

‘HE WHO WEEPS’

the Halifax Boiler Explosion of 1850



Britain was where the industrial revolution began,
but what were working conditions like?

Published by Calderdale Trades Union Council

This publication has been funded by the members of Unite Marshalls Branch Halifax

29 November 1850 – Halifax

12 killed, - 10 female, including ten aged 17 or under - and dozens injured as boiler at Halifax five-storey worsted mill explodes close to train station

Dramatic rescue scenes

Workers who had truanted work left relieved

Employers call for Government inspections of boilers rejected

Factory owner and boiler worker charged with manslaughter

Both later found not guilty after counsel for the owner highlights his loss of property and a niece



The deaths of so many young people in 1850 occurred within yards of where the Eureka National Children's Museum is today.
Should the museum remember them?

BRADFORD OBSERVER

THURSDAY 05 DECEMBER 1850

[note – sub headings have been added to the original report – ed]

DREADFUL BOILER EXPLOSION AT HALIFAX. LOSS OF TEN LIVES

By the sudden explosion of a steam boiler, on Friday last, [29 November 1850 - ed] the inhabitants of Halifax have had to mourn one of the direst calamities ever known within the precincts of that town, involving, as it did, the sacrifice of no fewer than ten lives, besides serious injuries to many others.

The great portion of a worsted mill was also destroyed. The mill where this lamentable event occurred was in the occupation of two parties, and was situated in Lilly Lane, at the south- eastern corner of the township of Halifax, and about 150 yards from the Halifax Railway Station. One, and the largest portion, of the building was erected many years ago, but the other, and smaller portion, much more recently.

The former part was occupied by Messrs. Samuel and John Firth, and the latter by Mr. Isaac Firth. Until very lately, these several parties (who are brothers) were in partnership ; but a dissolution having taken place, the mill has been since appropriated in the manner described. The engine-house was beneath the southern part of the old mill, and the boilers, of which there were three, were beneath the new, which was an extension of the old, at the southern end. Thus, the engine being possessed by Messrs. S. and J. Firth, they supplied their brother, Mr. I. Firth, with power, although the boilers by which the steam was generated were directly under that portion of the mill in his occupation.

This mill is five storeys high, including the garret.

Explosion brings down four storey building

About twenty minutes to three o'clock, the centre boiler, which is of thirty horse power, suddenly exploded; upheaving into the air the whole of the material comprising the four stories above, and then mingling it on the site in one huge and chaotic pile of rubbish — broken timber and iron, stoned, bricks, and lime! The boiler itself darted forward, but was happily stopped by a viaduct (which runs parallel with the mill at this part) of the West Riding Union Railway, presenting a barrier to its progress, although the violence with which it fell against the bridge broke the railing, and forced several of the coping stones from their places.

Thus, the whole breadth of the mill, to the length of twelve or fifteen yards, was in a moment scooped out to the roof, and dashed into a heap of ruins: there being nothing left standing of what is termed the new mill covering the boiler house, but two or three yards of the southern gable. The effect was as instantaneous and singular as the catastrophe was awful in its consequences. The workpeople were plying their looms at the time in the rooms above, and the great proportion of them were consequently engulfed in the mass of rubbish into which the materials about them were so suddenly reduced.

The explosion is said to have made comparatively little noise, although those in the immediate neighbourhood were startled by a sudden blast, and in a few moments after, horrified to find that a portion of the mill had fallen in.

Remarkable escape stories

Many remarkable stories are told of the hair-breadth escapes of several parties. A little girl named Ann Swift, with five others, were apprised of the danger by a rumbling noise, took refuge in the privy in one of the upper rooms, saw a moment after the floors go down, and were themselves happily rescued from their position by a ladder.

One James Duckworth was working in the garret, with four other persons. The rooms fell gradually, and he descended (as he himself stated) as "in a cloud or in "a snow." He fell between some timbers, and seeing a light overhead, he crept out of the hole, which was so small that his clothes were tom to rags by his exertions in doing so.

His rescue was aided by Mr. S. Firth and two other persons.

Huge crowd at scene

The alarm created by the accident was of course very great, and in a very short time an immense crowd of persons had assembled in the immediate neighbourhood.

John Crossley, Esq., Mayor, and John Waterhouse, Esq., with several of the borough magistrates, were soon present, aiding by their directions and counsel the operations for the rescue of those who might be still living beneath the ruins, and the bodies of those who were dead.

Police, fire brigade and infantry arrive

Mr. Spiers, superintendent of the police, arrived with a large posse of constables. The fire brigade, with one of the engines, was also on the spot and rendered valuable aid, not only in extricating the sufferers, but in keeping down the burning of the fallen materials. Captain Fyffe also marched a detachment of the infantry from the barracks to the scene of devastation.

The duty of one party of these soldiers was to preserve order, and of another party, who were in fatigue dress, to assist in removing the rubbish and fallen materials, in order to recover the unhappy creatures who were engulfed beneath. Their labours in this department were characterized by zeal, energy, and bravery.

The operations were materially aided by Mr. Matthias, resident engineer of the West Riding Union Railway, directing the digging in the ruins. And among the anxious and "laborious throng which covered the nuns, none were more active than Mr. James Rawson (detective) and Mr. Sergeant Shepley.

The railway and every available spot were crowded with spectators—men" and women of every rank in life; and the brave band of men who were nobly engaged in extricating the dead and the wounded were frequently cheered in their course by the plaudits of the crowd.

Medical men

A number of medical gentlemen, among whom were Messrs. Bramley, Tucker, Harrison, and Stansfield, were present, rendering their assistance to the survivors. Omnibuses and cabs were constantly in the mill-yard in readiness to convey the wounded to the Infirmary.

Parents of the missing present

The friends and parents of those who were missing crowded the mill-yard. Their frantic cries excited the pity and sympathy of the spectators. But the stifled moans, and in some instances/the piercing cries of some of the children beneath the ruins, were pitiable beyond description, and melted many of the spectators to tears.

Fortunately, there were only some thirty or thirty-three persons in the rooms above the boiler-house at the time of the explosion. As will be seen hereafter, an apprehension of danger felt for some days previously had caused the hands to diminish, and this will account for the number being so few.

The greater proportion of those who had disappeared in the ruins had been recovered at five o'clock. As evening approached the exertions of soldiers and civilians were redoubled to clear away the debris, if possible; but owing to the vast mass of iron and wood work which had to be removed, this was found to be impossible.

Their zeal did not flag, though darkness appeared. Naphtha lamps and flambeaux lighted up the scene; and the humane work still went forward.

About half-past five a voice was distinctly heard beneath one part of the ruins.

It was supposed to come from a person not more than two or three yards below the rubbish, although it was impossible for a long time to ascertain the exact spot whence this sound proceeded. The interest now excited for the recovery of the poor creature was intense.

Brave

The brave and earnest fellows engaged in this task pushed their labours beyond this point with renewed diligence. They were directed by the mayor, by whose side was Mr. J. H. Mitchell, with an immense flambeau in his hand, lending signal service in the noble effort.

Faint cries

Every now and again the poor creature in the living tomb was heard to utter a sound.

These faint cries produced a buzz of commiseration, which was immediately suppressed by the loud voice of Mr. Mitchell proclaiming 'silence' and in an instant the vast concourse of spectators were silent. The weak voice of a child was now distinctly hear. The men now wrought with ten-fold zeal. The deeply- affected crowd poured forth blessings upon their labours.

At length the entombed sufferer was enabled to hold a conversation who were seeking its deliverance, thereby directing their efforts with greater certainty.

Dramatic rescue

It is difficult to describe the effects of that sad and terrible scene.

Men and women were affected to tears. Hope had been long deferred, and still as they looked on, with 'bated breath' their hearts seem filled with anguish lest the object of their intense anxiety and interest might either still evade their search or perish in the effort for its rescue.

Happily, the noble exertions of the men were at last crowned with success. The joy of the crowd knew no bounds.

About eight o'clock, the sufferer – a little girl – was drawn forth alive. Her exclamation of "Oh, let me go home!" and the sight of her living form, incited the crowd to several rounds of cheering for her deliverers. The poor child was Rachael Jones, residing at Bath Parade.

She had been enclosed for some five hours beneath an immense weight of material. Several medical men were ready to render assistance, but fortunately she was comparatively little injured. A large stone had fallen across her chest, but as this stone was supported on either side, the poor child had been happily enabled to breathe. She was removed to the Infirmary, and is now doing well.

Shortly after this the mill took fire- a casualty which had been apprehended; but by the aid of two engines, which were there in readiness, it was quickly subdued.

The search was prosecuted through the night till three in the morning, relays of labourers, of firemen, of soldiers and of police having been brought to the scene. The Mayor retired at 12 o'clock; his place being supplied by S. Waterhouse, Esq.

About one o'clock on Saturday morning, the bodies of two females were found. They were dug from a mass of rubbish in which they must have met instant death. Only one body was known to be in the ruins at three o'clock and it was supposed to be imbedded in the north-west corner of the mill.

On the labour being renewed, some hours after, the last body was found about eleven o'clock in the forenoon.

The following (ten in number) are those who were taken out:-

Dead— Emma Mitchel, aged 15, of Lilly Lane; Martha Barker, aged 16, of Bath Parade; Job Swift, aged 17, of Hatters Fold; Sarah Ann Robertshaw, aged 11, of Thomas Street; Jane Murgatroyd, aged 14, of Oven-den; Wm. Pepper aged 8 or 9, of Dam Head Southowram; Sarah Ann Riddeal, aged 17, Caddy Field, Harriet Sutcliffe, a married woman, of Haley Hill; Eliza Priestley, aged 12, of Bath Parade; and Elizabeth Gledhill, alias Stott, aged 11.

All were more or less disfigured and mangled. Swift and Pepper could not be recognised except by their clothes. The head of one was crushed to pieces, and that of the other severed from his body.

Seven of the bodies were removed to the Blucher, and three of them to the Infirmary.

The following seven, who were more or less hurt and scalded, were removed to the infirmary, as Wounded. — Susan Smith, aged 45, severely scalded. Mary Mitchell, aged 14; severely bruised and scalded. Hannah Mitchell, aged 10; Hannah Brown, aged 13; Amelia Sunderland, aged 12; Mary Ann Carter, aged 14; and Rachel Jones. Mary Mitchell died on the evening of 2nd December, and on the 4th of December Susan Smith “expired in great agony ... before giving evidence” [Halifax Guardian]

Amongst a large number who received injuries but were removed to their own homes were — James Duckworth, the first man rescued; Martha Hirst, aged 20, Thomas Street; Jeremiah Swift, overlooker; Ruth Ann Lee, of Waterside, who received a fracture of the ankle ; Charles Walker, who, although a carter, was sustaining the part of engine tender, and who had both his ankles fractured, with other injuries; and Mr. G. C. Firth (a son of one of the partners) who received a fracture on the head.

The effect produced by this terrible calamity was appalling in the highest degree, especially during the night.

The vast crowd of spectators whose faces, so expressive of fear and anxiety, were upturned within the dim and flickering shade on either side — the activity, beneath the blaze of torches, of countless stalwart arms engaged in the manly endeavour to rescue the dying and the suffering — the cries and moans of the afflicted friends and parents as one vehicle after another started off', beneath torchlight, with its load of the dead or wounded — produced a scene inexpressibly solemn and affecting.

Unfit machinery?

Workers had absented themselves from their work on Friday afternoon

Inquest to follow

The inquest will alone enable the public to learn the precise cause of this dreadful disaster. "Rumour with her thousand tongues," is busy, and attributes the accident to neglect and carelessness on the part of the employers.

It is said that there were some defects either in the boiler or the engine, and that this fact becoming known, many of the hands were filled with apprehension of an accident. This feeling was so prevalent that many were absent from their work on Friday afternoon, and at present rejoice in the providential escape they have had. Moreover, in consequence of Joseph Helliwell, the usual engine tender, being unwell, the boiler had, since the previous Friday, been under the care of Charles Walker, a cart driver in the service of the firm. So that owing to imperfect machinery and the imperfect knowledge of the person who had to deal with it, this catastrophe was brought about. Large crowds have visited the scene daily ever since; and the accident has been the theme of every conversation.

On Sunday, the streets of Halifax were thronged with streams of persons who came from other towns and the surrounding neighbourhood.

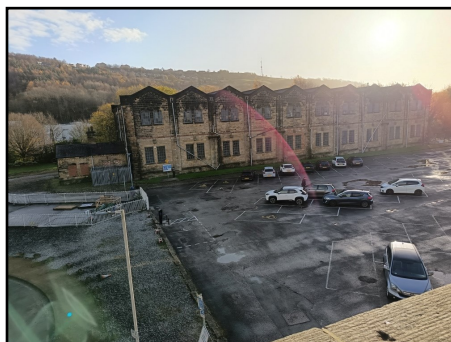
The trains from Bradford and from the valley of the Calder were densely crowded, and we were told at the Halifax police office on Monday that thousands of persons came from Bradford on that day. The scene of the catastrophe was described as being " like Halifax fair" — a season whereat there is always a tremendous gathering of " country cousins!"

Jury sworn in

A very respectable jury was empanelled on Saturday last, before G. Dyson, Esq, at the Town Hall. They proceeded to inspect the bodies lying at the Infirmary and at the Blucher public house, in order to their being interred without delay ; and after receiving the depositions of Charles Walker, of Wesley Street. Lilly lane, they adjourned to ten o'clock on Wednesday morning.

Collection

A collection amounting to £16 odd, was made at Square Chapel, on Sunday evening, to relieve those families thrown into difficulty by the calamity. No fewer than seven amongst the dead and suffering attended at the schools at Square Chapel. The chief constable received a cheque from Messrs. Firth for £20 for the purpose of aiding the internment of the dead. The Mayor summoned the borough magistrates together in order to institute a public subscription.



Buildings on Lilly Lane today

WHAT FOLLOWED?

MANSLAUGHTER CHARGES

There followed a prolonged coroner's enquiry conducted by 'a jury of our fellow-townsmen' who 'returned a verdict of manslaughter against one of the owners and the engine-tenter' but as 'to the capability of these parties, it behoves us to express no opinion, until the accused shall have a full trial on the charge, before another jury, under the direction of one of the criminal charges of the land.'

The newspaper had previously ventured, during the progress of the inquest, to declare that 'in no case is a jury warranted in returning a verdict of 'accidental death'.

'It is now necessary ... for a complete investigation to take place in such cases before the jury determines upon a verdict.'

The paper contended that by committing the pair to trial it had taught the lesson of 'personal responsibility to all engine-tenters and millowners' and that over the 'Christmas holidays there will be such an overhauling of boilers as never before in Yorkshire and Lancashire. This is good.'

[All quotes above are from Halifax Guardian December 21, 1850]

Employers call for Government inspections of boilers

*The paper had seven days earlier ran an article **GOVERNMENT PROTECTION TO THE FACTORY WORKER** and reported on a meeting of the leading millowners of the district in Halifax Town Hall to 'consider what steps should be taken to ensure greater safety in the management of boilers.'*

It was, of course, for the ten killed on 29 November 1850 a case of acting to close the stable door after the horse has bolted. But, a chance to prevent similar deaths in the future was surely best for all?

Indeed, 'this meeting unanimously adopted a memorial to Her Majesty's Government praying for the institution of a Government inspection of boilers. It was no more than we expected from the respectable millowners.'

The paper reported on how: 'The Government inspection of Factories [which were first appointed by King William IV in 1833 – ed] has worked too well in this district to leave a chance for the retention in many minds of the older jealousy of legislative interference. '

Yet the proposal had already been partially dismissed when the coroner Mr Roberts during the Inquest raised the issue prominently before the jury.

Because in giving evidence and in his report Mr Fairbairn, described as 'the eminent civil engineer and machinist from Manchester,' in the North British Daily Mail, had according to the Halifax Guardian 'insinuated an objection to such a legislation because Government did not always make proper appointments.' To which the paper responded by stating 'This is not an objection to the thing, but to the abuse.'

The case against Samuel Firth, 53, and Joseph Helliwell, 35 for the manslaughter of Sarah Ann Riddell, at Halifax, on the 29th of November 1850 was held at the Yorkshire Spring Assizes Crown Court before Mr. Baron Platt on Monday, March 17.

It was to last ten hours and during which time there had been another boiler explosion in a mill in Stockport and which according to the Huddersfield Gazette of Saturday, March 22, 1851 had resulted in 'the lives of, at least, 13 individuals being sacrificed.'

Death had been caused— it was contended - 'by the prisoners... not by wilfully or malicious means, not that they had any intention of doing injury to the deceased but by want of due caution and care, or gross mismanagement of the duties of their responsibilities.'

Halliwell was the engine tender responsible for overseeing the boiler. Following a period of illness he had returned to work on the Wednesday and was still working on the (Fri)day of the tragedy.

Samuel Firth shared ownership of the mill with his brothers John and Isaac and had responsibility for the safe working of the boiler. He had during the absence of Halliwell employed Isaac Walker, a carter, who according to the Huddersfield Gazette, 'knew nothing whatsoever about engines.'

Production regularly halted due to defective boiler in lead up to explosion

The paper reported on the operation of the boiler in the week leading up to the explosion.

On the Friday of the accident, production was stopped on a number of occasions as the speed of the machinery was not quick enough to drive the shuttles. Production had been resumed at 2pm. 'The engine at first worked regularly, then it went beyond the usual speed, and about 3 o'clock the boiler burst.'

Several scientific people were asked as to the causes of the catastrophe. There were widely different views. The prosecution alleged the accused had failed to ensure there was sufficient water in the boiler. It had been found that the steam gauge was out of order at the time of the explosion. It was reported that one of those killed was Firth's niece.

Loss of property and the death of a relative employed as argument for a not guilty verdict

It was this that was employed his counsel Mr Hardy to defend Firth on grounds that 'having lost his property and some of his relatives by this terrible disaster, he was not the man who should be charged with carelessness or neglect.' Firth - it was contended - had also employed for six years a competent man in Halliwell.

The paper reported that Hardy further ‘called on the jury not to brand his client with having been the cause of the deaths of twelve persons, including his own relatives, as it would bring down his grey hairs with sorrow to his grave.’

In defending Halliwell, Mr. Overend, contended that he had left his sick bed to ‘attend to his duties’ and that the gauge may have gone wrong during his time away from work.

Sticking together - factory owner’s character witnesses include three magistrates

Character witnesses were called for Halliwell whilst Mr. Hardy called on three West Riding magistrates in Mr. Barr, Mr Appleyard and Mr. Abbott to give references for Firth.

Before the jury retired the Judge Mr, Baron Platt summed up by stating that supposing Halliwell was guilty it did not follow that Firth was also. ‘For though civilly the master was responsible for the deeds of his servant, yet criminally he was not.’

Not guilty verdict

The paper reported: ‘The Jury immediately found the prisoners NOT GUILTY’ and when they were then charged with the manslaughter of Jane Murgatroyd they were discharged when no evidence was offered.

No one it seems was to blame for the deaths of ten innocents in Lily Lane, Halifax on Friday 29 November, 1850.

Then and now?

Clearly, the tragedy took place in an unregulated industry and the loss of life was avoidable. Some of the workers had even been prepared to forego wages and had absented themselves earlier in the day from work for fear of a catastrophe.

They were the lucky ones.

The workers at Firth's were not in a trade union. Improvements in health and safety have been argued for by trade unions ever since workers, especially after the success of the London Dockers Strike in 1889, began combining at work. <https://markwrite.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/the-great-dock-strike-of-1889-web-booklet11-23272.pdf>

Trade Union organised workplaces have better safer records than those that are not.

Every year, unions train 10,000 workers in health and safety. Local safety representatives, elected by trade union shops, deal with issues ranging from stress to hazardous substances, representing their fellow workers' health and safety interests to management.

Victorian employers and politicians, many of whom were the same, had a laissez faire approach to their employment practices and took no responsibility for human life as they sought constantly to raise production levels and record increasing profits.

Today, children in the UK are not permitted to work full-time until they reach the school leaving age of 16 years. But there are currently 160 million children working worldwide of which 112 million are working on small farms on plantations, often in hazardous conditions. British companies are involved.

See:- British cocoa companies continue exploiting trafficked children <https://writemark.blogspot.com/2023/10/british-cocoa-companies-continue.html>

There have been huge improvements in health and safety in the last 175 years but deaths and injuries remain common with over 120 people annually killed at work. (a figure that does not include workplace deaths from road traffic accidents) whilst over 4,000 people, mainly workers, will die in 2025 as a result of having worked with asbestos, often as long ago as 40 years. Many deaths that were the result of a lack of protective equipment that led to the contracting of COVID from work were not recorded.

View:- Remember the Dead & Fight for the Living <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLyeMYnpVjo>

Some employers in 1850 called for the Government to take responsibility for inspecting boilers. This was rejected and there were subsequent explosions that killed workers in Halifax over the following 20 years.

It was not until 1974 that the focus on reducing workplace death and injury saw the passing of the Health and Safety at Work Act, resulting in regular inspections of workplaces by HSE inspectors. However, in recent decades the number of inspectors has fallen and most workplaces will never be visited by one.

Read <https://writemark.blogspot.com/search?q=COVID+deaths>

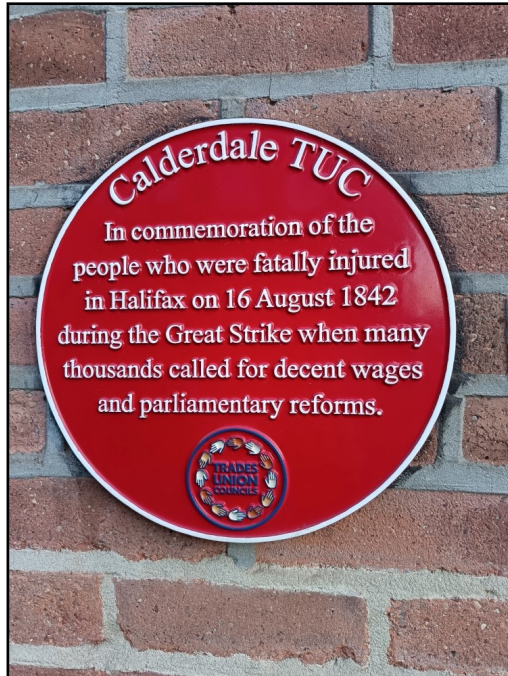
Corporate Manslaughter Act 2007

*It was not to be until 2008 that **Corporate Manslaughter** charges could be employed against organisations for serious failings that result in death. Yet there have been under 40 convictions up until 2021 under the law. Also in the case of the 2017 Grenfell Tower tragedy it will be, at least, ten years after the event, before the Metropolitan Police will complete their investigations into the deaths of 72 persons. Any charges, never mind convictions against the government, building companies and manufacturers remain a long way away. At least in 1850 the investigation process was swift.*

Meanwhile... interested in working class history?

Please view:- *BREAD NOT BAYONETS – HALIFAX 1842*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOUxMadnIEA>



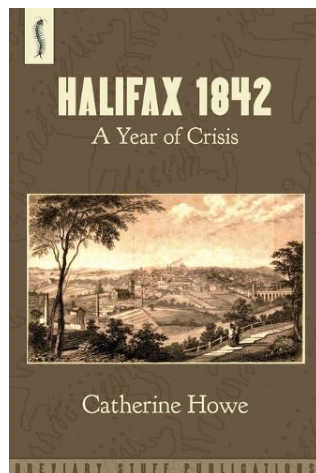
Sunderland's Peterloo: Remembering the North Sands 1825 massacre https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1J_VXf_IIVs&t=101s

Halifax Chartist hero Benjamin Rushton Remembered <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fp4mth4LfwY&t=5s>

This article is online at:- <https://writemark.blogspot.com/2025/11/he-who-weeps-175-years-ago-this-saturday.html>

Read *TRADE UNIONS THEN AND NOW – A BRIEF HISTORY* by Mark Metcalf and Mick McGrath <https://markwrite.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/trade-unionism-book-pdf.pdf>

Halifax 1842 – A Year of Crisis
by Halifax-born Catherine Howe is the
definitive account of events in Halifax at
the time.



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Calderdale Trades Union Council is the local TU Council for the Calderdale Metropolitan Borough area in West Yorkshire.

We exist to bring together union branches and members at a local level to campaign on issues affecting working people in their workplaces and their communities. We meet the third Thursday in each month. There are regular speakers at our meetings.

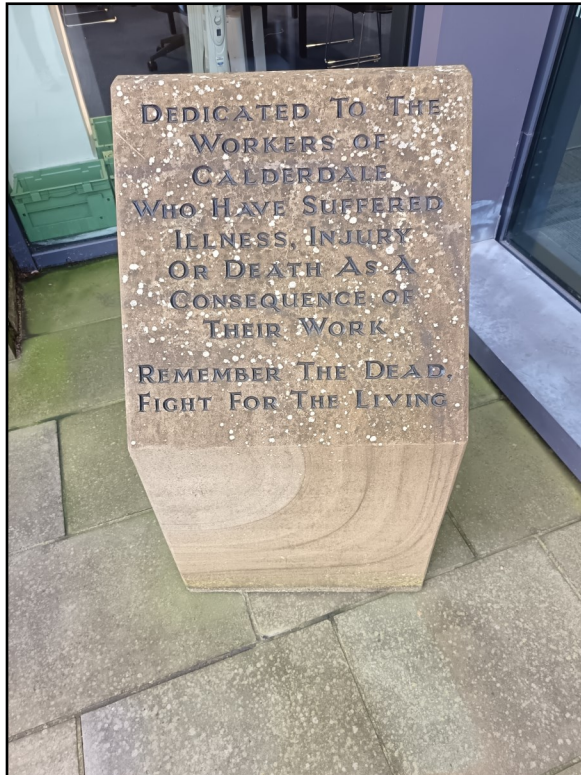
This publication has been funded by the members of Unite Marshalls Branch Halifax.

CTUC would like to thank them for doing so.

Special thanks to Carol Marshall, Jon Medcalf, Keith Piercy and Alan Walsh for their help with this work

Other local branches who are keen to finance other such booklets should get in touch.

December 2025



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