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Molten metal injures 13 in blast at steel plant

By JOHN FULLERTON

Eleven firemen and two workers were injured, five of them seriously, when molten metal exploded at British Steel's Tinsley Park Works in Shepcote Lane yesterday.

Five firemen were taken to Northern General Hospital with serious burns from molten steel. Six others and two British Steel employees were taken to the Royal Infirmary with slight injuries and they were sent home after treatment

Five fire engines and seven ambulances were rushed to the giant factory after one of 11 soaking pits, where steel ingots are reheated for rolling, broke out at about 3.30 pm.

Firemen stood by when bricks came away from the furnace wall and molten "slag" leaked on to the floor.

Water sprays were turned on to the liquid fire. When it appeared the fire had been contained, a hose was turned on, said a BSC spokesman.

Seconds later there was an explosion.

Workers took cover and watched men reel back from the furnace, their clothes ablaze.

"I could see men running - it was like a volcano in a way," said one worker.

"It was terrible." said another. "One man was screaming. His face was burned black."

"This is the first time anything has happened like this." said the BSC spokesman.

One worker said he saw a fireman's axe blown to pieces:

"Another's fireman's axe was on fire. One man's helmet was burned to a crisp."

The sound of the blast was heard by British Steel employees half a mile from the furnaces. One office worker said it sounded "just like a bomb".

There are 11 soaking pits under one roof. Each pit can take up to 70 tons of steel. In this case there were five ingots of 12 tons apiece when the explosion took place.

Water

Three employees - who refused to give their names - said they wanted to know why water had been used to cool the escaping slag.

Slag is the residue steel from the surface of the ingots.

"Why didn't they use sand?" said one man.

A spokesman for Sheffield Fire Brigade said last night the material used to put out a fire - whether water, powder or sand - depended on conditions.

"Sometimes the burning metal can set fire to other equipment such as pipes or hydraulic oil. Water would be used carefully and sparingly to force the metal to set.

"Dry sand does breakdown rather quickly and you need quite a lot of powder and the metal can creep underneath it."

When the trouble began, the fuel to the furnace was immediately cut off.

Morning Telegraph asked a British Steel spokesman whether the furnace was using alternative fuel because of a shortage of coal gas.

"If it was, it had nothing to do with the operation of the furnace. We have used oil and gas for soaking pits and they are completely compatible. Fuels can be switched, but I do not know at present what fuel was used in this pit."

Cleared

British Steel would not release the names of the injured workers.

A Northern General Hospital spokesman said Station Officer Brian Ellis of Foxwood Avenue, Sheffield, is in a "satisfactory" condition; Fireman Robert Codman of Greenwood Road is "satisfactory"; Fireman Paul Parkin of Bramley Drive is "poorly"; Fireman Peter Child of Smalldale Road is "satisfactory" and Sub Officer Robert Smith of Cartmell Road "fairly satisfactory."

A spokesman for the Royal Infirmary said the following firemen were sent home after treatment: Assistant Divisional Officer Peter Knutton: Fireman R Whittaker: Fireman K Needham: Leading Fireman R Davis: Fireman Rosewarne and Fireman Johnson.