

The clockmaker's art in the service of crime: the so-called 'Thomas disaster' on 11 December 1875 in Bremerhaven

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This article discusses the background of the so-called 'Thomas disaster' on 11 December 1875 in the German harbour town Bremerhaven. It was the first discovered attempt at insurance fraud using a time bomb to be placed on a ship. Special consideration is given to the clockwork mechanism, and in this respect hitherto unknown sources have been consulted.

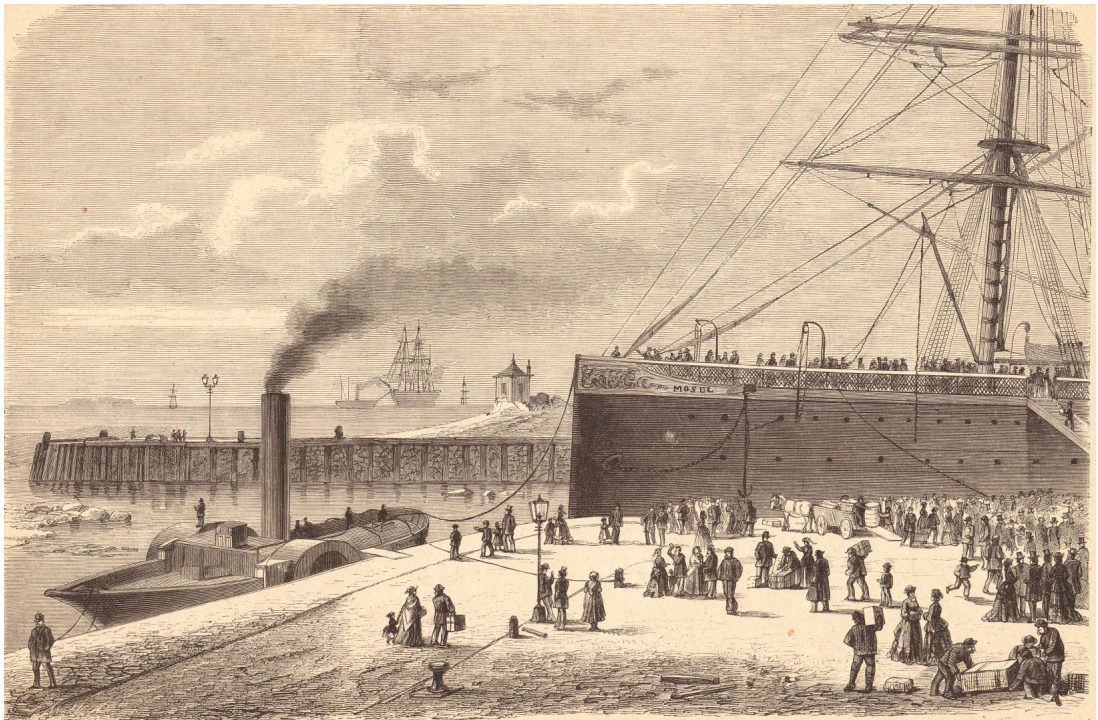


Fig. 1. The quay at the lock to the New Harbour of Bremerhaven before the departure of the *Mosel*. Xylograph after Carl Justus Fedeler (1837-1897), *Illustrierte Zeitung*, nr. 1696, 1 January 1876.

On the morning of 11 December 1875, Bremerhaven had nice winter weather, and on the quay in front of the lock of the New Harbour a dense crowd had assembled to say goodbye to the passengers of the Lloyd

steamship *Mosel*, which was due to sail to America (Fig. 1).

As the departure of the *Mosel* was imminent, the steam tug *Simson* had already moored, and the last cargo had been taken

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Fig. 2. After the explosion. Xylograph after H. Marutzky, *Illustrirte Zeitung*, nr. 1696, 1 January 1876, p. 13.

over. A carriage with crates and barrels arrived, one of which was extremely unwieldy, armoured with iron, and weighing 650 kg. According to the consignment note, it contained a delivery of caviar worth 3000 marks. The car was unloaded and the freight hoisted up immediately. At 11:20 a.m. a huge explosion broke a four-meter deep crater into the quay, a column of smoke rose almost 200 meters, and the blast wave caused numerous windows to break in the surrounding houses. The scene was horrendous, with dozens of people dead, missing or severely injured. Both the *Mosel* and the steam tug *Simson* were heavily damaged. (Fig. 2)

The cause of the explosion was completely unclear, and at first a boiler explosion of the tug *Simson* was suspected. At about 5 p.m. groans were heard from a first-class cabin. The locked door was broken open, and inside it the passenger William King Thomas (Fig. 3) was found covered in blood. Initially he was thought to be another injured victim of the explosion, but soon a revolver was discovered in his cabin. Thomas had obviously tried to

commit suicide. Two short notes were found next to him, one addressed to the captain of the *Mosel*: 'What I have seen today I cannot bear', the other to his wife: 'God bless you and my darling children, you will never see my [sic] again.'

Despite his severe injuries, Thomas occasionally gained consciousness and was interrogated by the police. He eventually admitted to having been the owner of the barrel that exploded, but he refused to say anything about the course of events, the nature of the explosive and whether there were any accomplices. Finally, a psychologically adept police inspector coaxed a partial confession out of him. Thomas died on 16 December at 16:30 p.m. and is said to have shown no regrets.

Forty-three victims of the explosion, of whom only twenty-two could be identified, found their final resting place in a mass grave in Wulsdorf (Fig. 4). It is recorded that the 'cadaver' of Thomas was 'hastily buried' (*verscharrt*) outside the cemetery boundary. The rather macabre designation of Thomas's



Fig. 3. Portrait of Alexander Keith aka William King Thomas. Bremen, State Archives: 2-Q.9-441, I.



Fig. 5. Photograph of the head of Alexander Keith. Bremerhaven, Municipal Archives.



Fig. 4. The grave of the victims of the 'Thomas disaster' in the cemetery of Wulsdorf near Bremerhaven. Photo by the author.

corpse was chosen with good reason, because his head was missing. It had been cut off without authorization by the Bremerhaven city doctor Soldan for scientific research and was placed in a large jar, in alcohol (Fig. 5).¹

In Germany, Austria and the United States meticulous investigations were started immediately. The famous American private detective agency of Allan Pinkerton was instructed and within a few months delivered a detailed report based on the involvement of a dense network of informants. This 'movement profile' — a remarkable accomplishment at a time when one could at best use trains and ships, often had to travel by horse or carriage, and when letters and telegraphs were the only means of distant communication — did not only yield a precise picture of the delinquent's dubious activities, but also of his personality.

Born in 1827, William King Thomas was actually called Alexander Keith. The family

1. Thomas's head was first kept in the 'Museum of Natural History', an old school building in Bremerhaven, which was a kind of cabinet of curiosities. In 1914 the ghastly object was transferred to the 'Museum of Crime' of the Bremen police and is said to have been disposed of in 1944 with the remains of the mutilated dead after an air raid. According to another version, British soldiers blew up grenades in the building in 1945. Whatever may have happened – at the end of the Second World War, Thomas's head disappeared without a trace.

was of Scottish origin and emigrated to Canada in 1836. His father had founded a brewery in Halifax, which was not economically successful. However, an uncle of the same name also owned a flourishing (still existing) brewery, and became a rich, influential man in a very high social position. Apparently driven by social envy and the desire for recognition, Alexander Keith, hoping to share in the brilliant position of his uncle, added 'junior' to his name, and faked bills of exchange.

In the American Civil War Halifax became a hub of conspiracy to procure weapons and equipment for the South. Expecting highly profitable business, Keith (called 'Sandy' by his buddies) sided with the Confederates, acting as a ship's agent and sending blockade runners to the shores of the secessionist states. It would go too far here to elaborate on all his scams, subversions, and other dark business.² As the situation of the Confederates became more and more desperate, Southerners came to Canada, planned plots from there and were supported by Keith. On 9 August 1864 the Confederate agent John Maxwell blew up an ammunition barge with a time bomb, and insurance broker Thomas Courtenay devised the so-called 'coal torpedo' to destroy Union ships: a hollowed-out piece of coal containing gunpowder was to be shoved into the boiler by unsuspecting stokers and blow up the ship. Such machinations may have provided the inspiration for an insurance fraud by means of an explosive charge in a highly insured cargo.

Again and again Keith was entrusted with considerable sums by shady characters in anticipation of marvellous profits, and when their money was 'lost' he always found plausible excuses. In December 1864 Keith, accompanied by Mary Clifton, a Halifax hotel maid, disappeared with a large sum of money. For a while he lived in the lap of luxury in Boston and New York, but his angry cronies had hired private investigators who were hard on his heels. Keith left the now pregnant Mary Clifton in New York and fled to Missouri. In Edwardsville (near St. Louis) he married the French-born milliner Cecilia F. Paris on 21



Fig. 6. Portrait of the Leipzig turret clock maker Johann Ignatz Fuchs. Museum Schloss Bernburg.

August 1865, with whom he was to have four children. However, his defrauded 'business partners' were tirelessly chasing after Keith, and after another narrow escape he rushed to Europe in 1866 and lived with his family temporarily in Vienna, Linz and Leipzig. Finally, they settled in Dresden, where the always charming and jovial Keith associated with the best society and was generally considered a successful, widely travelled businessman, as well as an exemplary family man. He never worked, but lived off his capital from dubious sources—resources which were drained rapidly owing to his sumptuous lifestyle and his losses of considerable sums in casinos and from unsuccessful speculations. Finally, Keith alias Thomas was virtually bankrupt and developed the idea of solving his financial problems with insurance fraud on a grand scale. This project was to become a 'pioneer' and in a sinister way groundbreaking: With a highly insured cargo containing explosives and a time bomb, he wanted to cause a ship to disappear on the Atlantic without a trace and pocket the

2. For a detailed account see Ann Larabee, *The Dynamite Fiend: The Chilling Tale of a Confederate Spy, Con Artist, and Mass Murderer* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan: 2005), pp. 23 ff.

insurance sum. It was very probably the first attempt at such a crime at sea using a time fuze.³

In 1873 Keith entered into negotiations with the turret clock maker Johann Ignatz Fuchs (1821–1893) in Leipzig (Fig. 6) and inquired about the possibility of producing noiseless clockworks which could deliver a strong blow after ten days of running time. Fuchs was a well-known clockmaker, born in Welda, Westphalia, and founded a workshop in Zerbst. In 1845 he moved to Bernburg and became a well-known maker of turret clocks. Since Keith spoke German very poorly and Fuchs could not understand the purpose of the device, he did not pursue the matter further. In the spring of 1874 Keith, now under the name Peadro Wiskof, approached the Viennese clockmaker Ignaz Rind. Rind built a movement and sent it *poste restante* to Germany towards the end of the year. To get explosives Keith visited the factory of the Krebs brothers in Cologne. He introduced himself in broken German as Mr. Garcie of Kingston, Jamaica, and expressed his interest in the explosive ‘Lithofracteur’. This was a variant of the dynamite recipe by Alfred Nobel, and according to the manufacturer the effect of one pound of the explosive was equal to ten times that amount of gunpowder. Keith aka Garcie aka Thomas pretended to need the explosives for the hard rock in one of his mines. In March 1875 he personally collected 700 pounds.

However, Rind’s clockwork, which he had received in the meantime, did not meet his requirements; it was too small and did not prove to be strong enough. So Keith again turned to Fuchs and travelled to Bernburg. In the meantime he had improved his German and pretended to be the owner of Russian silk factories for which he needed a special movement. This should run noiselessly for ten days and trigger a firing pin with a force equal to a 30-pound hammer. When Fuchs asked for its purpose, Keith stated that the movement was to operate a special mechanism that could cut a thousand silk threads in one fell swoop, and he promised to order another twenty movements. Fuchs found his customer

a bit strange, but did not suspect anything and started working. On 20 April 1875, he handed over the first movement in a hotel in Leipzig. In a trial triggering of the firing pin, the mahogany table on which the device was placed suffered severe damage. Keith was highly satisfied and paid Fuchs not only the agreed 100 thalers, but also, without quibble, an additional expenditure of 25 thalers claimed by the watchmaker. Afterwards Fuchs did not hear from him anymore.

In June 1875, Keith had a box insured for £9000 through the London bank Baring Brothers, and had it loaded on the steamer *Rhein* of North German Lloyd in Bremerhaven. He himself embarked on the British ship *Republic*. But when Thomas arrived in New York, the *Rhein* lay undamaged in the harbour. The mechanism had obviously failed — the lid of the spring barrel had been pressed out and blocked the wheelworks. Keith declared the contents of the box as polishing paste, stored it in New York and took the clock movement back to Europa on the *Republic*.

As soon as he was back in Germany, he made another attempt. At the end of September, Keith received another 100 pounds of ‘Lithofracteur’ and tried to insure two heavy boxes, allegedly containing dollar coins, in Liverpool. However, both the insurance company and the White Star Line insisted on the prior counting of the money. Keith had to travel to New York on the steamer *Celtic* with his boxes uninsured. Probably he secretly threw the explosives overboard to avoid suspicion in customs. In New York, Keith reclaimed the stored barrel, and had it loaded on the *Rhein* again. The ship arrived in mid-November in Bremerhaven, and the cargo was forwarded to Bremen. Keith embarked on the *Frisia*, rented a storeroom after his arrival, and commissioned a barrel maker named Delvendahl to build a new, large barrel into which a false floor was inserted. Keith filled one compartment with explosives, and for the firing pin of the mechanism (previously repaired by the Bremen watchmaker Friedrich Bruns) the intermediate floor was provided with a hole. Keith personally brought the barrel, allegedly

3. The sinking of the cargo ship *Lucona* in the Indian Ocean on 23 January 1977, which caused a political scandal in Austria, had a very similar scenario.

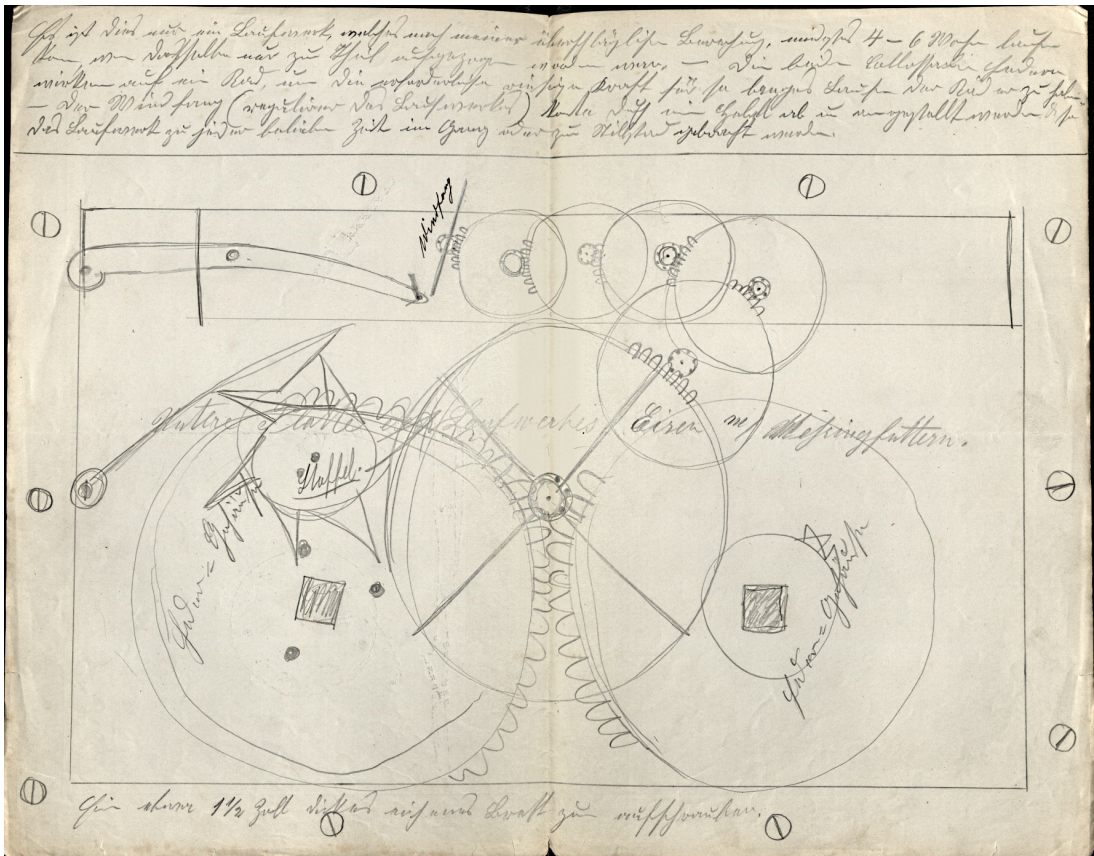


Fig. 7. Sketch of the movement by Johann Ignatz Fuchs (Bremen, State Archives: 2-Q.9-437, 5). Translation of the heading: *This is the movement, which can run at least 4-6 weeks according to my estimate, when it has been wound only in part. - The two springs of enormous size act on the same wheel to effect the necessary huge power for running the wheels so long. - The flywheel (regulator of the movement) can be turned on and off by a lever, and so the movement can be started or stopped at any time.*

containing caviar worth 3000 Reichsmarks, as passenger baggage to the freight terminal of North German Lloyd. Their ships regularly carried express goods and precious cargo, and what made the Lloyd attractive to Keith was the fact that the company was also engaged in insurance business. He booked a first class passage to Southampton where he planned to disembark. Probably Keith intended to hand over a box ostensibly containing 15,000 dollars to the purser in Southampton. His course of action was very methodical and the time of the explosion planned exactly: On the tenth day after the departure of the ship, the mechanism was to spark the explosion, and *Mosel* would never reach its destination. At that time no means of communication were available offshore, and witnesses would not

exist. Between 1851 and 1873 alone seven steamers had disappeared without any trace, and only a tragic accident could be assumed. It looked like the perfect crime.

But why did the premature explosion happen? The answer can be found in the design of the mechanism (Fig. 7). It was a large, sturdy movement with iron plates with 31 x 21 cm sides and a depth of 14 cm, driven by two spring barrels and regulated by a flywheel. On the latter, two balls with springs were mounted, which pressed against an annular plate and thus slowed down the speed of rotation. Fuchs seems to have been inspired by the functional principle of the regulator used in steam engines. According to the description⁴ by the watchmaker Bruns (see Fig. 8) there was only a normal flywheel, and

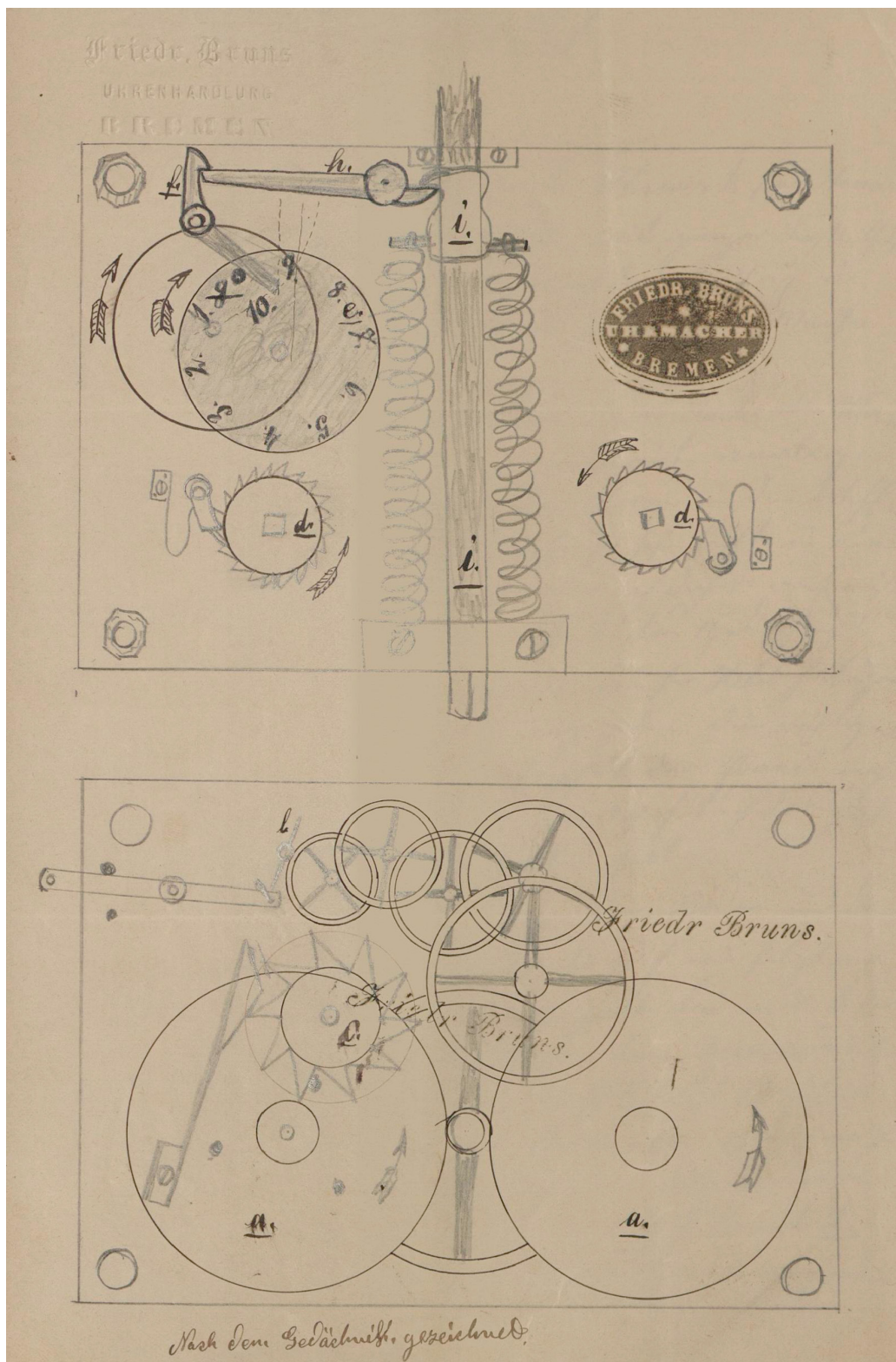


Fig. 8. Sketch of the movement by Friedrich Bruns. Bremen, State Archives: 2-Q.9-438, 255.

Das Thomas'sche Höllenuhrwerk.

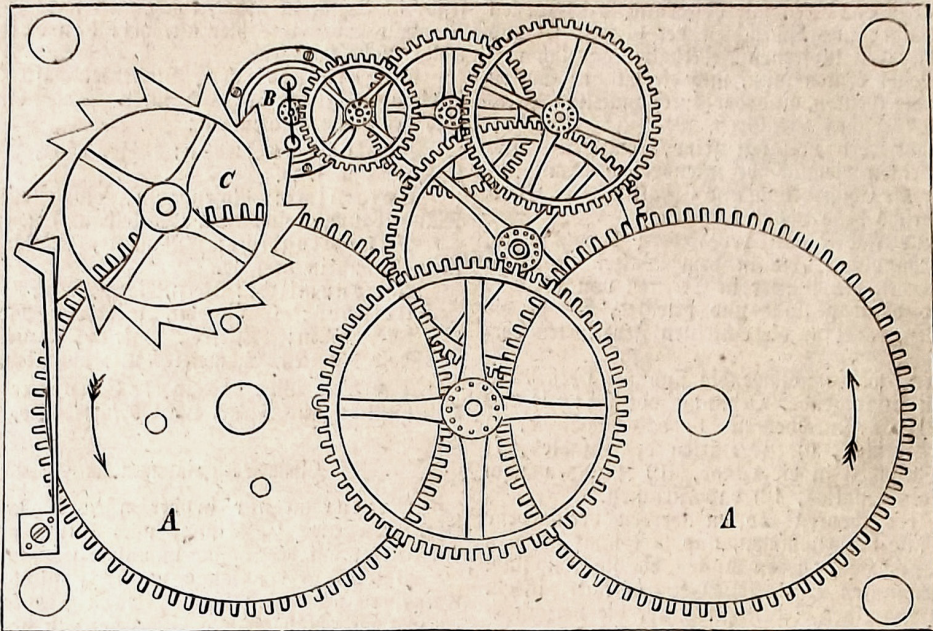


Fig. 1. Innere Ansicht der Thomas'schen Höllenuhr.

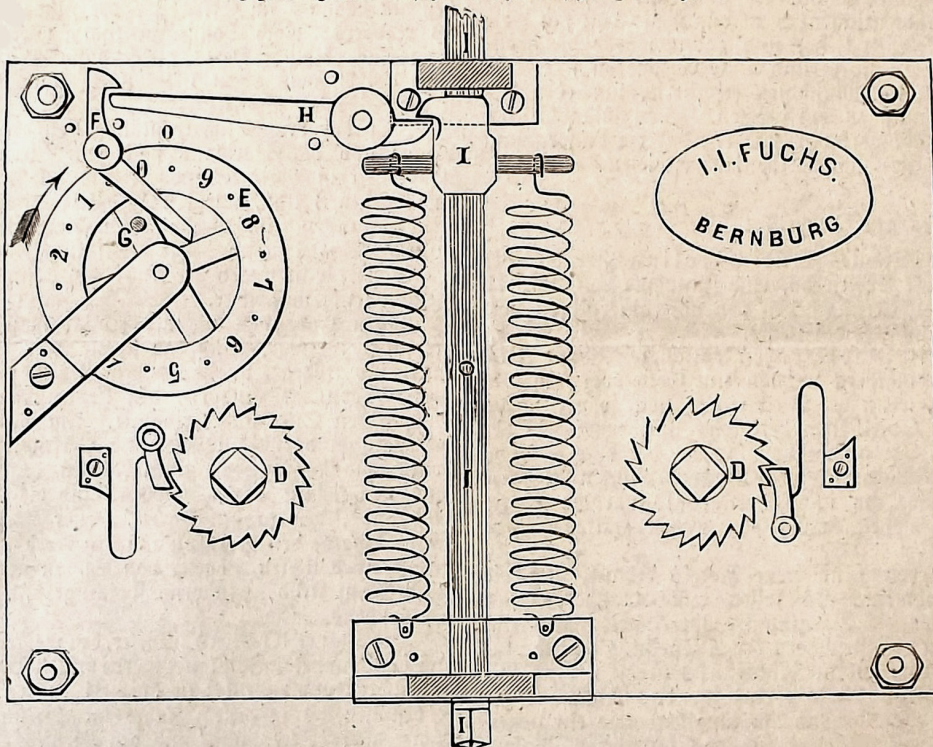


Fig. 2. Äußere Ansicht der Thomas'schen Höllenuhr.

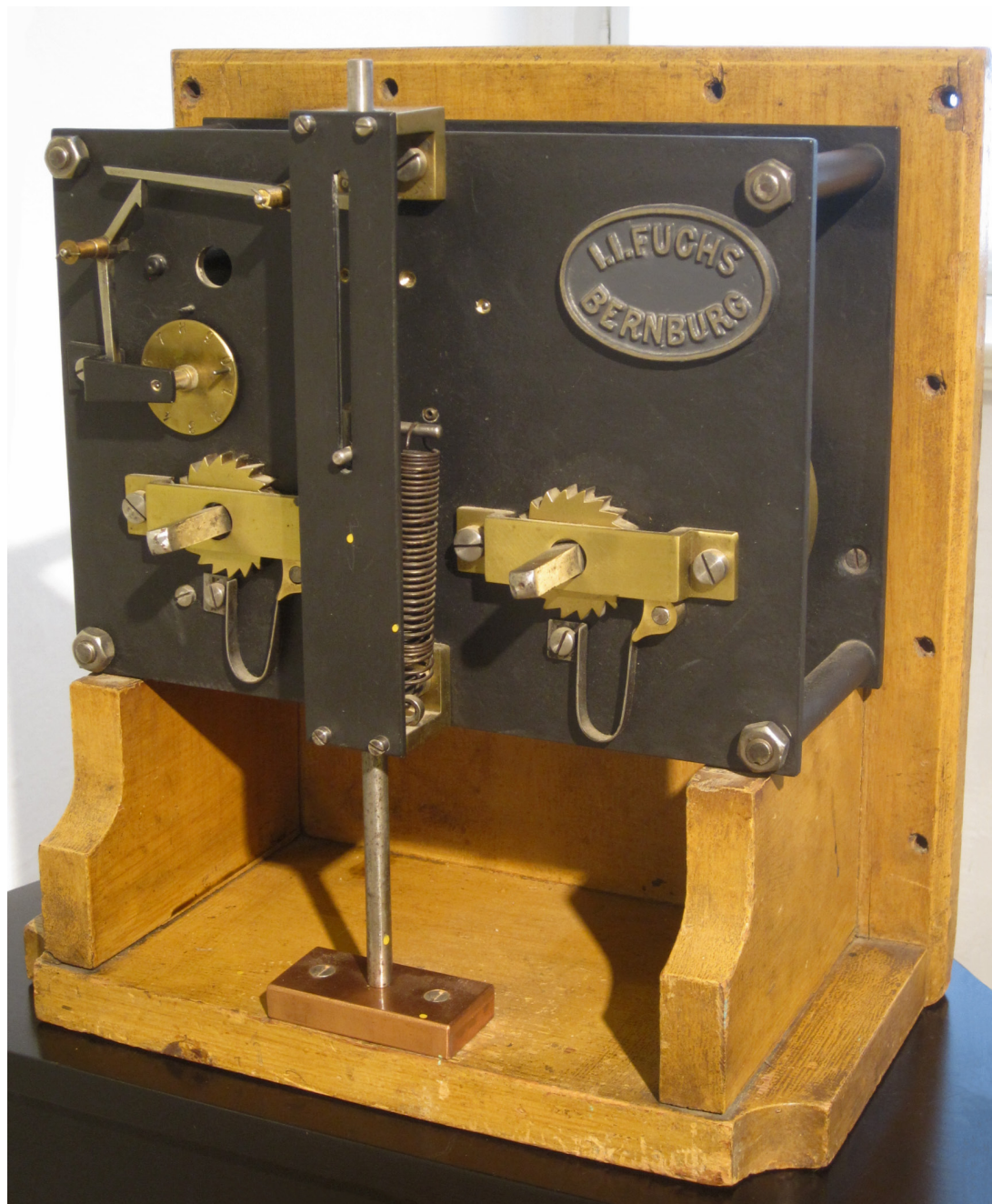


Fig. 10. Replica of Fuchs's mechanism, constructed by the clockmaker and on display in the museum at Schloss Bernburg. Photograph kindly provided by Dr Roland Wiermann, Museum Schloss Bernburg.

probably Keith had dismantled the two balls in advance.

Into the bottom of one of the barrels, three (four?) pins were inserted, which moved a

step wheel with 10 (15?) teeth forward. On its arbor, a disc with 10 divisions and a lifting pin were mounted outside. This triggered a lever with a claw releasing a spring-loaded firing

4. A full transcription of this document, which is in the Bremen State Archives: 2-Q.9-438, 255, is given in Oestmann, 'Die Uhrmacherkunst im Dienste des Verbrechens', pp. 48-49.

pin, which darted out about 10 cm, causing the cartridge to explode (Fig. 9).

Keith had thought of everything except one problem: The mechanism was not shock-proof, and the firing pin could be released prematurely by a strong shock. However, given the pretended purpose of the mechanism, its constructor had no reason to provide an appropriate safeguard. Probably the unwieldy barrel had been handled too roughly or slipped out of the guy rope when it was wound up.

The assault made Fuchs unintendedly into a celebrity. He had reported to the authorities at once when news of the explosion emerged, and could plausibly assert that he knew nothing of any criminal intentions associated with Keith's commission. In the following years Fuchs received numerous orders and delivered 'original Bremerhaven time bombs' (*Bremerhavener Höllenmaschinen*) to several museums. One of these replicas is still exhibited in the museum at Schloss Bernburg (Fig. 10).

It was beyond the imagination of contemporaries that a family man was nevertheless ruthless enough to try to destroy a ship with hundreds of people on it. General bewilderment and utmost horror prevailed—a new kind of crime had been committed: a seemingly harmless, likeable person went to work with a vicious intelligence, coldly calculating, and prepared to sacrifice a great number of uninvolved people for his purposes, without scruple. The 'Thomas catastrophe' was an outrageous and unimaginable event for contemporaries, but it was only to be a mere foretaste of what was to come in our times.

Sources and literature

Extensive archival sources can be found in the Bremen State Archives: 2-Q.9-437-442 contains extensive investigation documents, reports and police files. In contrast, only a small file (372/1) is available in the Bremerhaven City Archives. A collection based on the investigation files and contemporary publications was published by

Julius Eduard Hitzig, Willibald Alexis and Anton Vollert in *Der Neue Pitaval: Eine Sammlung der interessantesten Criminalgeschichten aller Länder aus älterer und neuerer Zeit*, n. s., 13, Leipzig, F. A. Brockhaus: 1878, pp. 1–60. Further contemporary records are 'Die Bremerhavener Katastrophe: Von einem Augenzeugen', in: *Die Gartenlaube: Illustriertes Familienblatt*, 24 (1876), pp. 19–20, 36–38; Johann Friedrich Hashagen, *Die Explosion in Bremerhaven: Ein Tag im Advent. Zur Erinnerung an den 11. December 1875* (Bremen, Valett: 1876), and an anonymous pamphlet (*Die Schreckens-Katastrophe in Bremerhaven: Erinnerungsblatt an den 11. Decbr. 1875* (Bremerhaven Remmler & v. Vangrow: 1875), reprinted in 1925 under the title *Das Thomas-Verbrechen in Bremerhaven am 11. December 1875 bei Abfahrt des Lloyd dampfers „Mosel“* by the Provinzial-Zeitung Bremerhaven-Wesermünde). Ann Larabee published a detailed biography of Alexander 'Sandy' Keith aka William King Thomas: *The Dynamite Fiend: The Chilling Tale of a Confederate Spy, Con Artist, and Mass Murderer* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan: 2005), and Lee Mellor's book *Rampage: Canadian Mass Murder and Spree Killing* (Toronto, Dundum: 2013) contains a chapter on Thomas (pp. 113–130). Moritz Grossmann and Emil Schneider published a short description of the Fuchs movement under the title 'Die Uhrmacherkunst im Dienste des Verbrechens', *Allgemeines Journal der Uhrmacherkunst*, 1 (1876), pp. 18–19. Further descriptions can be found in the articles 'Das Uhrwerk des Verbrechers Thomas', *Die Gegenwart: Wochenschrift für Literatur, Kunst und öffentliches Leben*, 9, nr. 4 (22 January 1876); 'Das Thomas'sche Höllenuhrwerk', *Deutscher Hausschatz in Wort und Bild*, 2 (1876), p. 288, and *Illustrierte Zeitung* 66, nr. 1696, 1 January 1876, p. 20. The recently published account by Michael Schuster, *Die Bernburger Höllenmaschine* (Baalberge, Schuster, 2013) contains inaccuracies, and some names are incorrectly reproduced.