Accidents and Deaths in the Coalmines of County Durham

by Raymond Leach

To young people born in recent years and to first-time visitors to our county, it is difficult for them to visualise what our county was like at the height of the coal mining industry when hundreds of pits with their winding gear, machine shops, rail sidings, and ugly slag heaps some emitting pungent smells, dominated and scarred the landscape. Perhaps the greatest scars were those left in the lives of the men and boys who toiled in the bowels of the earth and their wives, sisters and sweethearts who laboured in the terraced houses surrounding the collieries.

The nature of the work of a miner, labouring in an alien environment, led to many terrible mining accidents and disasters that go back in County Durham to 1621. There were the terrible major disasters which claimed the lives of many men and boys. There were the explosions at Seaham colliery in 1880 when 164 miners were killed; at West Stanley in 1909 when 168 men and boys lost their lives; the structural failure at Hartley Colliery in 1862 claiming 204 lives; and as recently as 1951 when 83 miners were killed at Easington colliery, again due to an explosion. These are poignant reminders of how disasters of this magnitude could rob a family of several of its members and have a devastating effect on the local communities. These major disasters hit the headlines, but there were many accidents to men and boys as a result of the nature of their work; bizarre accidents when a man or boy was injured or killed just by being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The threat of disaster was there from the moment a worker entered the colliery work site. George Jameson, forty-five years old, stoneman, died after being run over
by a motor lorry at Malton Colliery on 18 December 1926. George Newton, fifty-five years, datal worker, died on 13 January 1920 after being struck by a stone thrown by boys at Follingsby Colliery on 31 December 1919. Delinquency among youths obviously goes back a long way!

The cage itself and surrounding area posed another threat. Joseph Stephenson, forty-seven years, shaftman, fell down the shaft whilst unloading timber at Charlaw Colliery on 23 May 1923. Robert Purvis, forty-one years, hewer, was injured getting out of the cage whilst it was in motion at Brancepeth Colliery on 9 November 1923 and died eight days later on 17 November. James Heslop, fifty-nine years, shaftman, was killed at Murton colliery on 2 June 1924 when he was hit by an object falling down the shaft.

Tubs in the wagon ways and the ponies involved in pulling them resulted in many accidents causing death. One man, Joseph Grafton, twenty-one years, wagon way man, died at Deaf Hill Colliery as a result of having been kicked on the cheek by a pony on 5 July 1918. Thomas Brown, forty-seven years, hewer, Boldon Colliery, was crushed by a run away pony on 5 January 1920 and died on 19 January. One of the youngest fatalities was William Seager, a driver at Derwent Colliery who was killed on 13 January 1921 after being kicked by a pony; he was just fifteen years old.

Men were killed as a result of accidents involving tubs. James Bowes Waites, forty-five years, wagon way man, Shildon Colliery died on 28 May 1923 after being crushed by a full set of tubs. John Whitter, forty-nine years, tipper, Tudhoe Colliery, suffered an injury to his leg on 16 June 1918 when a tub jumped off the track. He died on 4 December 1923. George Anderson, seventeen years, shaft lad, Wingate Colliery died on the 1 January 1921 after being caught between some tubs and a
wall. For the family of George Anderson it was a cruel way to begin the New Year. William Temple, sixty years, shifter, was killed on 29th May 1923 when he collided with the roof whilst using a tub as a mode of transport.

The extraction of the coal at the coalface using explosives in a dangerous environment of suffocating and explosive gases was another extreme hazard. Adam Atkinson, thirty years, timber loader, Usworth Colliery, was gassed on 5 April 1940. George Simon Birchnall, twenty-one years, putter, Chopwell Colliery, was injured on 9 December 1921 and died six days later on 15 December as a result of a premature explosion of shot. Robert Charlton, forty-four years, deputy, Kibblesworth Colliery, was killed on 14 February 1941 by being struck by stone whilst firing shot. John William Hodgson, forty-seven years, hewer, Medomsley Colliery, was burned by blown out shot on 5 August 1925 and died on 13 August. David Jameson, fifty-eight years, stoneman, Randolph Colliery, died as a result of being overcome by carbon monoxide on 7 May 1918.

The shot explosions, resulting in falls of stone and coal brought death and injuries to many miners. Alexander Weaman, thirty-six years, hewer, Ravensworth Colliery, was injured by a fall of stone on 18 June 1917 and died five days later on 23 June. George Brown, thirty-three years, hewer, Heworth Colliery, died as a result of a fall of coal on 13 December 1921.

The accumulation of water in the coal workings bursting into the coal seams was another source of extreme danger resulting in death by drowning. One such accident was at the Sacriston Victoria Colliery on 16 November 1903 when John Whittaker, thirty years, and Thomas McCormick, fifty-two years, both hewers, were drowned by
an inrush of water into the West Board of the Second North Flat in the Third West District of the Busty Seam.

The use of dangerous machinery produced many accidents, some bizarre, others due to carelessness or the malfunctioning of the machinery itself. John George Douthwaite, twenty-six years, cutter, Newton Cap Colliery, was electrocuted on 13 May 1924. Maurice Dale Elliott, sixty-five years, shifter, Esh Colliery, was struck on the head by a drill on 13 October 1918 and died on 11 November. John Hall, bankman, thirty-six years, Murton Colliery, was killed by being caught on the chest by a lever on 23 December 1924. John Allan, sixty-six years, wagon way man, Boldon Colliery, died on 2 July 1940 as a result of being dragged over a conveyor tension drum. P. Burns, twenty years, labourer, South Moor Colliery, died on 4 December 1920 as a result of having his foot cut off by a saw. George Butler, fifty-seven years, shifter, Langley Park Colliery, was injured on 22 January 1915 and died on 15 June 1917 after being struck by a windless chain breaking. Jacob Joice, fifty-two years, hewer, Mainsforth Colliery, was killed on 14 July 1916 after being struck in the abdomen by a pick.

Working among dust and dirt in a time before the use of antibiotics, some miners suffered accidents and died as a result of germs entering the wounds. These deaths would not perhaps have occurred in a more friendly environment and if treated with antibiotics. Edward William Dobbin, thirty years, driller, Newton Cap Colliery, was injured on the 30 October 1918, developed blood poisoning from a "beat" knee and died on 28 February 1919. Arthur Eagle, twenty years, onsetter, South Moor Colliery, was injured by a blow from a drag on the 29 July 1919, which resulted in blood poisoning and he died 23 August. Joseph Ridley, fifty-six years, hewer, Harton
Colliery, sustained a cut on the leg on 18 January 1918 and died from gangrene on 16 February.

The enormous strain put on the body by the tremendously physical nature of the work caused deaths among young and old from heart failure. John Smith, thirty years, plate layer, Shield Row Colliery suffered heart failure through exertion and died on 29 June 1918. Thomas Robinson, fourteen years, driver, Bowden Close Colliery, died on 30 August 1918 as a result of strain when lifting a tub. John Hodgson, sixty-four years, labourer, Hetton Colliery, collapsed with strain and died on 13 May 1918.

Finally there were many who died from lung complaints after working for months and years in a foul atmosphere of stone and coal dust. One example will represent the many who died in this way. William Ernest Simpson, fifty-one years, hewer, Roddymoor Colliery, died on 13 March 1939 as a result of silicosis.

The reader will have observed that there is no mention of the deaths of women or girls in the Durham Coalfield. It is to the credit of the northeastern miners that after the death of a woman in a shaft accident at Fatfield Colliery in the latter half of the eighteenth century, women and girls were not allowed to work underground. The scars on their lives were left by having to work extremely hard without the use of modern labour-saving devices to look after homes and keeping men fed with perhaps little sleep if husbands and sons were on different shifts. There was also the mental strain caused by deaths and accidents and sometimes poor compensation, as well as the worry that they could be evicted from their homes as the result of the death of the working member or members of the family.
The collieries are no more. The grim reaper of death, accompanied by his scythe of destruction, no longer harvests in the wagon ways below ground. The cries of anguish and pain are silent. I am reminded of the closing page of the novel ‘Wuthering Heights’ by Emily Brontë. She writes: “I lingered round them [the graves of Cathy, Heathcliffe and Linton] under that benign sky; watching the moths fluttering among the heath and harebells, listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass, and wondered how anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth.”

Bibliography

All information of the accidents taken from;

Hall, Edward and Hancock, Fred. Fatal accidents in the Durham Coalfield 1898-1940.

The fatal accidents of Thomas McCormick and John Whittaker were taken from Purdon, Gavin. The Sacriston mine disaster

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