

# All Fired Up

## The Silvertown Explosion, By D. P. Hughes

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### The Sell Family

**F**rederick Charles Sell was born in 1872 in Fulham to Thomas, who was a police sergeant, and Rosalie Sell.

In 1898 Frederick marries Caroline Louise Muntz in Great Yarmouth at the age of 26 years. That year he also became a fireman with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, where in 1901 he was stationed at Mile End in London, his address being Jewel Street, Mile End Road. By the census of 1911, he has left the Metropolitan Fire Brigade and joined the West Ham Brigade, which was officially in Essex. He is living at the address, 14 Agnes Street, Silvertown, and has a family of 4 sons, Harold, Frederick, Thomas and Leonard and 1 daughter, Winifred.

Friday 19th January 1917 was a day which would have devastating consequences for the Sell family. At 6.52 pm. a blast occurred at a munitions factory that was manufacturing explosives for Britain's World War I military effort. Approximately 50 tons of trinitrotoluene (TNT) exploded, killing 73 people and injuring 400 more, as well as causing substantial damage in the local area. A fire broke out in the melt-pot room, and efforts to put it out were under way when the TNT exploded.



or unsalvageable damaged, including to the Silvertown Fire Station at which Frederick was based.

Seventy-three people were killed, and more than 400 injured. Up to 70,000 properties were damaged, 900 nearby ones destroyed

Fireman Sell and his daughter Winifred were killed in the explosion, Winifred being 15 years of age and a scholarship pupil at the Central Secondary School.

The damage caused by the explosion was extremely severe, the factory was destroyed and houses for a great distance were damaged, some beyond repair. Among the injured were a number of firemen, police officers, factory workers and their families.



Silvertown Fire Station

In late January 1917, there is a public funeral service at which the King's representative, the Honourable Henry Stoner attended, as well as the Bishop of Chelmsford, together with other dignitaries. There were thousands of mourners present and a great demonstration of sorrow was obvious.

At the burial of the Fire Officers, the Bishop of Chelmsford stated that he had often wished that there was a decoration given to firemen equal in importance and in value to that of the Victoria Cross.

On the 25th June 1918, Frederick's widow, Caroline Louise, attends at the investiture held at Stratford, at the West Ham Recreation Ground, where she receives a medal, presented by the Town Council, in memory of her deceased husband.

The people of Silvertown also remembered the work done by the Fire Brigade and erected a plaque in memory of their valiant work, deaths and injuries.

