

THE DISASTER AT SWANWICK COLLIERIES.
TWO MEN SUFFOCATED BY CARBON-MONOXIDE.
INQUEST AND VERDICT.

Yesterday Mr. C. G. Busby, Coroner for the Hundred of Scarsdale, held an adjourned inquest at the Queen's Head Inn, Alfreton, touching the deaths of John Severn (35), stallman of Swanwick, and Samuel Hatherley (18), miner, who were suffocated on Thursday week while working at the Deep Pit of the Swanwick Collieries, the property of Mr. Palmer-Morewood, J.P. There were present Mr. A. H. Stokes, Government Inspector of Mines; Mr. James Haslam, secretary of the Derbyshire Miners' Association; Mr. W. W. Nelson, solicitor, Alfreton, representing Mr. Palmer-Morewood; Mr J. W. Eardley, manager of the colliery; Superintendent Eyre; Mr. W. H. Hepplewhite, assistant inspector of mines, and others.

At the outset a plan of the place in the pit where the bodies of the deceased were found was put in.

Henry Brentnall, of Somercotes, deposed that he was a deputy at the Swanwick New Colliery. On the 22nd of January, the day before the accident, witness was down the pit. The deceased men worked in the return airway. Witness examined the ventilation, and it appeared to be clear and free from gas of any kind. There were two men (Severn and Maycock) in the airway at the time, and the deceased, John Severn, said, "I think the air is not so good as usual; not so much of it." Witness replied, "We can soon alter that; we can have as much as we like" (meaning air). He then altered the brattice cloth, to let in more air, and he thought the ventilation was good. Witness and the two men all came out together. He reported to the manager that the place was free from gas. He did not make any note in his report as to the complaint made by the men. He never knew any gas to be found in the airway before. This occurred on the Wednesday, the day before the accident. On Thursday (the day of the accident) witness went down the pit again at three o'clock in the morning. He arrived at the airway about seven o'clock. He examined the place carefully, and found no trace of gas. Witness left the deceased men just beginning to work. Severn said, "There's a good air this morning, Harry," and witness replied, "Yes, it's all right." The men were repairing the airway. They were getting some coal out of the side of the head, and were putting dirt in. When witness got into the return airway he found there was something wrong; the air did not smell right. The air had a sweet smell, like the smell from burnt wood, or something of that kind. Witness went towards where the men were, and found them lying about 40 yards from the place where they were originally. They were lying face downwards. He thought at the time the men were asleep, but they were quite dead. The gas had no effect on witness's lamp, it burned as usual.

The Coroner: Have you ever smelt the smell of a gob fire?—Yes

Was the smell of the gas anything like it?—No.

Have you formed any idea where the gas came from?—No, sir.

By Mr. Stokes: There was a hand lamp burning when he found the deceased men. It was lying on the floor. The other lamp was out. Severn lay with his head towards the shaft, and Hatherley the other way. It was five minutes to eleven o'clock when witness found the men.

Do you think the men ever started work at all? I cannot say. They were beginning to strip when I left at seven o'clock, preparatory to starting work.

Had they sent any tubs out that morning?—I could not say.

Who was it on the Wednesday who complained of the gas?—Severn.

You withdrew the men?—Yes, Severn said he was poorly. The air seemed right to me.

Did you report that you had had to withdraw the men?—No.

Why? Isn't your duty?—I did not think there was anything wrong with the place.

But you yourself altered the scale to let in more air?—Yes.

Therefore, there must have been something wrong?—Well, I thought I would let in more air.

Mr. Stokes read the rules, which provide that the airways shall be examined thoroughly and gone through at least once a week.

Mr. Stokes: Show me your report in the report-book on your last examination?—There is no report.

By Mr. Nelson: As rule no men go up to this airway. They were there repairing the airway, and for nothing else.

Have you had any experience before of this kind of gas?—No, I have never smelt it before.

You have never had any complaint before about this gas?—No.

Did you see Mr. Brentnall, the under-manager, on Wednesday?—Yes.

And did you tell him that Severn had complained about the air?—Yes, and he said the men could have plenty of air.

Dr. Timothy Corkery, of Alfreton, deposed that had made a post-mortem examination of the bodies of the deceased. Severn had a very fresh appearance as if asleep. There was also a slight flush on the body, especially on the breast. The superficial veins of the brain were full of dark blood and the brain itself was congested. Although he examined the body more than 30 hours after death, there was a good deal of warmth in the internal organs. The lungs were quite dark, and the heart was full of dark blood. The deceased was apparently quite healthy. Suffocation was undoubtedly the cause, of death. There were traces of poisoning by carbon-monoxide, more in fact than of poisoning by carbonic acid. The post-mortem symptoms in regard to the other man were practically the same as in the case of Severn. In Hatherley's case the flushing of the body was even more marked.

After luncheon, the first witness called was Albert Maycock, of Greenhill Lane, who stated that he was a coalminer, and worked at the Swanwick Colliery. He was at work there in the No. 32 return airway on Wednesday the 22nd January, the day before the accident. John Severn (deceased) worked with him. They were getting out coal to make room for the dirt, to clear the airway out. There was very good ventilation, plenty of air going through. About nine o'clock in the morning witness began to have a severe headache. Shortly afterwards Severn also said he did not feel very well. He also had headache. They stopped work, and went down into No1 jig road. They both felt better, and returned in about ten minutes. The under-manager came in about half-past ten. They complained to him of feeling unwell in consequence of the gas. Witness told the under-manager that he had a severe headache. They then went into the airway. The under-manager opened the ventilation place a little, and said there was good current of air. Mr. Brentnall said it seemed all right. The deputy (Henry Brentnall) then came up. In the meantime Severn had gone to fetch his clothes to go home. The deputy said to the under-manager, "He (meaning witness) is complaining about the air." The deputy then went to raise the brattice cloth so as to allow the air to go more freely. The under-manager told them if they did not feel well enough to work they could home. The under-manager tried the air with his lamp. Witness's lamp burned well that day. They did not return to work, but went to the bottom. Witness did not go to work the next day, because he did not feel well. Hatherley went in witness's place.

The Coroner: What did you think was the cause of your headache?—I put it down to the bad air.

Have you ever felt like that before?—No.

You had never made any complaint to the manager before about feeling unwell?—No.

Mr. Stokes: Did you feel anything on the Tuesday?—No.

Would the ventilation of the place on the Wednesday be different from what it was on the Tuesday?—Not so far I could tell.

Did the deputy tell you to go?—No.

Then he left you to either go or stay?—Yes.

Mr. Nelson: How long have you done this kind of work?—About twelve months.

When you went in on the Wednesday morning; was there anything to indicate the presence of gas?—No.

Did the headache come on gradually? Yes.

Mr. Nelson said what he wanted to show was that everything was done reasonably to remove the air.

The Coroner said, of course, the air would bring the gas with it, as it was an airway where it occurred.

Mr. Nelson said they did a natural thing by removing the brattice.

Mr. Haslam: Had you, as an experienced miner, any idea what caused your lamp to burn more brightly?—Yes.

What was it?—Sweet damp.

The Coroner: But did you think so then or after?—After, when I came to think about it.

John Brentnall, of the Swanwick Colliery, said he was under-manager at the pit where the accident happened. He had been there 28 years. The pit had been open all the time. There was large area of old workings at the colliery. There was an airway close to the old workings, the "dip" workings as they were called. The air from the old workings came by the No. 32 airway. The airway was supposed to be examined once a week. There was no report as to the examination of the airway in the report book.

The Coroner: Why was it not reported?—It should have been.

The Coroner: It seems me extraordinary that they make no reports as to their examination.

When was it last examined?—It was examined this month by one of the deputies.

Do you know when anybody last went into the old workings?—No, sir, I am sure I could not answer that question.

Do you know if any examination has been made to show if there was an accumulation of gas in the old workings?—No.

Have you made any test to see if there was any gas coming from the old workings?—I have held my lamp.

Witness proceeded say that on Wednesday, January 22, he saw Severn and Maycock in the pit. Witness asked Severn what was amiss, and he said he did not feel very well. Severn said he thought there was something wrong

with the air; it felt warmer than usual. Witness examined the place with his lamp, but could not find anything wrong. In the end witness said to the men, "If you don't feel well, I would go home."

In answer to Mr. Stokes, witness said he frequently visited the place near the old workings, but he did not specially expect anything. It was in pursuance of his general duty.

Mr. Stokes: When was this airway examined last?—I think one of the deputies went about the 14th.

Where is the report?—There is no report.

Don't you know that, according to rule, each airway has to be examined once a week?—Yes.

Well, how is it to get to Mr. Eardley if there is no report?—Well, the deputy gives a report, but not in writing.

Couldn't there have been a brick stopping over these old workings?—Yes. The old workings are fenced off by a lattice fence.

But that does not prevent the gas coming in?—No.

What ever nastiness which may come from the old workings must come into the return airway?—Yes.

Have you been to this place since?—Yes.

And what did you find?—I should not like to have stopped.

You think then that the gas from these old workings got into the airway and swept over these men and killed them?—Yes.

But if somebody before the accident had put his head where you put yours after the accident, he would have found it out?—Yes, if the circumstances were the same.

Is there any reason why you should not have put in a stopping, so as to protect the airway?—No, there is no reason.

The Coroner said the system of examination at the colliery seemed to be very loose, and reports were not made.

Mr. Stokes said if there had been a stopping the accident would not have happened.

The Coroner said it was quite clear what was the cause the accident.

Witness said they never suspected the presence of the gas at the entrance to these old workings.

The Coroner said there was no reason why this place should not have been examined.

Mr. Nelson said there was no special reason why it should be examined for this gas. Nobody suspected the presence of this kind of gas.

Mr. Haslam: Didn't it strike you as singular that two men have each complained the same symptoms?—No; it did not. As have said, I thoroughly examined the airway, and found no trace, of gas. This is the airway for one district, and that district is standing.

By Mr. Nelson: They had been working this airway for nearly twelve months.

The Coroner, in summing up, said there was no doubt that these men had died from the effects of a gas which was not frequently found—a gas called carbon-monoxide. It was different to the ordinary choke damp found in mines.

Mr. Stokes said the gas was well known, though not frequently found. It was known to colliery managers, and they had had deaths from it before.

The Coroner proceeded to say that it was clear the gas came from the old workings, and the officials did not appear to have suspected its presence. He must say that the evidence showed that there had been no regular examination of these places, and no report was entered in the book.

Mr. Nelson mentioned that there were two deputies in attendance who had examined the airway on several occasions. But they had made no written reports.

The Coroner said hoped there would be proper reports made in the future.

The jury, after a prolonged consultation, found a verdict "That the deceased men met with their deaths accidentally from poisoning by carbon-monoxide," and they added a rider censuring the great neglect on the part of the management in not having reports properly written down in a report book.

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