

The Northern Echo

Summary of the following articles;

'Highly likely' that blast could have been prevented

8:27am Thursday 23rd October 2008

For the sake of a few pounds

7:38am Friday 24th October 2008

Acetylene gas explosion: hundreds could have died

7:56am Friday 24th October 2008



By Will Roberts



TRAGEDY: The wreckage of Andy Herd's van burns in Wolsingham town centre after gas exploded as the welder drove to work

A FEW pounds could have saved the life of a welder killed when leaking gas cylinders in the back of his van exploded, a lawyer representing the man's widow claimed last night.

Andy Herd died almost instantly when acetylene gas leaking into the back of his van ignited as he was driving through Wolsingham, County Durham, on May 26 last year.

The blast caused widespread destruction in the town's market place, badly damaging shops and houses and leaving debris spread around the area.

Recording a verdict of accidental death at 33-year-old Mr Herd's inquest yesterday, coroner Andrew Tweddle, who saw the scene of the accident first-hand, said "The evidence you have heard has revealed certain issues that we are now more aware of. It is beyond belief that we are talking here about the death of just one person, and if it was in Darlington high street, we could have been talking about 200 deaths, a massive inquiry and public outcry." and **called for more detailed advice to be made available to companies transporting dangerous gases.**

At the inquest Peter Dawson, a Health and Safety Executive specialist inspector, told jurors it was **"highly likely" that the explosion could have been prevented if Mr Herd's van had been modified** by his employers, Ward Brothers, of Langley Moor, Durham City.

Mr Dawson said that guidelines laid down by the British Compressed Gases Association (BCGA) suggested that an enclosed van should have ventilation equivalent to two per cent of the van's floorspace.

Mr Ken Irwin of BOC, which owns the gas cylinders used by Ward Brothers, attended the scene of the accident in the centre of Wolsingham. He said that both the valve on the acetylene cylinder and the knob on the welding lance were in an open position when he inspected them.

Mr Dawson said the gas could have gradually escaped overnight while the van was parked outside Mr Herd's home in Millrace, Wolsingham. **Mr Dawson said that had more ventilation been fitted, much of the gas would have had chance to escape.** Since the accident, Ward Brothers has modified three of the company's vehicles to meet the standards set by the BCGA.

Giving evidence, John Hodges, senior scientist at the Health and Safety Laboratory, said the build up of gas may have been ignited by one of the van's components.

Joseph O'Brien, acting on behalf of Mrs Herd, also told jurors at yesterday's inquest that Ward Brothers **had not carried out the necessary risk assessments in relation to the Health and Safety Act.**

Richard Bulmer, head of the HSE's North-East investigation team, said: "Mrs (Melony) Ridgeway-Buckley, HM Inspector of Health and Safety, has conducted her own Health and Safety at Work investigation and has been assisting the coroner at this inquest. She will now finalise her report in the light of the inquest and we will then be considering whether or not health and safety charges should be laid."