

Andrea Angel - Blue Plaque Address

Andrea Angel was born in Bradford on January 8th 1877, the son of Thomas Angel, an Inland Revenue Inspector, and Angelina Rabagliati, whose father had been a political refugee from Northern Italy. His father's profession required regular relocation and, after a period living in Birmingham, the family moved to Exeter where, in 1890, Andrea enrolled as a day boy at Exeter School.

In 1895 he was awarded a College Exhibition at Christ Church, Oxford, where he read Natural Science, gaining a BA with First Class Honours in 1899. He stayed on to undertake research in the Christ Church Laboratory with A. G. Vernon Harcourt.

In 1906 he was awarded a BSc degree with merit, *FOR HIS BRILLIANT RESEARCH WORK*. He continued to work in Oxford as a Chemistry Lecturer at Brasenose and Keble Colleges, Tutor for non-Collegiate Students, and Lecturer and Demonstrator in Chemistry at Christ Church, where he took charge of the college laboratory.

Angel had married Mary Stock in 1904, and in 1905 they moved to 15 Banbury Road. Two daughters followed, Marian in 1908 and Heather in 1909.

At the start of World War 1, Angel was keen to join the Army and, having seen his students through to their finals, he tried to enlist but was forbidden to do so. His Chemistry skills were seen as too valuable, and he was given the job of managing the TNT processing factory in Silvertown, East London, which was owned by the Brunner-Mond Company.

The Chemical Works at Crescent Wharf had lain idle since 1912, but after the "Shell crisis" of 1915 it had been seconded for TNT purification despite the presence of houses only 200 yards away.

At 6.45pm on 19th January 1917 fire broke out in the processing plant and 7 minutes later there was a massive explosion. The ensuing shock-wave was felt all over London, the bang was heard in Norwich and Southampton, and by the King at Sandringham, and the ensuing fires could be seen from Maidstone and Guildford.

As soon as he was aware of the fire, Angel ran over to the TNT plant to save the employees and to help extinguish the fire. 73 people, including Angel, were killed in the ensuing explosion, between 500 and 600 others were injured, and up to 70,000 properties were damaged.

The press coverage of this catastrophe appeared 2 days later. Angel was described as "The Hero of the Great Explosion" on the front pages of the Daily Sketch and Daily Mirror, the former reporting that: ***"He stood at his post of duty, sending out orders to police and firemen, helping women workers to escape, knowing that at any moment he might be blown to atoms. In the glorious records of our Army and Navy no deed of self-sacrifice greater was than this."***

On 20th June 1917 The London Gazette announced that ***"His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to award ... the Edward Medal of the First Class to the representatives of Dr Andrea Angel"***. He was also awarded a Carnegie Hero Trust Fund Medal *"for heroic endeavour to save human life"*.

Andrea Angel's heroism is commemorated on the War Memorials of Exeter School, of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, and of the Royal Society of Chemistry, a civilian in the midst of military heroes. His name also appears on the memorial to the Silvertown Explosion at the Royal Wharf, Silvertown and he has been identified as one of the Royal Society of Chemistry's 175 Faces of Chemistry.

I hope that this plaque will also serve to remind passers-by of the many acts of civilian heroism on the Home Front in the First World War.

M C Grossel

Christ Church.

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