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WATH MAIN COLLIERY EXPLOSIONS – WATH-ON-DEARNE – 1930

WATH MAIN. Wath-on-Dearne, Yorkshire. 24th. February, 1930.

The colliery was the property of the Wath Main Colliery Company, Limited, with Mr. G.H. Ashwin as the agent, Mr. M Martyn as the manager of the colliery. The explosions occurred in the Billingley Drift District of the colliery in the Barnsley Seam between six and seven p.m. and cost the lives of seven men with three others injured.

The Billingley District of the Barnsley Seam was two miles from the shafts and was an area of coal to the rise of a fault known as the Billingley fault. The seam was seven feet six inches thick and overlain with a shale roof. It was worked by longwall and pack walls were built on each side of the gate roads. No packs were built between the gate roads and the timber supports

were withdrawn and the roof allowed to fall into the goaf. The Billingley Fault was being stripped on both sides of the district. There was a working known as the 30's next to the fault on the south-west side and it was seen that two faults, the first a seven feet dipper and the second a four and a half feet riser ran almost at right angles from the fault to cross the 30's gate roads.

The ventilation did not rely on brattice and the quantity of air entering the district as measured on the 17th. February was 7,400 cubic feet of air per minute, half going to the right side and half to the left. Flame safety lamps of the Davis-Thorburry type and electric flame safety lamps of the Davis-Derby Pillarless and Oldham "C" type were used throughout the district. Each pair of men was provided with a one flame lamp and one electric lamp.

There were three deputies in the Billingley District, one per shift and the inspection was made before the commencement of the shift by the deputy of the preceding shift but it was not made within two hours before the commencement of work which was a breach of the regulations. The contravention was frequently acknowledged by the manager who explained to the inquiry that it had arisen through neglect when work restarted after the 1926 stoppage to alter the hours of work of the deputies. The inspection that was made prior to the shift was also regarded by the manager as the second inspection of that shift which the Inspector considered a breach of the regulations.

There was no record in the deputy's reports of finding any gas during August 1929 to the 8th. January 1930 but from that date to the date of the explosion, except for the 9th. 10th and 11th January the report of each deputy showed that firedamp was present in the vicinity of the 30's left bank. The working differed. Arthur Bird, the night shift deputy, recorded that "*a small percentage of gas in 30's left bank*" the day shift deputy, John Enoch Jones reported "*a small percentage of gas at 30's fault*" and the reports of the afternoon shift deputy, John Russell who lost his life in the disaster read "*a small percentage of gas in 30's fault side*". Again on the 18th February, he reported "*a small percentage of gas in 30's bank*".

In addition to the inspections made by the three deputies, there was an occasional inspection by the manager, the undermanager, Walter Kelly and the overman, Albert Fairhurst. The most recent of these inspections was on 7th February by the manager, 3rd February by the undermanager and the 27th January by the overman. The undermanager and the overman found gas on the low side of the left pack in the 30's left bank during these inspections which were where they understood the fireman had found gas.

On the 7th February, the Billingley District was inspected by Mr. T. Gawthorpe, H.M. Sub-Inspector of Mines accompanied by the manager and the day shaft deputy Jones, and found one per cent gas in 30's left bank low side. Mr. Gawthorpe asked the manager to have a brattice sheet erected to carry the air current across 30's left bank and in his report written on the same day Mr. Gawthorpe said:

There was 1 per cent firedamp in the general body of the air in the fast end of the fault end of the fast side of the stall. This fast end was about 16 yards long and not ventilated. The manager ordered the deputy to carry the air into the fast end by brattice.

Mr. Gawthorpe thought that the request had been carried out but in fact it had not. In stead the officials after a full consideration of the matter had a wooden door fixed on the outbye side of the brattice sheet already fixed across 62's gate road and the reporting of firedamp went on as before.

The conditions in the 30's working place immediately prior to the first explosion were quite normal on the evidence of two men who were working there when the first of the two explosions occurred. Samuel Walton was building up the goaf side corner of the pack on the left side of the 30's gate road and William Hart was busy lying rails about nine feet from Walton. Hart had his flame lamp hanging on the inbye side of the prop next to the goaf close to the side of the pack. The bottom of his lamp would have been about two and a half feet from

the roof. It was intact and the flame was burning steadily. The roof of the goaf had not fallen over an area of about 8 yards long by four or five yards wide immediately behind where Walton was working but nearer the Fault it had fallen close up to the doubling props.

Walton and Hart heard a bump in the roof and then it fell into the goaf starting from the Billingley Fault and travelling towards 30's gate road. What followed is not too clear but Walton went down to the floor and the next thing he saw was a flash. Hart was kneeling on the floor putting a sleeper under some rails, looking towards 30's gate road when there was a bump, a fall and then a flash. This was the first explosion.

Hart had his electric lamps and although he was burnt he was able to help Walton who was more seriously injured. They went out of the place to the top of the Jinny where they saw the afternoon shift deputy, John Russell. On the way out they saw three men, John Thomas Ridgewell, a corporal was one of the and Hart told these men to go up the 61's and bring the men out "*as there was a bit of fire at 30's*". These men, however, went outbye with Walton and Hart and heard Hart tell Russell that they had had "a bit of fire" and he should send down the low side of the district (70's, 36's, and 60's) and warn the men to come out. This Ridgewell did and he had returned to the main intake opposite 30's level when "another bump went off". This blew open the doors on the 30's level and raised a large cloud of dust. This was the second explosion.

What Russell was doing before the explosion was gathered from the evidence given to the inquiry by George Hopwood, a hewer was working in 61's, Fred Hopwood, his son who worked as a trammer and Alphonso Lenton a corporal. George Hopwood said that sometime after six, following a check on the ventilation, Russell came to his place and told him that he would have to go out because something had happened in 30's. At the time his son was along the face having gone to fetch some empty tubs. He waited for a minute or two and then went outbye. He was standing between the ventilation doors on the 30's level when these doors were both blown open and he was blown against the horses which were standing on the main road. There was a strong rush of wind and a lot of dust and the flame of his oil safety lamp was extinguished.

Fred Hopwood had left his father in 61's and went into 12's stall to get some empty tubs. On his way back he met Russell which did not speak to him but spoke to John Poole and Hopwood understood him to say that there was a lot the matter in 30's but he did not say what it was nor did he tell Poole or Hopwood to go out. He then went straight on 61's and not finding his father there, went straight down the gate and was on the 30's level when there was "*a bit of a bump and then a rush of wind and then it was like a gale of wind*". His electric lamp was blown out of his hand but although he could not see it at first as it was covered with coal dust, he recovered it and made his way out of the mine.

At about 6.15 p.m., Alphonso Lenton took a pony, Jumper, and a run of empty tubs from the passbye in the 30's level in the 12's face for a driver, William Johnson, who was having his snap. About five minutes after he got to the face, something occurred which seemed to him, "*as if someone had cut off the air on the low side (61's) of us and then it rushed forward again*". The colliers Poole, Unwin, Dyson and Allott were in the face and either Dyson or Unwin said he thought there had been a heavy fall and the other said: "*a run had gone down the Jinny*". Allott and Dyson were walking towards 62's and Lenton followed them. He saw King and Cusworth at the face of 62's and went down towards 30's. Lenton was returning to the pony when he met Russell between 12's face and the empty slant end. Russell asked him where the men were and he told him that and he told them that Dyson and Allott had gone towards 62's and he asked, "*What have they gone up there for?*" Russell also asked where Cusworth and King were and he told him they would be up in their own place. Russell then passed on without telling him to go out. He heard Russell tell Unwin and Poole that there was "fire in 30's".

When Lenton got into 12's empty slant, his pony was there and he remained there and was there, about 10 to 15 yards from the face when the second explosion occurred. He saw no flame but the air became hot and "just like a fog, dust rising off the roof – thick dust". There was no noise. He was wept off his feet. He shouted to Poole and Unwin but got no answer. He did not know where his pony was as he had left it rearing and kicking. He was eventually taken out by some men from 66's. He had Pool's electric lamp and Poole had this oil lamp. Between the first reversal of the air and the second explosion, there was an interval of 20 to thirty minutes. It was surmised from the evidence given at the inquiry that Dyson and Allott had been overtaken by Russell who was on his way to 30's when the second explosion occurred. Cusworth's body was found in his working place where he and King were filling a tub. It appeared that Cusworth had returned to his working place after Lenton had seen him turn down 62's gate with Dyson and Allott.

Those who died were:

- John Dyson,
- Herbert Allott,
- Ernest Cusworth,
- Tom King,
- John Russell,
- John Poole and
- Leon Unwin.

Walked out:

- Fred and George Hopwood,
- Sam Walton and
- William Hart.

The inquiry into the causes and circumstances attending the explosions which occurred at the Wath Main Colliery, Wath-on-Deerne, Yorkshire on the 24th February 1930 was made by Sir Henry Walker, C.B.E., LL.D., H.M. Chief Inspector of Mines in the Council Chamber of the Wath-on-Deerne Urban District Council. Mr. W.P. Richardson and Mr. J. McGuirk appeared for the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, Mr. Herbert Smith and Joseph Jones for the Yorkshire Mineworkers' Association and W.T. Miller for the General Federation of Firemen, Examiners and Deputies' Association of Great Britain and all other parties were represented. The proceedings opened on the 22nd May and lasted for seven days. The report was presented to E. Shinwell, Esq., M.P., Secretary of State for mines on the 1st. October 1930.

An inspection of the explosion area after the event revealed that in the 30's left bank the roof had fallen close to the timber from the pack on the left side right down to the low end and the goaf side of the pack was partly down. Walton's safety lamp was found lying at right angles to the face of the pack with its top lying towards the pack and its glass broken. This lamp was suspected as the source of ignition and Captain Platt extensively tested the lamp and gave the inquiry the following report:

The lamp was lighted and suspended in a gas chamber containing normal air. The lamp was adjusted to normal working height. A mixture of firedamp and air at 5.5 to 6 percent firedamp was allowed to descend slowly on to the lamp the lamp flame increased in height to about level of the bottom edge of the gauze ring when a flame of the burning firedamp propagated to the external mixture. This test was repeated with similar results and an 8-9 percent mixture of air and gas. In none of the tests was any diminution of the light observed prior to the ignition of the gas mixture.

Samuel Walton was sure that his lamp could have been struck by a stone from the gob. Mr. Frazer said:

When I got to the colliery they told me there was a man getting dressed in the ambulance room in the baths. I did not wish to distress Hart with a lot of questions so I said, "What has

happened?” He said, “We were putting a pack on and the place broke down and must have broken the lamp”. I asked him if he saw it break the lamp and he said, “No, but it must have done so”. I asked, “Did you bring the lamp out?” and he said, “No”. I said, “What sort of flame was it?” and he said, “It was a fairish big flame”.

The inquiry came to the conclusion that the first explosion was due to Walton’s lamp breaking and the presence of firedamp brought down by the fall in the goaf which both Walton and Hart heard.