

Another Dreadful Explosion of Fire Damp.

TWENTY THREE PERSONS KILLED.

Little more than three months have elapsed since it was our distressing task to detail the occurrence of an explosion of fire damp in one of the coal mines of this district by which more than forty lives were sacrificed, and anguish and dismay carried into the bosom of many a hard-tilling family. This week, we deeply regret to state, it again devolves upon us to relate a calamity of a like disastrous nature—painfully similar in its details, but happily less extensive in its devastating effects.

Early on Monday morning last, the inhabitants of Whitehaven, more especially that numerous class connected with mining operations, were thrown into a state of great excitement and consternation by a report that William Pit had "fired"—or, in other words, that an explosion of carburetted hydrogen gas had taken place, and that 50 men and boys, and 40 horses, had been destroyed. The pit mouth and the surrounding lanes and streets were quickly crowded by groups of anxious persons, and it was very early ascertained that the report was unfortunately too true, although it was some time before the extent of the calamity could at all be accurately ascertained. "William Pit" is one of the extensive coal mines belonging to the Earl of Lonsdale in this neighbourhood, and is situate close by the town on the north, and the workings extend under the ocean and towards Parton, which is situate about a mile and a half from the shaft, in a easterly direction, not far from below which the explosion is said to have occurred.

The history of this catastrophe is very brief, and all that need be known upon the subject may be said to be comprised in the proceedings of the coroner's inquest, which will be found below. It is universally allowed, by all conversant with the state of William Pit, that it had for a long period been very free from foul air, and that no efforts had been spared to maintain the thorough ventilation of all the workings; nor does it appear from all we have been able to ascertain that there was, on the Saturday, the least reason to suppose that any danger existed. William Pit is worked by shifts; and on Monday morning the persons employed on the night shift had partially got set to work when the explosion took place. It seldom happens in calamities of this nature that the origin is accurately known, but in this case the fact is different, for those who unfortunately, from their carelessness, cannot be held blameless have escaped to tell the tale. The accident seems to have been caused in this manner. On Monday morning, an under-viewer named Topping approached a part of the workings in which a large quantity of explosive gas had accumulated, owing, as is believed, to an irruption in the mine, below the pavement, at that particular part. Topping was followed by a lad named Kennedy, who had both a lamp and a lantern in his hand. The lantern was open, with a lighted oil lamp in it, and on the flame coming in contact with the inflammable air, a tremendous explosion was the immediate consequence, by which the doors and stoppings of the pit were shattered, blown down, and displaced, and the circulation of pure air checked and prevented. Loss of life to a lamentable extent ensued—ten men and 13 lads perished! Precautions had been observed in this pit which would have prevented so dreadful a sacrifice of our fellow creatures had the pit only "fired" once, for at all the leading crossings second and third doors had been placed,—the third doors so constructed that in case of the others being blown away by an explosion, they acted in keeping open the ventilation,—thus allowing the men an opportunity of escape. No doubt exists, however, in this case that on Monday morning two blasts had occurred, by the second of which the supplementary doors (as they may be called) were demolished, and the ventilation stopped. Hence the great loss of life which occurred, for it appeared on examination of the bodies that two only (Stott and Wheatley) had been actually scorched or burned to death, or immediately killed by the violence of the explosion, whilst twenty-one had perished by suffocation from the choke damp.

No sooner was it known that the accident had taken place than the utmost alacrity was used by all connected with the Earl of Lonsdale's coal mines to make good the air-courses of William Pit, and ascertain the extent of the disaster. The exertions of the stewards and those under them were unremitting until the whole of the bodies were got up, and with such zeal were these labours pursued that an apprehension existed that some would fall a sacrifice in the good work. Many were brought up completely exhausted, and a report prevailed at one time, and was credited, that some workmen who had gone down to aid in restoring the ventilation had sunk under their employment, but on closer investigation it was found that the men had come up at Harris, at which village they were ascertained to be safe, having recovered from the effects of the unwholesome atmosphere which they had been breathing. The grief and anxiety of the persons at the pit mouth as each body was sent up, was most distressing, and until six o'clock in the evening the bursts of irrepressible sorrow and anguish were frequent and truly painful to witness. At the hour named the last body was got up, when the melancholy groups gradually dispersed and disappeared.

Mr Mitchell, surgeon to Lord Lonsdale's mines on the north side of the town, was in attendance at the mouth of the pit from an early hour in the morning, and is universally admitted to have been most assiduous in rendering every possible assistance to the few survivors who were brought up. In twenty-three cases all human skill and knowledge were unavailing—not the smallest spark of existence flickered in the frames of the unfortunate sufferers to impart a ray of hope, but in the case of John Devlin, who was brought out in a dreadfully exhausted condition, we are glad to state that Mr Mitchell's prompt and persevering exertions were crowned with complete success. Devlin was found in the pit, in an exhausted state, by Felix M'Ginnis, who kindly took him upon his shoulders, to remove him beyond the reach as he hoped, of the noxious gas, but alas! the destroyer overtook them, poor M'Ginnis perished, whilst Devlin has been spared to relate the generous act. The usual means of restoration in cases of suspended animation from suffocation were employed by Mr Mitchell, such as rubbing, applying hot bricks to the soles of the feet, the use of the hot bath &c., and we are now most happy to say that the sufferer is in a state which leaves no doubt of his perfect recovery.—It is with pleasure that we also state that Topping, and the boy Kennedy, and two or three other individuals who were in the pit at the time of the explosion, are also now quite out of danger. Topping and Kennedy escaped in consequence of the body of fire taking an opposite direction to that by which they arrived at the fatal spot.

The following are the names and places of residence of the sufferers:—

- George Stott, New Houses, aged 60, wife living.
- William Davidson, do., aged 41, wife and 6 children.
- William Smith, do., aged 22, lately married.
- Richard Harrison, do., aged 49, 4 small children.
- John Tordiff, do., aged 31, pregnant wife and 4 children.
- Barney Curran, Taugier-street, aged 24, single man.
- Felix M'Ginnis, do., 33, wife and 2 children.
- Thomas Gilnour, do., 60, wife and 3 children.
- Hugh Roney, Banks-lane, George-street, aged 46, wife and 5 children.
- John Firth, Charles-street, aged 33, wife and 2 children.
- James Teare, Nicholson Alley, aged 18, } brothers.
- Robert Teare, do., aged 12, }
- Richardson Shields, New Houses, aged 16 years.
- John Fisher, do., aged 10 years.
- William Mac Mullen, do., aged 11 years.
- William Dornan, do., aged 14 years.
- Michael Wheatley, do., aged 13 years.
- John Dunn, do., aged 11 years.
- Christopher Pearson, do., aged 14 years.
- Levi Hoskins, Banks Buildings, aged 16 years.
- William Atkinson, New Town, aged 14 years.
- John Ross, Charles-street, aged 18 years.
- James Clarke, Kelsick-lane, aged 14 years.

The bodies were conveyed to their several homes in carts, followed by sorrowing friends and relatives. A more harrowing spectacle it is scarcely possible for the mind to conceive.

THE INQUEST.

On Tuesday, Peter Hodgson, Esq. Coroner, held an inquest on the bodies of the sufferers. The jury was summoned to meet at the Public Office, and consisted of the following individuals:—

- William Atkinson, shopkeeper, Ginns, foreman.
- John Jones, shoemaker, Queen-street.
- Daniel Opra, furniture broker, King-street.
- John Smith, innkeeper, Lowther-street.
- John Ward, auctioneer, King-street.
- John Heylin, gentleman.
- William Banks, shoemaker, Carter-lane.
- William Nicholson, shoemaker, Queen-street.
- Jonathan Bowman, shoemaker, Ginns.
- William Caddy, gentleman.
- Peter Christie, shopkeeper, Ginns.
- James Armstrong, shipowner, King-street.

The jury having been sworn, proceeded with the Coroner to the houses of the various sufferers, and viewed the bodies. On their return, the Coroner briefly pointed out the nature of the questions which the jury would have to inquire into:—first, as to the manner in which the deceased had severally come by their deaths; then, supposing the jury found that it was by an explosion of inflammable gas in a coal pit, whether sufficient care had been used or not to keep the air of the pit in a proper and wholesome state; and in the next place whether the accident which caused the death of these unfortunate persons had arisen from the negligence of any parties, or had been altogether the result of accident.

Mr William Thornton deposed as follows:—I am overseer at William Pit. My duty is to see that the ventilation of the pit is kept good, and that every thing is in proper order. I went through William Pit on Saturday morning, and found the ventilation good, and the workings in a perfect state of safety for the workmen. I went into the pit on that morning about two o'clock, A.M., and remained there until about seven. I was not down again until the morning of Monday. About a quarter past three o'clock that morning I heard that an explosion had taken place in William Pit, when I immediately got up, dressed myself, and descended into the pit. When I got to the bottom of the shaft I proceeded through the workings for about a mile, and found all correct up to that point. Then, and until then, the air was good. Then I found some doors blown away, which I got replaced as soon as possible in order to convey the ventilation forward. I then went on about a mile, when I perceived four or five more doors

blown away. I immediately got temporary doors placed, and having thus secured a supply of good air, I proceeded through the workings for about 5 or 600 yards further. There I perceived several doors and stoppings blown out. I got these replaced, and went on to two doors which were standing good. I opened them, and went on about 60 yards further. Then I found more stoppings blown out, and also the corpse of Levi Hoskins lying on the pavement. The body did not appear to me to be burnt. I went on a little further, and found other three boys lying dead—these were William Atkinson, Richardson Shield, and, as I believe, John Ross. I went a little further, and discovered a horse that had been killed. A little further still I found the bodies of three other boys, viz—Christopher Pearson, William Dawson, and John Dunn. They were all quite dead; they had been suffocated. A little beyond the bodies of these boys I found John Devlin lying on the pavement, with a light burning beside him in a safety lamp; he was alive. Felix M'Ginnis was lying dead beside him; and a little further on I found Richard Harrison, John Tordiff, John Firth, and a boy whose name I did not know. On proceeding further I found Hugh Roney, Wm. Smith, and Barney Curran—they were all lying dead. I saw no more corpses in the pit. I got the persons who were living conveyed to the bottom of the shaft, and taken up with as little delay as possible:—these persons were John Devlin, Jos. Topping, and Thos. Kennedy, a boy. When I reached the furthest point from the shaft I had much difficulty in breathing.

John Watson was the next witness. He said—I am a miner, belonging to Whitehaven. I was in William Pit on Monday morning last, having gone down on the preceding night at nine o'clock. About three o'clock on Monday morning, I heard the noise of an explosion, and with my fellow workmen immediately left the place where we then were. We had got about 500 or 600 yards, when we met with the *stife* (choke damp.) We had much to do to get out, but at last we reached the shaft and were taken up.

Joseph Topping, on being examined, said—I am a miner, and was employed in William Pit. I was in the pit on Monday morning. A boy named Thomas Kennedy was with me. We went about two miles from the bottom of the shaft, when the accident happened. The boy had a patent lamp in his hand, and also a lantern. There was an oil lamp in the lantern. The lantern was open. I considered the place where we were perfectly safe. It might be half-past two or three o'clock when we got to that place. The inflammable air then became ignited. If I had supposed there had been any danger I should not have gone to that place. After an explosion of fire damp, unless the person working there makes his escape he cannot live. Immediately after the explosion there comes a blast which brings air with it; in which a man cannot live. I am satisfied that from the effects of the ignition of the inflammable air, and the blast consequent thereupon, the persons killed in William Pit yesterday morning lost their lives:—that they were either immediately killed by the explosion of inflammable air, or suffocated by the consequent issuing of air called choke damp, and that the whole catastrophe was accidental, and not occasioned by any negligence or want of skill whatever.

This was the whole of the evidence, and after its bearings had been pointed out by the Coroner, the jury took a short time to consider of their verdict. After having consulted for some time they found that the deceased had come by their deaths *accidentally*, and recommended that greater caution should be used in the use of naked lights in the pit for the time to come. In the case of George Stott, the finding of the jury ran thus—"And the jurors aforesaid do upon their oaths say that upon the 18th day of February, in the year aforesaid, in the parish of Saint Bees, the said George Stott being then and there employed in a certain coal-pit (more situate called William Pit, it so happened that accidentally and by misfortune a quantity of inflammable air became ignited, and that by the flame thereof the said George Stott was then and there scorched and burned upon the body, face, and various other parts of the said George Stott, of which said scorching and burning he, the said George Stott, then and there accidentally died; and the jurors aforesaid recommend that in future no person be allowed to use a lamp, the light whereof shall be exposed so as to come in contact with the air, and they advise that in future greater caution shall be used in this respect."—In Wheatley's case the same verdict was recorded, and there was no difference in any of the other cases, except in the substitution of the words "choked and suffocated" for "scorched and burned."

On Wednesday afternoon the funerals of the unhappy sufferers took place. Twelve were buried in Trinity Church yard, six at St. Nicholas, two at St. James's, and at Moresby, and two in the burying ground attached to the Catholic Chapel in this town. The corpses of the men were followed to their last resting place by the "Pitmen's Club" in procession, with the Secretary's banner, surmounted with a white banner, and their clean and respectable appearance excited very general observation. Nothing could be more affecting or heart-touching than these silent and mournful cavalcades as they wended their way through our thorough streets to the narrow house appointed for all living.

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