

Researched by John Lumsdon

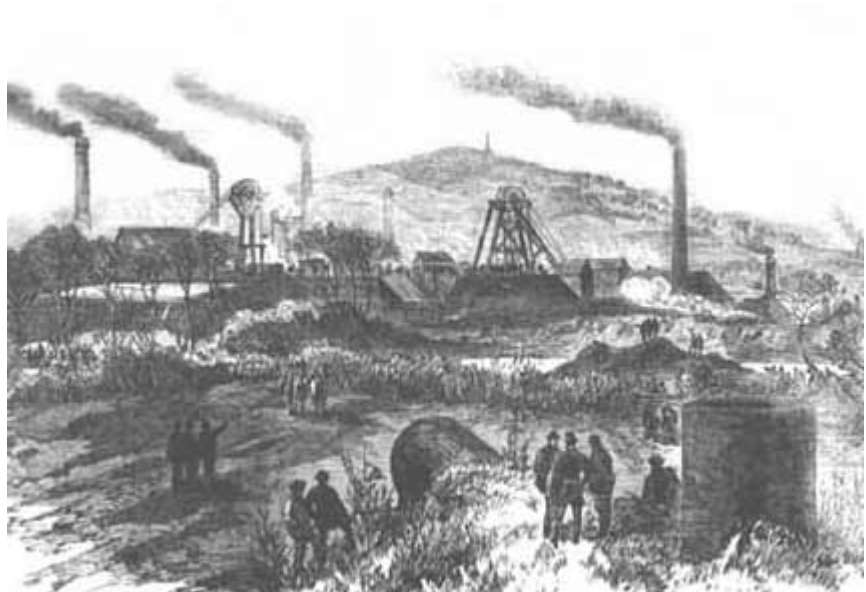
Talke o the Hill Explosion Dec 13th 1866

Some 150 men and boys went into the Big Banbury Pit.

Talk o' th' Hill 1873 and Talk o' the Hill Explosion 1901



On the morning of 13th December 1866, some 150 men and boys went into the Big Banbury Pit, at Talke (the property of the North Staffs Coal and Iron Company), to work, at their usual hour. Two thirds of the number went into the south workings, where a fine seam of seven-foot Banbury coal, highly charged with gas, had been recently discovered, and was being advantageously worked.



About 11.30 a.m., an explosion of gas took place in that part of the mine. A minute later 89 men and boys were corpses strewed in all directions; 14 horses were struck dead, and their stables were on fire. The explosion shook the earth like an earthquake for half a mile around. Dense masses of smoke and dust rolled up the shaft and filled the atmosphere with a thick fog. These were the signs visible above the surface of the destruction, which had been effected below. Only too well aware of the nature, though not of the extent, of what had occurred, and calm and collected as the emergency required, the managers of the pit and the men at hand, as soon as the smoke had cleared away, began the work of rescuing those who were within the reach of human aid. Some 50 men who were at work on the north side of the pit, and heard the report of the explosion roll like thunder through the narrow avenues of the mine, at once hurried to the shaft, and were drawn up unhurt. A few of those who were on the other side escaped almost by a miracle, and came safely to the surface.

The news of the accident quickly spread and before long colliers from neighbouring pits came to help. Experienced mining engineers and colliery

managers from all parts of the district came to offer their services in the dangerous and merciful labour of rescuing the sufferers. When the first party of brave volunteers reach the bottom of the mine they came upon a scene, which no pen could describe, corpses lay in all directions, in some places in heaps.

The majority had died a peaceful death from suffocation by "afterdamp" but the remainder had been burnt, and some were frightfully disfigured and mutilated. Two or three lay with their heads partially blown off, and were beyond recognition of friends, except by marks on the body.

In these chambers of horror the searching parties pursued their work of mercy, some had to be brought to the surface after a time affected by the foul atmosphere that still filled the pit.

One by one the black bodies were brought out of the pit, briefly examined by one or more of several surgeons in attendance, to see if life was extinct, and one after an other were carried away to the nearby Inn where they were washed and laid out.

All day and far into the night the drawing up of dead bodies went on and when this was suspended to allow some necessary repairs to the ventilation of the pit to be effected, 58 corpses had been recovered.

During all this time the scene at the pit bank was the most harrowing description.

Around the head of the shaft stood a dense crowd of colliers and others looking sadly and silently on the terrible revelations of the catastrophe. At the edge of the bank were men and women anxiously inquiring for sons, brothers or husbands, whose corpses would presently pass them on the way to the Inn. And in here a still more heart-rending tragedy was being enacted. Their friends and relatives in their grief were identifying dead bodies. All through the dull afternoon, the dark evening, the cold and bitter night, these things were going on, and when the next morning arrived 58 bodies were decently laid out at the Inn, ready to be placed in their coffins. When night came again the examination of the mine was resumed, and before morning 25 more human corpses had been brought out of the pit.

Then the search was again suspended to allow the ventilation of the pit to be restored, and one of the pipes of the pump, which had burst, to be repaired. The latter work occupied nearly a week, but in the interval the carcasses of the horses were drawn up and buried. Further investigation of the workings had been made without result; but by accident the men that had been employed restoring the bratticing discovered 4 men lying dead behind a sheet on the Wednesday, and the same day 2 other bodies were found near the bottom of the shaft where they were supposed to have floated from the "sump". Of the 13 men and boys rescued alive, 2 died afterwards, making 91 deaths as the amount of the fatality caused

by the explosion.

For several days after the catastrophe the colliery was the centre of great excitement. Thousands of people from the neighbouring towns and villages visited the colliery and the Inn where the dead bodies lay.

On the Sunday after the explosion the main street of the village was scarcely passable for the crowds. On the afternoon of that day the remains of 22 of the victims were consigned to their resting place in Talke churchyard, and as many more bodies were interned in various churchyards in the neighbourhood.

The next day 21 more were buried at Talke then the following day 3 more, the day after that 6, and in the intervening days the rest of the dead were deposited in the earth in other localities. The catastrophe was from the first suspected to be due to carelessness on the part of some of the men employed in the pit, and subsequent investigation has shown this to be correct; but the blame dose not rest wholly with the workmen and is shared to a grave extent by those who managed the mine. Though no less than 27 false lamp keys were found on as many dead men, the under-officials of the pit knew that some of the men had lamp-keys, and were guilty of opening their lamps and knew that men smoked while at work, they never on their own admission attempted to prevent the unlocking of the lamps, or to check smoking; and though firing of shots by the colliers was prohibited and men were appointed to do this duty, the rule was systematically neglected.

The precise actual cause of the accident will probably never be known, but that it was one of three: firing shots, smoking, or removing the top of a lamp is pretty conclusively established.

The ventilation of the pit according to the Government Inspectors of Mines was defective, and the management in driving new workings while the ventilation was imperfect had committed a grave error.

The pit was declared to be free of gas on the morning of the accident, except in one place, were it was cleared away at once.

In blind trust to chance, shots were fired in the night preceding the explosion, and evidence of smoking and of lamps having been unlocked on the very day of the accident was found in subsequent discovery of two lamps unlocked and another with the head removed in the pit, while one of the corpses held a half smoked pipe in his hand. Pipes and tobacco boxes were found on more than a dozen of the dead men and matches on most of them. Considering the gaseous nature of the coal, the clearly proved occasional presence of gas, in the shape of blowers, the neglect of duty by those in charge of the workings and the recklessness of the colliers themselves, the wonder is not that the explosion occurred, but that it did

not take place before.

While it appears clear that the systematic neglect of the rules on the part of the colliers and the overmen was unknown to the managers it is also clear that they adopted no means of periodically ascertaining the state of the pit, and whether the rules were carried out or not. A public subscription for the relief of these sufferers was at once opened, Mr. Smith Child heading the list with £500, and the Queen following with a gift of £100.

In most towns and villages in North Staffordshire funds were started, and at the same time a subscription was opened at the Mansion House, London, for the sufferers. Up to the end of January the amount received by the treasurer of the relief committee was nearly £7.800 in addition to which about £2.300 had been raised in local funds in the different parts of the district.

The amount required for the relief of the sufferers was estimated at least £15.000, and the committee expected this could be obtained in the course of a short time.

The relief committee were also anxious to have a surplus with which to set on foot a permanent relief fund for those left without support by future colliery accidents.

List Of Deaths At Talke Explosion 1866.

There is no perfectly reliable record in existence therefore it is not to be implicitly relied upon.

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