Coal Miners and First Aid

by William McAdam

There can be little doubt that together with the Fishing Industry, Coal Mining is probably the most hazardous occupation for mankind. The dangers are brought about by a number of factors e.g. darkness, instability of roof conditions, exudation of gases from the strata the principal ones being Methane (Firedamp) Carbon Monoxide (White damp) Carbon Dioxide (Blackdamp), and of explosions, the problems of inundation of water, plus the general difficult environmental conditions in which Miners’ had to work.

In many instances the seams of coal in Durham County were not particularly thick varying from as low as 18 inches in some places to above 6 feet in others. This caused very cramped conditions in which the Miner had to work. It was inevitable that the accident rate and fatalities was high. Hardly a day would go by without the Miner sustaining some injury albeit that this may just be a wound or bruising although more serious injuries were not uncommon.

In the early days there was little organized First Aid available and it would appear that it was mostly a case of self help. The Miner who produced the coal (Coal Hewer) was paid for the amount of coal he produced and, therefore, despite any injury he had sustained he would often return to work before his wound or injury had properly healed because without work he would not receive any wages to maintain his family. Those employed throughout the mine as day or shift workers were paid only for the days or shifts that they worked and if absent for any cause, they like the coal hewer did not receive wages for the days lost.
Medical aid was provided by the local Doctor who may be assisted by a Nurse or Midwife, though generally this aid was provided on the payment of a weekly rate of pence to the Doctor. Difficulties did arise on occasions when payment to the doctor had lapsed though usually the problem was sorted out to the benefit of the patient involved. In nearly every village there would be a person known to the population as the one who would receive the first call for assistance, be it an injured miner, a birth or a death.

These persons were noted for their various forms of treatment and remedies, e.g. Carron Oil, Lard, or Vaseline was used to treat Bums, Goose Grease was rubbed on the chest for respiritory conditions, Comfrey leaves or Bread was used as poultices for infection, and there were many more.

Hospital facilities were usually provided in the larger towns and cities e.g. Durham, Newcastle and Sunderland. It was noted that wounds sometimes left a blue scar on the site if injury and even to-day some miners can be recognized by the Blue Scar which remains on their bodies, resultant from a wound sustained underground.

It should be recorded that the application of First Aid was not only for the benefit of an injured miner, but was also applied with good effect to the many ponies employed underground. They of course working in the same difficult conditions as the miner and although they had some protective harness they were still vulnerable to dangers of the mine. In 1938 there were 32,059 horses and ponies employed in the British Coal Mines, fortunately this had dropped to 6,471 by 1962.

In the early part of the 19th century provision for treatment of injured Miners was considered very poor and it was not until 1877 that The Order of St. John of
Jerusalem in Britain formed the St. John Ambulance Association to teach First Aid and to distribute material to areas where the risks of accidents were high. This was followed in 1887 by the formation of the St. John Ambulance Brigade. This provided formal training and the opportunity to obtain a qualification by examination.

The St. John Ambulance Brigade in Durham County was largely formed from mining communities, nearly every colliery village had its Ambulance Division of the Brigade, which was essentially for men and training was taken very seriously. It was not long before training in Home Nursing was provided and this afforded women to take part and Nursing Divisions sprung up usually in association with an Ambulance Division. Attendance at First Aid classes became a popular form of leisure pursuit and it is recorded that in 1883 Queen Victoria received in Windsor Great Park some 400-500 Miners’ from the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Collieries belonging to Colonel Seely and who had gained a first aid certificate.

Members of the St. John Ambulance Brigade who gained the First Aid Certificate and then continued successfully for three years could qualify for the issue of a Medallion which would have the members name inscribed on the reverse side, and in addition if he continued to re-qualify each year he could be awarded a bar with the year inscribed. Many members proudly wore these medallions and bars in the form of watch chains. St. John Ambulance and Nursing Divisions were self-supporting and several forms of activities were employed to raise the required amount of money to obtain equipment, uniforms, and other needs.

Flag days were often held and mining members of the brigade would attend the colliery offices on pay Fridays in uniform to collect whatever the men would subscribe. Many Miners’ Lodges agreed to subscribe a small sum usually 1 penny per
miner each week, and this was deducted from the men’s wages. It follows that where a Division had a building they had an advantage in that various forms of social activity could be arranged all to the benefit of the Division. In some cases whole families were involved, Father, Mother, Sons and Daughters who could join a Cadet Division on reaching the age of 11 years.

A very important date in the life of a St. John Division was the parade held on St. John Day, when Division from every part of Durham County assembled in Durham City and paraded through the streets to the Cathedral for a service of dedication. The service was followed by the presentation of long service medals and other awards on the palace green. St. John day being the nearest Sunday to the 24 June.

Another aspect of the work of the Brigade was that members were frequently offered the opportunity to attend functions such as sporting events, cinemas, concerts, public gatherings etc. and this gave an impetuous to many to learn First Aid and to become members.

The Owners’ of collieries and the officials often supported the St John Divisions by becoming Presidents or accepting an officer position within the division thus encouraging many employed in the mine to under take First Aid training. The interest in First Aid had become apparent in other industries particularly in the Railways, Docks, Shipyards, Steelworks, and also the police, so much so that in order to maintain a high level of interest competitions were developed either within an industry or within the Brigade organization.

In 1897 Sir Thomas Dewar, Sheriff of London donated a Large Silver Shield for competition between teams of men who where members of the St.John Ambulance
Brigade. This became a very prestigious award and in Durham the contest to represent Durham was sort after most enthusiastically. The competition was organized on a regional basis, and it was necessary to win Durham region and then to compete against the winners of the Northumberland and North Yorkshire regions in order to represent the North of England in the National Final held in London.

In Durham colliery teams always gave a very good account and the Dewar Shield was first won by Murton Colliery in the early part of the century, this was followed by the Dean & Chapter Colliery team winning in 1959, and later by Dawdon Colliery in 1974, 1978, and 1981. In addition the leader of the Dawdon Colliery team Mr George Bowerbanks was awarded the ELLIS Cup for the highest number of marks gained by the team leader on each occasion. This was a unique achievement and demonstrated the standard of First Aid in Durham County.

In 1903 an Ambulance League was formed to assist study in First Aid in Mines. It was known as The Durham Mines Inspection District Ambulance League, Comprising South Durham, Westmoreland, and North Yorkshire.

In 1904 Mr .R. Donald Bain, a Senior H.M. Inspector In Mines, presented a shield for competition between teams of men employed in mines. This allowed Lead and Ironstone miners as well as coal miners to compete for the shield. In the first year of the competition teams constituted of 8 members but this was changed the following year to teams of 5 members which was more in line with the drill for stretcher bearers as indicated in St. John text books. It was not uncommon for some 60 teams from collieries to enter the contest, the final of which was held in Durham Town Hall, a setting which enhanced the occasion drawing many spectators supporting the teams.
The first team to win the trophy was Murton Colliery followed by Lumpsey Ironstone Mine in 1905. A photograph of the teams in the 1948 final included Blackhall Colliery, Chilton Colliery, Dean & Chapter Colliery, Horden Colliery, and North Skelton Ironstone Mine.

In 1925 the Ambulance League introduced a Junior Competition and a shield was presented to the league by Mrs Elizabeth Bain, the wife of Mr R. Donald Bain. A junior team being a team that had not won a senior trophy, and again the contest was well subscribed with a good number of teams entering each year.

The mine owners were required by a Coal Mines Act to make provision for suitable accommodation to be provided for the treatment of injured miners and for adequate arrangements to be made for ambulance transport to be available as required. This resulted in the employment of a recognized First Aid Man to be available at all times, though usually he had additional duties to perform. First Aid stations were set up underground at strategic places and Officials, Deputies, and Shotfirers, usually carried small First Aid Boxes each day.

A further innovation to encourage the study and training in First Aid was provided by Mr John Graham, DL., Coroner for the Chester Ward in County Durham. He had expressed his concern at the number of inquests involving Miners as well as persons employed on industry and in 1924 he presented a shield to the St. John Ambulance Brigade in Durham for annual competition amongst teams of First Aiders who were industrially employed in Durham County and who held the certificate of the St John Ambulance Association.
The first contest was held in 1926 with 30 teams taking part in preliminary rounds thus resulting in 6 teams entering the final which again was held in the Durham Town Hall. The proprietors of the Newcastle Chronicle also provided a shield for the team gaining second place. The teams competing in the first final in order of placing were as follows: Brandon Colliery, Tyne Dock L.N.E.R., Dean & Chapter Colliery, Gateshead Police, Blackhall Colliery, Boldon Colliery.

The owners of coal mines in Durham were very conscious of the need to train employees in First Aid and Safety measures, and in many collieries training was given to all new entrants to the industry before they became employed underground.

The Nationalization of the Mines in 1947 brought about many improvements in the treatment of injured miners. Area Medical Officers were appointed and Medical Centres Staffed by a State Registered Nurse as well as First Aid Men enhanced the facilities. A scheme to encourage an interest in first aid was the issue of a badge to all miners who qualified, this depicted the eight pointed cross of St John, and having the inscription “We Give And Take Care” around the edges.

Investigation into the various Industrial Diseases experienced in mining e.g. the mass chest x-ray program. A new text book was issued appertaining to mining (First Aid In Coal Mines). A chapter in this text book dealt specifically with the treatment of spinal injuries where the miner had sustained the injury when working on his knees in a crouched position, and it recommended that the patient be transported in the prone position (Face downward). In addition there was also instruction on the application of oxygen apparatus.
The issue of Morphine to be used underground by selected, trained, and certified personnel was also a new feature, due mainly to the long time factor between the injury occurring and the miner reaching the surface. Several forms of mechanical transport were adopted to ease the strain and hardship of carrying a patient on a stretcher long distances in very difficult and conditions.

The National Coal Board followed the pattern of most National Industries and held its own National First Aid Competition for both Senior and Junior Teams of Miners. The trophy for the senior miners contest was called The Mitchel Hedges Trophy, it was a magnificent very large Silver Bowl which had dimensions of being 31 inches tall, 37 inches long, weighed 97 lbs and when filled with water held 121 pints. It was too large to be carried by one man. As this was to be the trophy at National Level the Donald Bain Shield was presented the National Coal Board Durham Division in 1949 to enable a team from a Durham Colliery to represent the region at the National Final.

The interest in competition throughout the mining industry was intense and teams from Durham County often appeared in the top three places in the national competition. Shotton Colliery was the first team from Durham to win the Mitchel Hedges Trophy in 1956 although Deaf Hill Colliery won the Contest for Junior Miners in 1955. Further success was achieved when Dean & Chapter Colliery won both the Senior and Junior Trophies in 1958.

The St. John Ambulance Association recognized that as there were a number of National organizations which held a First Aid competition each year it decided to arrange a contest involving all the winners of these national finals. This contest was called the Grand Prior’s Trophy, again a magnificent trophy a Silver Knight on a
Horse. The team winning this trophy was then recognized as the premier team in Britain. Mining teams could gain entry to this contest by winning either the National Coal Board Competition, or by winning the National Final of the St. John Ambulance Brigade.

Once again records will show that mining teams appeared frequently in the Grand Prior’s Trophy Final and in 1959 Dean & Chapter Colliery were able to bring the trophy back to Durham County. Dawdon Colliery won the Dewar Shield in 1974, 1978, and in 1981, and whilst they did not win the Grand Prior’s Trophy they came very near on each occasion, showing the quality of proficiency of Mining First Aiders.

Because of the inherent dangers to life and limb, it is readily understood why Miners practiced First Aid so enthusiastically, and it could well be said that as an industry many of these Miners were so efficient that they could be called Professional First Aiders. It may be of interest to list some of the teams that have been prominent during the long history of First Aid Competitions from collieries in the County:– Blackhall, Bearpark, Brancepeth, Brandon, Boldon, Bowburn, Chilton, Crookhall, Dawdon, Deafill, Dean & Chapter, Easington, Eppleton, Eden, Elemore, Esh Winning, Fishburn, Horden, Langley Park, Mainsforth, Murton, New Herrington, Roddymoor, Shildon, Shotton, Sherburn Hill, South Hetton, Ushaw Moor, and Westoe.

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