat through the 3/4" steel plate separating the tanks. As a consequence, it was decided that it was vital to prevent the dividing plates from cracking, otherwise the gas would enter the blazing tank and explode.

The Fire Force Commander then informed his staff of the situation, and, wearing breathing apparatus and ringed with flame and in dense sulphur fumes, the firemen fought their way into the blazing tank. While some with pickaxes and shovels cleared a way through the blazing mass and hacked away iron grids and wooded structure, others kept up a continual spray to cool the vital steel plating.

This was kept up through the night but such was the heat that the men could only work in relays 10 minutes at a time. Meanwhile police had cleared the surrounding district because of the danger of explosion.

Early the following morning cracks appeared in the plating, but a supply of rapid hardening cement which had been brought up during the night was used to plug the leaks.

In the background a shuttle transport service was organised between the fire and a local firm for recharging the cylinders of the men's breathing apparatus, a canteen van was brought early on the scene and a room commandeered as a dressing room where the men's oxygen cylinders were renewed.

The fire was extinguished at 11-22 a.m. the N.F.S. having worked on it since 6-45 the previous evening - a few minutes after the alarm was received.

In his report the Fire Force Commander stated that the work of the officers and men set an example, which aroused the admiration of the works officials.

"Everyone concerned was aware of the danger of explosion but at no time did any single member display any outward sign of disturbance or even excitement" the report adds.