

DEMOLITION NEWS RADIO

DIDCOT - TWO YEARS ON

This was a special one-off episode of Demolition News Radio that was written and produced to mark the second anniversary of the biggest and most deadly UK demolition accident in living memory.

This was originally written as the script for a commemorative video we were planning. However, having revisited Didcot for the first time in two years a few weeks ago, we all felt that such a film was inappropriate and potentially intrusive upon the grief of the families and friends killed in the accident.

And so, we decided to produce it as a podcast instead. It was a long episode – our longest ever – and it is also the episode that has attracted the most listeners. So, without further ado, here it is.

At approximately 4pm on 23 February 2016, a large section of the former boiler house at Didcot A power station collapsed while the building was being prepared for demolition.

One person – Mick Collings - was killed outright; three men were listed as missing presumed dead. Those men were Ken Cresswell, Christopher Huxtable, and John Shaw.

Several others were injured, three of them seriously. Around 50 people were treated for dust inhalation.

The boiler house was a steel-framed building with the boilers suspended from the superstructure. At the time of the collapse it was being prepared for an explosive demolition that was scheduled for the following month.

On 31 August 2016, more than six months later, it was confirmed that a body had been found in the rubble. On 3 September, that body was identified as Christopher Huxtable from Swansea.

On 8 September 2016 Police confirmed they had found the body of one of the remaining two missing men. The following day, that body was formally identified as that of Ken Cresswell. The last missing worker was found on 9 September. He was identified as John Shaw from Rotherham.

Up until two years ago, if you did a Google search on the word Didcot, you would likely have received one of three obvious suggestions:

- Didcot Power Station
- Didcot Parkway railway station
- Or Didcot Cinema

If you do that search today, the chances are that the first result will be “Didcot Disaster”. That the name of a town so synonymous with rail and power generation engineering should now be inextricably linked to a fatal accident in which four men perished is a tragedy in itself. But it also speaks to the magnitude of that accident; its impact upon the nation in general; and its impact upon the demolition industry in particular.

Each year, the Health and Safety Executive publishes its report on the number of workplace accidents and fatalities.

It is a constant frustration among demolition folk that the specific figures for the demolition industry are not published separately. Instead, they are contained and concealed within the figures for construction.

Despite this, the demolition industry can be rightly proud of its ever-improving health and safety record. There is no question that demolition is an industry that comes with risks and hazards. And even one accident is one accident too many.

But year on year, the sector's contribution to the number of accidents and fatalities recorded by the HSE has grown ever smaller.

In 2016, however, there was a spike. A four-fatality spike. A four-fatality spike that can be traced back to the town of Didcot and to one of its two famous power stations. It was the worst UK demolition accident in living memory.

For some people, for the media, and certainly for Google; the word Didcot is now linked inextricably with the word disaster.

There was still dust in the air when I got to the site two years ago, the day after the tragedy. It was cold and clear. A cameraman from Sky TV was trying to focus on me while showing over my left shoulder the part of the boiler house that had remained standing when disaster struck.

Between takes, both he and the presenter buried their faces into their scarves to keep warm.

Local people went about their business while a media circus descended uninvited upon their town. With a police roadblock in place, most of the news crews had camped at the top of the approach road to the power station. After being interviewed by Sky TV, I was interviewed by a local BBC channel. Even while that interview was taking place, several other journalists and reporters were forming an orderly queue.

They clearly had no idea who I was. But with no formal spokesperson yet willing or able to reveal just what had transpired behind the gates of the power station or the rescue effort that was now underway within, I was apparently the best they could hope for.

Of course, I am utterly unqualified to comment on demolition – I am just a journalist. And at this time, I was also unqualified to talk about accidents; although that would change almost exactly six months later.

That said, I was better qualified than the various apparently disgruntled former employees upon which the TV cameras also alighted. Each of them had apparently thought to themselves that the demolition was an accident waiting to happen.

The accident had, apparently, turned a great many people overnight into armchair structural engineers. It's just a pity that none of them chose to voice their concerns before their alleged predictions came true.

Yet while some used the unfolding tragedy to seize their moment in the media spotlight, others were demonstrating the kind of unspoken humanity and compassion that you normally only read about.

There were two policemen guarding the entry road to the power station. It was February and it was cold; really cold. I got to talking to the pair of them and while both were understandably cautious about speaking to a journalist, both were friendly and endlessly patient.

While we were speaking, a woman walked up clutching the kind of wicker basket that looked like a prop from an episode of Miss Marple. From it, she produced a flask of tea and a pack of sandwiches for the two policemen. She left without even waiting for them to say thank you.

All in all, I spent more than 14 hours at the site on 24 February 2016. I was interviewed more than 15 times by local and national TV and radio channels and by national and regional newspapers.

Between interviews, I would return to my car to warm up. When the time came for me to leave, I put the key in the ignition, turned it and got nothing. I had emptied my fuel tank just keeping the cold at bay.

It was 11 o'clock at night when I walked back up the road to where the two police officers were still standing sentry.

I told them my sorry tale. And despite having been on duty for considerably longer than was normal, one of the police officers drove me to the nearest petrol station, waited for me to fill up a petrol can, and then drove me back to my car.

With hindsight, I wish I had taken a note of the police officers' name. I wish I had written to his commanding officer to commend his actions. But I didn't. I hope that by some fluke he gets to hear this show.

Coming in the midst of a long day in which so many tried to make sense of a senseless tragedy, that glimmer of humanity from the police officer and that lady with the basket of sandwiches has stayed with me.

Half a century ago, coal was the UK's main source of energy. Five years ago, coal generated more than 40 percent of the UK's electricity. In the first half of 2017, coal supplied just two percent of the nation's power.

Last year, windfarms provided more power.

Pollution laws and carbon taxes have forced large, ageing power plants to close in the past five years, with three major power stations closing in 2016 alone.

There are now just eight coal-fired power stations left in the UK. Rather than running all year as they used to, they now fill the gaps in the energy system when output from wind turbines and solar panels is low.

The reason for this sudden and unprecedented decline in the use of coal can be traced back to the Large Combustion Plant Directive; a European Union dictate that required

member states to limit flue gas emissions from combustion plants with a thermal capacity of 50 MW or greater.

Under the terms of the directive, combustion plants built after 1987 had to comply with specific emissions limits.

From 2007, plants built earlier than that could either choose to comply with the emissions limits, or 'opt out'. Plants that opted out were limited to a maximum of 20,000 hours of further operation, and had to close completely by the end of 2015. As a coal and gas-fired power station, Didcot A fell under the directive and chose to opt out.

Even though many claimed it was actually more efficient than the natural gas power station at Didcot B next door, Didcot A ceased operation on 22 March 2013 and was earmarked for demolition.

At the time of the Large Combustion Plant Directive, Britain had the largest proportion of opted-out plant in terms of total capacity, with no less than nine major power stations set to be closed to comply with a European Union dictate.

Had the UK been a little less keen to satisfy EU lawmakers, then maybe the nation wouldn't be facing the very real prospect of its lights falling dark because of a lack of generating capacity.

If the UK government had decided to allow the power stations at Didcot A, Grain, Kingsnorth, Tilbury and Ironbridge to see out their natural working life while a viable nuclear replacement was being built, then maybe, just maybe, those four demolition men might still be going to work each day.

Across Europe, more than 200 power stations chose to opt out and to cease operation. Not all of them were built like the power station at Didcot A. Not all of them were fuelled in the same way.

But each power station – regardless of its fuel source – is built from heavily reinforced concrete and steel. The demolition of such a structure requires planning and precision; it requires experience and forethought; and it requires the demolition contractor to have access to every bit of information available on how that structure might react during the demolition process.

Some of that information lay buried at Didcot A for six months while the painstaking recovery and forensic examination took place.

Some of that information looks set to remain buried in red tape and bureaucracy for several more years yet.

And all the time, demolition men across the UK, across Europe and across the world are continuing to demolish and dismantle these gargantuan relics of our industrial past.

It is often said that everyone of a certain age remembers where they were and what they were doing when they heard that John F. Kennedy had been killed. That assassination was so tragic, so monumental and so far-reaching that it left an indelible scar upon the psyche of those old enough to remember it.

That is why it is known as the JFK moment.

I am not old enough to remember the JFK assassination. The closest I have to a JFK moment came on the 11 September 2001 as I – along with the watching world – saw the events of 9/11 unfold before our unbelieving eyes.

I remember it vividly. I was working from home that day with the TV news playing quietly in the background. I was alone. My wife was out and my children were at school.

Even though the 9/11 attacks were taking place thousands of miles away, I just wanted to gather my family around me. As the second plane struck the South tower of the World Trade Center, I knew that life would never be quite the same again.

You would think that the unplanned and deadly collapse of part of the power station's boiler house would have been another life-defining moment. After all, I write about demolition for a living and, as a result, I had visited the Didcot A Power Station site several times. I had even walked through the very boiler house that partially collapsed. And sure enough, I remember precisely where I was when I first heard about the accident. I was driving down the M40 on my way home when a radio announcer said there had been a major incident at the Didcot Power Station.

But this could have been anything, right? Didcot B was and is still operational. And besides, I had seen for myself the way in which the demolition was being carried out. There was no way that the incident could have been related to the demolition works. Surely.

By the time I got home, I was receiving phone calls, text messages and emails calls faster than I could respond to them. News of the disaster spread through the demolition business like wildfire.

Even though the extent of the accident would not be known for several days, it was immediately evident that – in the future – the UK demolition industry would be defined by this single incident; and that the term post-Didcot would slip silently and unseen into the industry's vocabulary.

This was the industry's JFK moment.

Coleman and Company, the demolition contractor selected to carry out the demolition of Didcot A, is a modern demolition firm in every sense.

The company had only recently completed some extensive work at Birmingham New Street and had won industry plaudits for its innovative approach which included the development of a remotely-controlled JCB excavator.

As a modern demolition firm, Coleman and Company embraced social media. It was and it remains active on both Twitter and LinkedIn.

Earlier in February 2016, the company's Twitter account featured a photograph that showed seven or eight men walking away from the camera at the Didcot A site. Clad in the requisite orange high visibility jackets and trousers, the men were dwarfed by the boiler house behind them and towards which they were walking.

It was an iconic image. It captured perfectly the camaraderie of the demolition industry; the monumental task facing these men and their colleagues; the orange of their workwear in stark contrast against the bleak backdrop of the ageing boiler house hinting at a brighter future.

Just a few days later, after that photo had been shared and retweeted hundreds if not thousands of times, the image it portrayed was changed in an instant and forever.

The opening to the boiler house suddenly looked menacing; like the gaping maw of some unspoken mythical beast about to consume those entering it.

The men in the photo - who at first looked to be striding purposefully towards a day of work that would reinvigorate the local area - suddenly appeared as if they were walking reluctantly towards their fate.

There was, we all felt, a very real possibility that the men in the picture might include Mick Collings, Ken Cresswell, Christopher Huxtable, and John Shaw. Even if it didn't, that photo featured men that had worked alongside them; men that had shared a canteen, maybe shared a cigarette break. They would certainly have shared a kinship; maybe they shared a friendship too.

That photo may still exist on the Internet. Most things do. Google doesn't forget. I have never looked for it. But in my mind, I can still see it.

Estimates at the time suggested that the partial collapse of the boiler house brought down somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 tonnes of steel. The rubble from the collapse was more than 9 metres high and unstable which, along with the instability of the remaining half of the building, greatly hampered search efforts.

Against this backdrop, it was agreed that it was simply too unsafe to send men in to finish what the unplanned collapse had started. Instead, remotely-controlled robots normally used to deal with bombs and suspect packages placed the explosive charges.

On 17 July 2016, at just after six o'clock in the morning, what remained of the structure was demolished in a controlled explosion.

The bodies of the three missing men were still in the rubble at that time.

It is part of the healing process that we humans tend to cling to the tiniest rays of light amidst the all-consuming black of a tragedy.

In the aftermath of the two world wars, we tried to convince ourselves that the loss of millions of innocent lives was somehow noble; that the sacrifice they made was at once brave and of their own choosing.

We focused on the first responders – the fire crews, the police officers, the priests and paramedics - that risked and gave everything during the 9/11 attacks on New York because the death of thousands of innocent people for nothing is just too horrible to contemplate.

Ultimately, however, there is sometimes just too much black; too much wrong.

Ultimately, however, there is sometimes just too much black; too much wrong. According to eye-witness reports, the workers at Didcot on that fateful day worked bravely and manfully in an attempt to rescue their fallen colleagues before the risks to their own well-being prevented them from doing so.

I saw first-hand the tireless work of the ambulance and police services who each worked calmly and professionally while, all around them, chaos was unfolding. And I saw the compassionate and united response of the residents of the town of Didcot who came together as one to lend support and solace as the tragedy unfolded. But still there was too much wrong.

It is wrong that an accident of this magnitude should have happened in a demolition industry that has made such huge strides in the field of health and safety.

It is wrong that the name Didcot, which for years had been associated with railway innovation and power station engineering excellence, will be forever linked with a tragedy not of its own making.

It is wrong that some unqualified individuals used the tragedy to claim their fifteen minutes of fame amid the media circus that was camped at the Didcot power station for days and weeks after the collapse.

It is wrong that bureaucracy and red tape was placed ahead of the feelings of the families of the men lost when the boiler house came down; and it is wrong that three of those families had to wait more than six months to be reunited with their loved ones.

It is wrong that two years on we are no closer to ascertaining precisely what caused the catastrophic collapse that claimed four lives and could so easily have claimed more.

But the greatest wrong of all is that on 23 February 2016, dozens of men walked through these gates on their way to work at one of the nation's most prestigious demolition projects.

And that four of them never walked out again.