

# FATAL ACCIDENT AT LITTLE CLAYDONS FARM 1866

THE REPORT IN THE CHELMSFORD CHRONICLE –  
FRIDAY 12 OCTOBER 1866

SHOCKING BOILER ACCIDENT AT EAST HANNINGFIELD ONE MAN KILLED AND SEVEN  
SERIOUSLY INJURED

A dreadful accident, of a character and extent happily almost unknown in Essex, occurred on Friday afternoon last at East Hanningfield, by explosion of the steam boiler of an engine attached to a threshing machine, by which one man was killed on the spot and seven others injured, three of them dangerously so. From inquiries made on the spot it appears shortly before two o'clock a portable steam engine of seven-horsepower belonging to Mr. John Brown, of Victoria Road, Chelmsford, was brought to Little Claydon's Farm, East Hanningfield, in the occupation of Mr. Jeffrey Ambrose, for the purpose of threshing some peas. Fourteen men were in charge of the engine, the driver being John Saunders, of Rayleigh, a man who had considerable experience as an engine feeder but had not regularly acted as a driver until the present season. Under Saunders' direction the engine was placed near the barn, and the boiler appears to have been properly filled, the fire lighted, and the steam got up to a pressure of about 45lbs. or thereabouts, which was only a moderate pressure, as the boiler ought to have been in a condition to bear a pressure of 80lbs. About an hour and a half was occupied in getting up the steam, and the strap was then put on the flywheel and Saunders started the engine, but almost immediately the strap slipped off. It seems too, that the water-glass snapped before the engine was started, but this was considered of no importance, and although one of the men, who new to the work, suggested that the boiler might burst, Saunders said it was safe enough, as it could not burst with such a quantity of water in it. The strap was replaced on the fly-wheel and the engine again started, and the men were just commencing work when, with a fearful explosion, the boiler burst, hurling the unfortunate driver Saunders into the shed opposite, a distance of nearly seventeen yards, and killing him on the spot, while seven other men were shockingly scalded and otherwise injured, and so great was the force of the explosion that the engine was smashed and thrown a distance of four or five yards into the barn. The scene was a most pitiable one, some of the unhurt men rushing to the assistance of the sufferers who were scattered about the ground in a helpless condition, while others endeavoured to save the corn in the barn, which had been set on fire by the burning cinders from the firebox. A police-constable with a prisoner in charge happened to be passing the farm at the time, and another constable was close by, and both men were promptly on the spot, rendering all the assistance in their power. The driver, Saunders, was found to have been killed on the spot, and seven others sadly injured, so much so indeed that for

some time the lives of three of them, Woolmer, Wicks, and Maxwell, were despaired of, and they are not yet out of danger. The sufferers were promptly removed to the farmhouse and were attended by Messrs. Colson and Gibson of Chelmsford, and afterwards by Mr. Hare of Great Baddow, everything being done for them that skill could suggest, and the greatest kindness shown them by Mr. Ambrose and his family. The names of the sufferers are – John Saunders, Rayleigh, aged 59, dead; John Saunders, Rayleigh, aged 13, son of the above, scalded in the face and eyes (removed home by his mother on Saturday evening; Thomas Woolmer, 31, Wyndham, Norfolk, leg broken, scalded on chest, side and face (now lying in lower room in a dangerous state); George Maxwell, Rayleigh, 19, badly scalded in the face; Jesse Smith, Galleywood, 29, scalded on the left side and face; Joseph Mead, East Hanningfield, 21, scalded on face and chest; Samuel Wicks, Galleywood, 36, scalded face and injured in the chest by part of the engine falling on him; Charles Wilson, Union-yard, Chelmsford, 31, slightly scalded. The seven injured persons, with the exception of the lad Saunders and Wilson, are still lying at the farmhouse in a sad condition and quite unfit to be removed, the injuries of Mead, Maxwell, Wicks and Woolmer, especially the latter, being of a shocking character. Great excitement was of course caused in the neighbourhood by the sad catastrophe, and on Sunday a great number of persons visited the spot, and the police had considerable difficulty in preventing some thoughtless persons from forcing their way into the house to look at the injured men. The melancholy accident, as will be seen by the evidence given below, is attributed to the defective state of the crown plate, or upper part of the boiler.

### THE INQUEST

The inquest on the body of the unfortunate man Saunders was held at Little Claydon's Farm on Monday, before C.C. Lewis Esq., coroner, Mr. Thomas being the foreman of the jury.

The following was the evidence taken-

**Jeffrey Ambrose** said-I am the occupier of this farm which is called Little Claydons; the deceased John Saunders was an engine driver, in the employ of Mr. Brown, Victoria Road, Chelmsford; he came here on Friday afternoon about two o'clock with a steam threshing machine for the purpose of threshing some peas; there were several men with him to work the machine, all of them were strangers to me; they placed the machine in the yard against the barn, and filled it, and lit the fire and got the steam up ready for work; I don't know who lighted the fire as I was not there then; it was almost four o'clock when they got the steam up; I saw the strap on the fly-wheel; they started the machine and the strap came off; Saunders and the feeder were putting the strap on again when the boiler burst; by the force of the explosion deceased was thrown into the shed opposite, a distance of about 17 yards; the engine was broken into pieces and thrown into the barn, a distance of four or five yards; I did not go up to the deceased as he lay in the shed but went to get some water to quench the fire, for the corn in the barn had

been set light to; I saw deceased was dead, but I did not go up to him as I was so shocked at the injuries of the other men; very shortly after deceased's body was removed into one of the outbuildings, and thence into the brewhouse, where he now lies; that is all the evidence I can give.

**The Coroner.** I suppose you can tell us nothing as to the cause of the accident?

**Witness.** No, I don't understand anything about engines at all.

**The Coroner.** I suppose the feeder is too injured to be examined?

**Supt. Simpson.** O yes, sir, he lies here now, very badly injured.

**Alfred Brand.** I live at Thundersley, and am a labourer; last Monday week I first went to work with the machine; I have known the deceased this five and twenty years; I came here on Friday with the machine, and got here about half-past one; the first thing we did was to place the engine near the barn, about five yards from it; when the engine was set, and the boiler properly filled, I lighted the fire by direction of the deceased; the boiler was filled in the side until it ran over and no more water could be put in; I can swear that anywhere; I was there when the steam was got up to about five and forty lbs., or from that to fifty lbs.- I cannot say exactly; I judged this by the steam gauge glass; it took about an hour and a half to get the steam up.

**By the Foreman.** The gauge was in working order, and it is not true we had an accident with it at the last place we had been to.

**The Coroner.** We had better take his examination in chief first.

Examination continued. The strap was put on the fly-wheel, and when it started it came off; Saunders started it and the strap was put on again, and I then went around to the hind part to my work, and directly I got round the explosion took place; I can't say where Saunders was when the explosion took place; he was thrown three rods off, and I went and picked up his dead body; he was lying in the corner of the shed on a little pea-straw; when I picked him up I thought I saw him draw a little breath but I was frightened and it might have been fancy; I believe he was dead; I have never worked with this engine before; I don't think the deceased had much to do with engines as driver until this year; last year he was a feeder; I believe that he had been a feeder some time.

**A Juror.** I should think I have known him for four or five years as a feeder.

**By the Jury.** The water glass snapped before the engine started, but the gauge was alright; one of the men made the remark that perhaps Saunders had better put the fire out, as the engine might burst, but deceased said it could not burst with the boiler so full of water.

**Superintendent Simpson.** If you want to know where deceased was standing at the time, the first witness can prove that.

**The Coroner.** That is of little consequence; it is very clear the poor man must have been very close to the boiler.

**Alfred Granger**, of Galleywood, labourer, said – I began work with this machine on Tuesday; I have been at machine work about four or five years; there were 14 of us came here with the engine on Friday; I saw the engine filled and Brand light the fire, and the steam was got up; we were going to get to work when the gauge glass broke; I did not hear anybody make any remark except that deceased said he thought he could drive it without the glass, as he had plenty of water; I went to the bay of the barn, with three others, and directly after the boiler burst; I saw the men scattered about on the ground, the straw on the barn floor on fire and the engine thrown into the barn; I went to Saunders who was lying in a corner of the shed and Brand with him; he turned over and died just as I got to him; the boiler had been filled quite full; I believe deceased had work with engines for a long time, but had not been a driver until this season; we were all quite sober and had only had a pint of beer each at the Windmill.

**Geo. Boulwood**, labourer, said, I had not long been accustomed to engines; I came here on Friday with the others, and saw the boiler filled, the fire lighted and the engine set to work; when it was starting the gauge glass broke, and I made the remark that perhaps we had better put the fire out, and the engine might burst, and Saunders said it would not burst with the boiler so full.

**The Coroner.** We have heard enough as to the accident and now will inquire as far as we can into the cause of the explosion.

**John Brown.** I live at Chelmsford and am a contractor for steam threshing; I was the proprietor of this engine and deceased was in my employ as an engine driver; he had been in my employ about 3 ½ years and had been with the engines during that time; he had been employed about three months as a driver and before that as feeder; he had been at work with this engine for the past two years; I considered him to be an efficient driver.

**The Coroner.** Before you put a man on as a driver do you test his efficiency, or was this man put on merely because he had been a feeder?

**Witness.** Principally because he had been a feeder.

**The Foreman.** Had he occasionally driven to your knowledge while he was a feeder?

**Witness.** O Yes, regularly, when another man was away.

Examination continued. I last saw the engine on Thursday evening at Bicknacre Priory; I don't examine machines myself, but they are examined for me at Messrs. Eddington's; in the latter part of July this engine was sent to Messrs. Eddington, of Chelmsford, to be repaired; it was sent out by them at the latter end of July as in thorough working order; their bill came to £57, and the foreman told me it was in thorough repair, and he

considered the working parts as good as a new engine; the upper parts, such as the slides, did not work exactly to my satisfaction, but that would have nothing to do with the explosion; I heard of the accident at half-past five on Friday afternoon, and came here directly; but I have not examined the engine, and don't feel myself competent to give an opinion as to the cause of the accident; I would rather leave that to others; in my opinion it was perfectly safe to work the engine up to 50lbs. or even up to 60lbs.; I know that on Thursday evening the top of the safety valve was in good order.

**Brand** recalled, said: I never saw or heard the steam blow off; it blew off at the tap when the glass burst.

**Mr. Thomas Mercer.** I am an engineer, and have been in Messrs. Coleman's employ over three years and I have been an engineer over 30 years; I have made an examination of this engine, and found the boiler burst, the cylinder and connecting-rod torn from their place, and other damages; the boiler was in decayed state, and in fact the iron had perished through wear and tear; it seemed to me there had been one or two fireboxes to the engine; the stays which fasten the fire-box to the boiler were improperly put in; one pair of stays was useless, owing to the corroded state of what they should have been stayed to; I cannot assign any cause for the accident, except that the crown plate of the boiler was not strong enough, from corrosion, to stand the pressure; a boiler like this when new might be worked with safety up to 80lbs.; I have known two explosions from similar causes, but it is rather a rare thing.

**The Coroner.** If a careful examination of the engine had been made in July would its defective state have been discovered?

**Witness.** It would have been discovered, certainly.

**By the Foreman.** I can find no signs of repair myself; it is not a rare thing for an engine to have had three or four fire-boxes.

**By the Coroner.** Deceased could not have known the state of the boiler, nor could I have told it myself without taking it to pieces; I can give no further evidence as to the cause of the accident.

**The Coroner.** I think it is to be regretted that someone from Messrs. Eddington's is not here.

**Mr. Brown.** I told Mr Eddington I thought the inquest would be on Saturday, and I have not seen him since; he did not say anything about the matter.

**Mr. Mercer.** The engine is from as eminent a manufacturer as can be found in England, and no doubt it is entirely through age it was in state I have described; the crown plate ought to have been removed and a new one put on.

**The Coroner.** And its state ought to have been discovered when it was sent to be repaired?

**Mr. Mercer.** Certainly, engines are often brought to us to repair, and on examining them I find perhaps they are not worth a new fire-box, and they are condemned; we have some that have been condemned in this way in the yard now.

**The Coroner.** And if this had been tested properly it would most likely have been condemned?

**Mr. Mercer.** Exactly.

**The Coroner** said they had now before them all the evidence that could be collected as to this melancholy case. As to the cause of death there could be no doubt. The boiler burst and the poor man was thrown into the shed, having sustained injuries from which he died on the spot. There was no doubt therefore as to the cause of death, but they wanted to know how the explosion was caused which resulted in his death, and through which other lives might be sacrificed; and as far as the evidence went it clearly did not arise from any act on the part of the poor man himself. He was the engine-driver, and it was for him to see that the engine was properly placed, that the boiler was properly filled, the fire properly lighted, and the steam properly got up, and not beyond a certain or proper pressure; for if a driver worked an engine at an improper pressure he might be held responsible for any casualty that occurred. It seemed perfectly clear that no blame was attached to the man himself, for as far as they could learn he had done all that was required of him. He was not working at an unusual or improper pressure, and no examination he could have made of the engine would have shown him whether it was in proper working order or not. Then came the question whether there was any responsibility on the part of the owner of the engine. Well, they found that in July last the engine was sent to Messrs. Eddington's to have certain repairs done to it, and in point of fact to be put into a thorough state of repair and fit for working. Mr. Brown told them that in July he received the engine from the yard, and that the foreman himself stated to him that it had been put into working order, and he believed the working parts to be as good as a new engine; Mr. Brown had paid £57 for the repairs, which seemed to be a fair and reasonable sum for putting it in thorough repair, and it therefore appeared to him that no blame whatsoever could be attached to Mr. Brown, but he done done all that any man could to assure himself that the engine was in good working order, and fit to be entrusted to those in his employ. Then where did the responsibility, if there were any, rest? As far as he could judge, certainly not with the driver or with Mr. Brown. According to the last witness the explosion was owing to the state of the boiler. Then came the point, as stated by Mr. Mercer, that if the engine were sent to Messrs. Eddington's to be put in a proper state of repair, it ought to have been examined, and if it had been examined its defective state would have been discovered, and it would perhaps have been condemned, and this sad accident would never have happened. He should say nothing at all with regards to Messrs. Eddington, except that they ought to have been there today. They had had notice of the explosion, and they might have known when the inquiry would take place and have been there to defend themselves

against any observations that might be made; but he should not adjourn the inquiry on their account. This poor man's death was no doubt caused by the explosion, and it was for them to say whether it was a matter of accident or not. No blame appeared to him to be attached either to the deceased or to Mr. Brown, and he had no further observation to make to them, except that if they believed it was an accident it would be for them to return a verdict of accidental death.

Several of the jurors expressed an opinion that Messrs. Eddington ought to have been present.

**The Coroner** said doubtless Messrs. Eddington would read the evidence, and they would then probably be able to make any explanation they chose through the public papers. It seemed to be perfectly clear that the explosion took place through the defective state of the boiler, and an adjournment ought not to alter the facts. He did not like to cast imputations on any man in their absence, but Messrs. Eddington had had notice of the explosion, and might easily have ascertained when the inquest was to be. Therefore he did not see why they should adjourn the inquiry. The evidence would be published, and if they had any explanation to give they would have the opportunity of giving it.

**Supt. Simpson.** Mr. Brown tells me that their foreman, who was with them when the engine was repaired, has since left.

A verdict of "Accidental Death" was then returned.

**The Coroner** repeated that Messrs. Eddington might still give a public explanation, and said that at present the matter stood thus – In July this engine was turned out of their yard as being in proper working order, but evidence had been produced to show it was not in proper working order, and further that on a proper examination its defects ought to have been discovered, and if that had been done, this poor man's life would not have been sacrificed in the way it had been.

The inquiry then closed.

## THE CASUALTIES

**JOHN SAUNDERS SEN. AGED 50** (killed) & **JOHN SAUNDERS JUN. AGED 13 OF RAYLEIGH** (scalded in the face and eyes)

John Saunders sen. was born at Hornchurch in 1817. He married Jemima Lewin at Rayleigh on 26 July 1840: neither of them were able to sign the Register. The 1841

Census finds them with 10 month-old Mary Ann at the home of his parents, James and Martha, in Mill Lane Rayleigh. Although their first two children, Mary Ann and Sarah, were born at Rayleigh, the next three, Martha Anne, Rachel and Susan, were born at Thundersley, so it can be assumed that they lived there for a while but they were living at Hadleigh Road, Rayleigh at the time of the 1851 Census, and had three more children Sophie, John and George, by the time of the 1861 Census, although only six of the eight were living with their parents.

There must have been some family pride that John sen. had been promoted to the role of engine driver, if only for a short time, because that is how he was described on the marriage certificate when his daughter Rachel married James Carey, a groom, on 13<sup>th</sup>. January 1867. Rachel signed the Register but James just drew a cross.

The first Census following the accident, 1871, records Jemima as a pauper living with her sons at The Weir. At that time John jun. is an agricultural labourer. Jemima remarried in 1872 to Samuel Cresswell, a car man, and the 1881 Census finds them with only George still at home but with a lodger as well, resident at Milton Street, Prittlewell. There were still there in 1891 with no children, but with two boarders. Jemima died in early 1893 aged 74.

John jun. also moved to Prittlewell and was married there, on 27 April 1878, to Mary Ann Burles and they both signed their names in the Register. The following Census, 1881, records them living at Jordens Cottages, with sons Charles J. and George A. while John was employed as a bricklayer's labourer. By 1891 John's employment was as a sawyer, there were six children and a servant, and they resided at Castle Terrace, Prittlewell.

By the 1901 Census, John and family have really come up in the world. John has worked his way up to become a builder who is also an employer. Their son Bertie is a bricklayer, so is probably working in the family firm. Their address is Redcliff Terrace, Prittlewell.

**THOMAS WOOLMER AGED 31 OF WYNDMONDHAM, NORFOLK** (leg broken, scalded on chest, side and face).

Nothing found. It is possible the reporter got the name wrong or Thomas was working under an alias.

**GEORGE MAXWELL AGED 19 OF RAYLEIGH** (badly scalded in the face).

Nothing found

**JOSEPH MEAD AGED 21 OF EAST HANNINGFIELD** (scalded on face and chest).

Joseph was born in East Hanningfield and baptised there on 11 March 1846. His father,



Aaron Mead, was an agricultural labourer. The 1861 Census found Joseph living at Sandon Hall and employed as a groom. He was clearly back in East Hanningfield at the time of the accident and was still there at the time of the 1871 Census. At some point he moved to Canning Town, and married Mary Ann Boreham there on 6 November 1889. The 1991 census found them living at 29 Poplar Street, with four lodgers and a nephew, George Hatch. Joseph was working as a coal porter at that time. The next Census, 1901, finds Joseph as a widower, at the same address, with his sister Emily Stone, a widow, and nephew, Godfrey Bright. Ten years later the same three names were at the same address, although by that time supported by the parish.

**SAMUEL WICKS AGED 36 OF GALLEYWOOD** (scalded face and injured in the chest by part of the engine falling on him).

Samuel Wicks was a Chelmsford born agricultural labourer. He had been working with engines for some years as an Essex Standard report of 8 October 1856 demonstrates:

“CHELMSFORD PETTY SESSION OCT 3-Thomas Boyd, Wm.Balls and Samuel Wicks were charged, they being employed by Messrs. Edgington of Springfield, steam machine workers, with neglecting their work. – The defendants were employed to attend the steam threshing-machine of Messrs. Edgington at £1 per week and were to be at Burnham on Monday morning the 22<sup>nd</sup>. ult., but did not go, in consequence of which the machine could not work and complainants lost about £10. – Defendants were committed to Springfield gaol for 1 month.”

Presumably “Messrs. Edgington”, are the Messrs. Eddington who did not attend the inquest.

At the time of the accident Samuel was living at Lower Green, Galleywood Common with his wife Harriet and their six children. There were five more children to follow. A rift occurred between the couple, as illustrated by a newspaper report in the Chelmsford Chronicle of 3 August 1877.

CHELMSFORD PETTY SESSIONS 27 JULY - THREATENING A WIFE – Samuel Wicks was charged with threatening to do his wife (Sarah Wicks) bodily harm at Galleywood on 25<sup>th</sup>. July. – The complainant said that the prisoner went home in a state of drunkenness on the night of the day named and said he would not hit her, but he would “wring her nose round”- [laughter] – she went out, and on going indoors again he threatened to “smash” her; he had previously threatened her and had struck her. – The prisoner said the complainant brought it all on by drink and her tongue. – Amy Scotcher confirmed the complainant’s statement. A man named Beadel said he had known the defendant all his life, and he knew that the complainant was more in fault than the defendant was. – The defendant was bound over in his own recognisances of £10 to keep the peace for six months. A fortnight was allowed him to pay the expenses.

It is not clear whether the Beadel speaking on behalf of Samuel was the Beadle who witnessed the marriage of Jesse and Emma Smith..

Clearly, the reporter got the wife's name wrong, a common mistake in the local press. Harriet would have been pregnant with their last child, Eleanor, at this time, perhaps visibly so, which might have had some influence on the court. They continued to live as a family for some time, but by the time of the 1891 Census, Samuel was living with his sister Eliza Juniper elsewhere in Galleywood, and Harriet was still at Lower Green with the four remaining children who had yet to leave home. She was earning a living as a laundress.

**JESSE SMITH AGED 22 OF GALLEYWOOD** (scalded on the left side and face).

Jesse was a near neighbour of Samuel Wicks, living at Lower Green with his parents, Joseph and Sarah Smith. His future wife, Emma Francis, took her daughter, Rosanna, to the parish church for baptism on 29 January, 1871, and they were found "visiting" with the Smith family at the time of the 1871 Census later in the year. Again, Emma took her second child, Ellen Smith, along for baptism on 2 August 1874. Sometimes, in the nineteenth century, a mother would give a child the father's surname as a middle name, when the parents were unmarried. Then all that was needed later was to make the two surnames change places: people were always changing the order of their names! We can only speculate as to the reason Jesse and Emma had not married when they were clearly cohabiting and were above the age when they needed parental consent to marry. They finally got around to getting married on 12 October 1874. Neither of them were able to sign the Register. An Edward Beadel was a witness, and possibly he was the same Beadel who spoke on behalf of Samuel Wicks at the Chelmsford Petty Sessions in 1877.

The 1881 Census found Jesse and Emma living at Vicarage Farm, Nevendon with two boys added to their family. Jesse continued to be an agricultural labourer. By 1891 the family had moved to Kettle Green, Much Hadham, Hertfordshire, and two more children had made an appearance. The 1901 found them back in Essex, at Springfield where Jesse was a labourer on a farm and one of his sons, George, a horseman on a farm.

Back in Galleywood for the 2011 Census, Jesse was a hay binder, and the only child still at home, Frederick, was a brick field labourer working for a pottery. By the 2011 Census, Jess and Emma are living in the Great Baddow Almshouses, and although at the grand age of 77 years and one month Jesse was working for Mr. Macmallan at Baddow Hall.

**CHARLES WILSON AGED 31 OF UNION YARD, CHELMSFORD** (slightly scalded).

Nothing found.

