

The Brynmally Mine Disaster of 1889

This particular disaster of 1889 was regarded as one of the most appalling and calamitous explosions that had occurred in North Wales up to this date. It caused a larger number of deaths than in any previously recorded mining disaster in the North Wales Coalfields. The districts had, happily, been singularly free from great accidents until then. The explosion took place on Wednesday 13th March 1889 at 2.45pm. This was just one hour before the men were due to have completed their day's work. It occurred in the Pendwll Pit of Bryn Mally Colliery. This was located at the bottom of the Bryn Mally Park and near the residence of Mr Thomas Clayton, one owner of the colliery. At 2.45pm on that fatal afternoon, a loud explosion was heard. The news spread very quickly throughout the area so that, in less than an hour after the explosion, the pit banks and all the approaches to the colliery were lined with relatives and friends, all anxious to learn the full extent of the disaster. There were many guesses as to how many men and boys had been killed.

The explosion occurred in the area known as the 'Queen Coal Section' - the seam being just over two feet thick and the coal was one of the best in the North Wales coalfields. Owing to a fault in the sub-strata, the mine was worked by two shafts called the 'Upper' and the 'Lower'.

The accident took place in the area of the 'Lower Shaft', this being about half-a-mile from the eye of the pit and at the extremities of the workings. The 'Queen Seam', which was the most valuable one and lay roughly 120 yards lower than the 'Main Seam' and was at an approximate depth of 300 yards. There were 113 men and boys in the area, although there were many more in all, in the pit. There were 74 miners, a figure which included 28 boys, were working in the bottom seam at the time of the accident,

The restrictive height of the seam necessitated the use of young men and boys to reach the coal and these worked under the directions of experienced miners known as 'Charter-masters'. The coal-face was worked in seven wickets. As soon as the explosion occurred the tremors were felt along the entire seam and the resultant dust and smoke affected some of the miners very badly as they rushed toward the pit bottom. Exploring parties were formed and the first was headed by Mr Robert Parry, the superintendent of the mine and Mr Robert Jones, the 'hooker' to the yard coal. These were followed by other teams led by Mr T.A. Clayton, the certificated manager of the Bryn Mally Colliery; Mr Frederick Hutchinson, also a certificated manager; Mr Samuel Cunnah of the New Broughton Colliery and a number of firemen and colliers themselves, who worked desperately hard, even at the risk of losing their own lives, in an effort to save the suffering and dying victims.

On that day twenty mine workers lost their lives, the proportion of boys to men being phenomenal. Five of the dead were married men, the others, young single men or boys. The enquiry was adjourned for a week, but the fact that tobacco, pipes, matches, unscrewed lamps and keys were found at the seam was somewhat significant, although it would have been premature to arrive at any conclusion until the witnesses and the Government Mine Inspectors had given evidence.

However, the tragedy evoked much sympathy for the bereaved families. The injured and the survivors were cared for by Mr Clayton in every way possible. The Rescue Parties were well organised and many brave attempts were made to save lives. Conspicuous services were rendered by officials of various local collieries and the men from Bryn Mally, but in spite of all their gallant efforts, the death toll was painfully large.

A reporter of the time wrote, "It is satisfactory to know that the distress and hardship, which has inevitably been caused, will be met by grants from the North Wales Permanent Relief Society, which has already paid out funeral allowances. It is at a juncture such as this that the beneficial work of an institution like the Relief Society is seen. Within a few hours the help that is needed is promptly given and although nothing can make up for the lives that have been lost, it is consoling to know that none of the families are in want." *(I add a note of my*

own here as I did not realize that such help was obtainable in those early days.)

The dead were brought out of the pit in the following order.

| | | | | |
|----|-----------|------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 | James | Davies | Halcog, Brymbo | 14 years. Filler. |
| 2. | E.W. | Edwards | The Green, Brymbo | 14 years. Filler. |
| 3 | W. | Davies | Cerney | 22 years. |
| 4. | Thomas | Edwards | Cerney | married. with family. |
| 5. | M. Thomas | Edwards | Cerney | 17 years. son of the above). |
| 6. | Arthur | Thomas | Cerney..... | 17 years. Bye-man. |
| 7. | Thomas | Jones | Cerney | 20 years. Collier. |
| 8. | W. | Rowland | Halcog, Brymbo... | 14 years. |
| 9 | Thomas | Williams | Cerney..... | 15 years. Holer. |
| 10 | Price | Jones | Cerney | 15 years |
| 11 | Henry | Harrison | Windy Hill... | 50 years. (M)Charter Master |
| 12 | Thomas | Williams | Ffrith | 27 years. (M) Holer. |
| 13 | Thomas | Jarvis | Pentre Isa | 20 years. Filler. |
| 14 | Thomas | Davies | Broughton | 15years... Horse follower. |
| 15 | Henry | Tudor | Brymbo | 17 years Jigger. |
| 16 | Samuel | Millington | | 15 years Filler. |
| 17 | Charles | Hughes | Moss | 14 years |
| 18 | Peter | Griffiths | Cerney | 23 years |
| 19 | Evan | Williams | Cerney | 53 years (M)Head Bye-man. |
| 20 | Henry | Goston | | . Charter Master. |

These unfortunate victims were buried on the following Saturday, Sunday and Monday: 11 were buried in Brymbo churchyard; 3 in Gwersyllt churchyard; 3 at the 'Brake' Chapel graveyard; 1 at 'Caer Salem' Chapel graveyard; 1 at 'Bryn Sion' Chapel graveyard and 1 at Llanarmon.

Sunday was a very sad day in the area. Six of the victims were buried in Brymbo Churchyard. These were James Davies, Thomas Davies, Thomas Jones, Peter Griffiths, Evan Williams and E.W. Edwards. Long before the hour set for the internment, all approaches to the Church and the hill sides were crowded with spectators. The Church and churchyard were full to overflowing and it was estimated that there were as many as 5,000 people present, many of these having travelled long distances to attend. Mr John Matthias was the organist and the service was conducted by the Reverend D. Lewis (Curate) and the Reverend Hugh Roberts (Vicar). After the Church service a special ceremony was held at the grave of Thomas Jones when the members of the Royal Standard Ancient Order of Foresters (based at Summerhill) gathered to mourn the passing of one of their members. A special hymn, was sung and a Sgt. Williams read the usual address of the Order given at such times.

On Sunday evening special services were held at various churches and chapels in the area, to give thanks for those who had survived the tragedy. Two hundred men had been working in the mine at the time, so there were many who had cause to give thanks for their escape.

The inquest.

The adjourned inquest was held at the Harp Inn, Moss and it was a long and detailed affair. However, it was established that many of the pits safety rules had been ignored. Before the bodies were removed from the site of the disaster, their pockets were searched and pipes, tobacco and matches were found along with duplicate keys which should not have been made.

There were also open lamps, which were a grave danger risk. The miners depended upon a Schiade fan, 4 feet 6 inches in diameter and run at 500 revolutions per minute, to circulate the available air through the workings. It was given in evidence that gas had been drawn in from a small unworkable seam (unworkable owing to a fall, which had taken place in the roof of the lower seam). Buried bodies were found on Goston's Jig (150 yards long) and about 90 yards up the Jig. Other bodies were found free of the fall and these had probably been killed by gas or the blast of the explosion.

Curiously enough, the Pit itself was not badly damaged except for the site nearest

to the area of the explosion. Many depositions were taken from the survivors, Pit Officials and government inspectors. These were very detailed and technical and beyond my comprehension so I have not attempted to record them and I will just add the verdict. Another member of the Local History Group, Ithel Kelly, is researching the Bryn Mally Colliery and will, no doubt, cover this aspect.

The verdict.

We have found according to evidence, that a fall in the Goston's Jig up to the air stream, caused a sudden outburst of gas, which was carried by the return current to a point near the top of the Waggon Road. Three men and a boy were known to be seated here with open lamps and this in our opinion caused the accident.

Some of the overseers were severely censured for allowing the safety rules to be broken, thereby resulting in such tragic consequences and it was particularly sad that so many young lives were lost.

(C) S.D.O. Hughes, (Mrs) 1986