Wingate Colliery Disaster 1906

by Marilyn Brown

An important event in my area of study was the 1906 explosion that left its mark on the lives of the families and friends of the ones who lost their lives and also brought the attention and sympathy of the country. The explosion occurred in 14 October 1906 and was the only major disaster at the mine in its one hundred and twenty-three year history.

The explosion occurred at 11.40 pm on Sunday night and was traced to the main haulage way of the Low Main Seam with some effects felt in the Main Coal. Four men died instantly, twenty died almost immediately and two others died some time later from exposure to the fumes. A copy of the Daily Mirror, dated 17 October describes the events as follows:

"After nearly thirty-six hours of ceaseless work on the part of the rescuers, all the ninety-three men who were entombed in the Harvey Seam of the Wingate Colliery have been brought to the surface alive."

"The last two men were hauled up into the light about 10 am yesterday. During Monday night seventy-nine men were brought up and yesterday forenoon fourteen others were rescued in batches of three and four and five."

"It was impossible to cover all of the fifteen bodies from the seam in time for the opening of the inquest yesterday. The coroner will therefore open his inquiry this morning."

"Many thrilling stories are told by survivors and rescuers. One man saved several lives by leading entombed men to a disused working which was free from after damp."
The rescued, when found, had been standing up to their waists in water for eight hours. Their provisions gave out and they had to subsist on corn from the mangers of the dead horses.

"The Master Shifter of the Harvey Seam, who was one of the entombed men brought to the surface yesterday, said he went down the mine at ten o’clock Sunday night."

"Another man who came out of the Harvey Seam, states that they sang hymns and songs, particularly the boys, several of whom were in the mine."

"After all the living had been saved, the rescuers turned their attention to the dead. The task was very arduous as the dead had to be carried through a tortuous passage and over rough ground among bauks of timber. Much of the debris had to be dug away before the bodies could be moved."

"The cause of the explosion was found and the most important function of an enquiry was to make suggestions which would protect similar occurrences and thus benefit others by the unfortunate experiences of the victims. The enquiry recommended that

a) The danger of coal dust explosions be brought to that attention of men and officials and that the Home Office circularise all the managers to that effect.

b) That every shot-firer should have the rules of shot-firing printed on his authorisation form.

c) That mine owners should be warned of the dangers of dust blowing down the shaft.

d) All main haulage roads should henceforth be kept clear of dust by watering or brushing."

The memorial of the explosion can be seen today it is the monument opposite the church. It was unveiled on 21 December 1907, as a commemoration of the tragedy.
Wingate Colliery Disaster 1906 - Introduction

The disaster, which occurred on 14th October 1906, was a unique event in mining history; it was the first time that coal dust was the main contributing factor to the cause of the explosion at Wingate Grange Colliery.

It hand never been envisaged that coal dust could cause an explosion every miner in the colliery did not believe that coal dust could create the disaster even coal mine manager Mr Armstrong frankly confessed himself a sceptic to the explosive capabilities of coal dust.

On the other hand expert witnesses stated that an explosion of coal dust pure and simple was a scientific fact, which had been repeatedly proved and was now admitted to the possible by all the mining experts in the kingdom who has studied the question.

Wingate Colliery Disaster 1906 – Verdict

The jury who included among their number several practical miners returned the following verdict.

That the said Edward Hardy 63 of the Row Wingate Grange Colliery, shifter in a coalmine was on the 14th day of October killed in the Five Quarter seam of the Wingate Lord pit, some 676 yards or there abouts from the shaft on the said 14th day of October last. And we leave the question of the future management of the pit in the hands of the mines inspectors, the owners and the representatives of the miners union and therefore say that the said Edward Hardy in manner and means aforesaid accidentally came to his death.

It will be noted that the jury did not find by their verdict that the shot was fired by Maddison and what I regard as more important refused to say whether the explosion was or was not a
coal dust explosion, the conclusion was that the coroner did not recommend any procedures against any person connected with the mine.

When it was remembered that this jury contained a large element of men with practical experience of mining this omission of the verdict is very significant of the attitudes of miners regarding coal dust explosions.

A list of recommendations were made by the coroner who strongly suggested that steps should be taken to bring the danger of coal dust explosions more vividly before the minds of officials of the mines, but the miners also.

A disaster Memorial was unveiled on 21 December 1907 with the names of the 26 men who lost their lives inscribed .

An unsigned and undated poem exists with these words.

As the midnight approaches fast
From lip to lip the word was passed
The pit has fired in grief and woe
The crowd go rushing to and fro
With many a sad and aching heart
Awakened by the dreadful start
Around the fatal shaft they stand
And watch the brave heroic band
Of volunteers prepare to go
In search of their dear ones below
The mother the wife are standing there
Offering to God a earnest prayer
Wingate Colliery Disaster 1906 - What happened?

Theory of the Cause of the Explosion

The theory put forward was that a man named Maddison who was one of the victims of the disaster had entirely without authority fired a shot in the main haulage road.

Sometime on the 14 October there had been a small fall of roof in the main haulage road. About 10.30 p.m. Maddison was instructed by the Master Shifter Murton to clear away the fall and plate and remove any loose hanging stones which might be left at the spot where the fall occurred.

The job was a small one and could be done by Maddison unassisted though another man was instructed to take a pony and tubs to take away the fall, that apparently did not reach the spot before the explosion occurred to remove the fall only required the use of a pick and shovel which were later found next to his body leaning against a wall after the explosion.

Quite close to where the fall occurred there was on one side a projecting piece of stone about five feet in height from the roadway this was supported by props and quite safe. It had been there for 25 years the only inconvenience caused by this was that the men had to move their heads to avoid coming into contact with it.

The theory put forward by the mine owners was that Maddison, a licensed Shot Firer, without any authority placed a charge of jeloxite, a permitted explosive, on the top of the projecting stone with the intention of blowing off that part of it that was projecting.
Maddison was a man of excellent character, a selected Shot Firer and a man of considerable experience. It was said as an experienced Shot Firer he must have known that he was breaking the special rules of the mine relating to shot firing. No drill holes had been made, for Maddison had no drilling tools with him, neither did he have any stemming materials with him, he did not remove the props, which supported the stone. This was recognised by all practical miners as the natural thing to do by any Shot Firer of experience.

The suggestion was made that he laid a charge of jeloxite attached to a fuse and either fired in an open and uncovered state or that he covered and mixed a compound of coal dust and grease. It was said that this was the concussion or the flame set up by this firing, which set off the explosion of the coal dust.

This view of the explosion was accepted by Mr A H Ruegg H C and R D Bain and J B Atkinson MSc.

The explosion was an explosion of coal dust and air alone and was neither caused by Firedamp.

Four men were killed immediately by the explosion, a further 20 men died from after damp and two more died from injuries received making a total of 26 lives lost. The inquest was opened on the 17th October and adjourned until 31st October and carried on till 1st and 2nd November. The coroner Mr Compton Maynard passed the report from Messers Bain and Atkinson, two of his Majesty Mining Inspectors.

The conditions of Wingate Grange Colliery was not a particularly dusty mine and it was said that many mines in the Durham Coalfields and in the Country were in a far worse condition
than that at Wingate, but cleaning and watering down of the main haulage road would make matters better.

**Wingate Colliery Disaster 1906 to 1907 – Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>14th October</td>
<td>11.40pm explosion. 4 men killed immediately.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>16th October</td>
<td>20 men die from ‘After Damp’. All remaining men were rescued alive. 19 of the dead brought to surface.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>17th October</td>
<td>Inquest opens and adjourns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>23rd October</td>
<td>24th body recovered and brought to surface.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>31st October</td>
<td>Inquest opens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>20th November</td>
<td>Inquest verdict – accidental death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>24th November</td>
<td>George Mason, a shifter, dies of injuries sustained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>James Pearce dies of injuries sustained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21st December</td>
<td>Memorial to 26 men unveiled in Wingate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** The views that are expressed on the website are the contributors own and not necessarily those of Durham County Council. This is a community website so no guarantee can be given of the historical accuracy of individual contributions.