



Louisa Irwin and Julia Finch were the victims of a blasting accident, on 17 May 1886, near the present site of the Dowling Street steps. Louisa was the wife of Frederick Henry Irwin, a well-known photographer who ran the London Portrait Rooms in Farley's Buildings, which still stand in Princes Street. Julia, Louisa's younger sister, helped with the running of the

business. She had been separated from her husband for many years. The maiden name of the sisters was Swannell, and in their early years they had lived in Bedfordshire, England.

It was 4.45pm on a Monday when a blast intended to loosen rock sent showers of debris over buildings and towards Princes Street. A group of relief workers, engaged by the Council, had been removing rock for use in reclamation work in Cumberland and Crawford streets, and to reduce the level of Dowling Street.

Julia and Louisa were seated at a table in the first-floor reception room of the London Portrait Rooms, along with a Mrs and Miss Vivian. Julia was crocheting a little boot. Seconds after the explosion, rocks weighing up to 15 kilograms came crashing through the roof and ceiling. Julia was struck on the head and died within minutes. She was 41 years old. Louisa also suffered head injuries and she died a week later. 42 years old, she was survived by her husband and nine children, the youngest of whom was three years old.

An inquest found that the blast was poorly planned, over-charged, and undertaken without proper safety precautions. It also emerged that the supervisor of the works, William Barnes, was the son of Mayor John Barnes, and had been appointed to the position even though he lacked suitable qualifications. An experienced foreman was available to assist with any blasting, but he was not called upon.

The jury at Julia Finch's inquest considered the Council liable, but was not willing to find manslaughter against any individuals. The Council subsequently paid over L.3,000 in compensation to the Irwin family and other victims of the accident. The Reserve Bank's inflation calculator suggests that this would be over \$500,000 in today's money. Julia's estranged husband was unsuccessful in his claim for compensation.

Controversy over the accident dogged and divided the Council, with both Mayor Barnes and councillors on the Relief Committee attempting to shift blame to one another. Barnes did not stand for re-election later that year.

Handel's *Dead March in Saul* was played as Julia's funeral procession left St Paul's in the Octagon, and a few days later Chopin's funeral march was played for Louisa. A large marble cross by monumental mason Henry Palmer marks their shared grave in the Southern Cemetery.

Prepared by David Murray for the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand (www.cemeteries.org.nz).

SOURCES INCLUDE:

Otago Daily Times and *Otago Witness* newspapers reports