

THE SUFFOCATED SWANWICK MINERS.

How they met their Fate.

MANAGEMENT CENSURED.

H. M. Inspector's Searching Questions.

FULL REPORT OF THE INQUEST.

The peculiar deaths of the two miners, named Jno. Severn and Samuel Hatherley, at the Swanwick Colliery on Thursday in last week, as reported last week's *Derbyshire Times*, has excited widespread sympathy and interest in the inquiry held to elucidate the nature of their demise. Throughout the district the incident has been the sole topic of conversation amongst miners for the past two days. Severn was buried last Sunday in the Lea Brooks Cemetery, and despite the inclemency of the weather there was great crowd to witness the last rites. The cortege was one of the largest which has been seen in the district for many a long day, the hearse being followed by many miners employed at the colliery, and also the deputies and Mr Brentnall, the undermanager, as officially representing the management.

Mr Z. Henshaw, of Swanwick, an employee the Colliery, conducted the obsequies impressively. Hatherley was taken to his home at Stanton-in-the-Wolds[sic] for interment there.

Mr C. G. Busby, J.P., the district coroner, opened the inquiry into the circumstances their deaths last Friday afternoon, at the Steam Packet Inn, Swanwick. Only formal evidence of identification was taken and the proceedings only lasted a few minutes. Mary Alice Severn, the wife of Jno. Thos. Severn, said she lived on the Green, Swanwick. Her husband was a miner, and was 35years of age.

Joseph Hatherley, of Stanton-in-the-Wolds, Nottinghamshire, an agricultural labourer, identified one of the bodies as that of his son Samuel William, who was 18 years of age, and was a miner. He lodged in Park Street, Alfreton.

The inquiry was then adjourned until Thursday morning, the proceedings to take place the Queen's Head Inn, Alfreton.

Mr. C. G. Busby attended on Thursday morning, and there were present Mr A. H. Stokes and Mr W. H. Hepplewhite, H. M. Inspectors of Mines; Mr J. W. Eardley, the manager of the Colliery; Mr W. W. Nelson, solicitor, who represented Mr C. R. Palmer-Morewood J.P., owner of the Colliery; Dr Corkery, who made the post mortem examinations; and Supt. Eyre.

The first witness called was Mr. Leeson, the surveyor of the Colliery who formally proved the accuracy the plans produced.

THE DEPUTY'S STORY.

Henry Brentnall, who resides at Somercotes and is deputy at the Swanwick New Colliery, said the men were found on the 23rd of January, and he was down the pit the on the 22nd. He knew the place where the bodies were found. On the previous day to the occurrence he was through the return airway about 11 o'clock in the morning. He examined the ventilation in the airway, and he found that it was clear and all right. He tried it with his lamp and the air was free from gas of any kind. At the time there were two men in the airway. One complained to witness that the air was not as good usual. The complainant was Jno. Thos. Severn, one of the deceased men. He said he thought it was not as good as usual, and not so much of it. Witness said: "We can soon alter that, and we can get as much as we like." Witness scaled or altered the brattice cloth, so as to allow the passage of more air. After that he considered the ventilation was good. The other man with the deceased was Albert Maycock. Witness then left the place with Severn and Maycock, the former going to the office to make out his report, and the two latter going out of the pit. Witness produced his report of his examination on Wednesday, which showed that he had examined the district and found everything, in good working order, free from gas, and a good current of air passing the roadways. He had never noticed any gas in that airway before. He would have found if there was. Neither had he ever heard speak of there being any. When came up the pit witness considered there was a good ventilation, and never stopped anybody working. He finished after that for the day.

On Thursday morning he went down the pit in[sic] 3 a.m. First he went to the north side of the pit and got into No. 32's return airway about seven o'clock. When he got into the airway he examined every place and found it perfectly right. He examined the place where the bodies were found at the time and it was all right. The airway was about 90 yards long. There was no gas present in the air then of any kind. At the time the two deceased were working in the air. They were then about to commence work. Severn said, "There is a good air this morning."

Witness replied, "Yes; it all right I think." The men were going to repair the airway by getting coal out of the side of the "head". The men were about 90 yards up the head or in the return airway from the No. 1 incline, which is the plane where the coal comes down to the upcast shaft. Witness left them at that part and went into another district of the pit. When he had examined that part he returned into No. 32's return airway. When he got to the entrance the return airway he perceived there was something wrong. The air did not smell right in the return airway. The smell was of the nature of burnt wood.

Witness went up the "head," expecting to find the men at work, but he found both of the men lying in a pass-by, about 40 yards away from where he had left them earlier in the morning at their work. The men were on the floor, lying face downwards. They must have come about 40 yards from their working place in the morning.

He pulled Severn up, and tried to wake him, as he thought the men were asleep. He was dead, however, though he worked his arms and rubbed him. Hatherley was also quite cold. He noticed no gas with the exception of the odour he encountered, which was something like damp. His lamp burned just the same as usual. There was also a light burning against Severn. It was not choke damp.

There were some old workings a long way from the scene of the deaths of the men, about 200 yards away. He could not say whether there was any communication between the old working and the return airway. He had seen no "gob" fires in the old workings, but he had not been in them for five or six years. He knew the smell from a "gob" fire, but the odour he smelt was not like that. He could form no idea where the gas came from.

Mr Stokes: When you got to the men, lying down was there more than one lamp burning?—No, sir.

Safety lamp?—Hand lamp.

Where was the other lamp?—In the middle of the road.

Was it out?—Yes, sir.

How far were the bodies apart?—About four feet.

Were they fully dressed when you found them?—Yes, sir.

Do you think that they had started work?—They were going to start work when I was there.

Men don't have clothes on when they work, do they?—I don't know.

Had they clothes on when you left them?—They were stripping when I came out.

They must have put their clothes on?—They must have done.

You see if the men left the place immediately you left, I want to know how it is that you did not detect the state of the place before you left?

The Coroner: Did you see them stripped?—Severn was stripping when I left them.

You withdrew the men?—Yes. Severn said he was very poorly and said he wanted to go home.

Was he poorly from the atmosphere?—I don't know.

Didn't you ask him?—He said the atmosphere was not right.

Didn't Maycock, who was with him, corroborate him?—No, sir.

Had they been there before and complained about it?—Never.

Why did you withdraw them?—I said if you don't mean to work you may as well go out with me.

Why did you take them in together?—Because it was my road to the district.

Doesn't the rules say that you should examine the places before the men go in?—They had been examined before I went in.

Who was it?—Thos. Hill.

The Coroner: Who is he?—The morning deputy.

Do you travel every night old No 10's level, where the old workings are?—No, sir

Does anybody else go through?—Yes.

Who has gone?—I believe Mr Henshaw. I cannot say about other people.

Mr. Haslam: Have you any idea what it was that killed these men?—"Sweet" damp.

Mr. Nelson: No 32's roadway is only used for the purpose of an airway?—That is all.

Do any men go up except to repair the road?—No: only deputies.

When you were in the place on the 22nd about 11 o'clock, did you perceive any smell?—No suggestion of this smell.

Have you had men at work in this place repairing for the past nine months?—Yes.

Have they complained?—No, sir.

Mr. Stokes: What was the width the place where it was not repaired?—3ft. by 2ft.

If they got fast in that width then they would stop the ventilation? It would like putting a cork into a bottle, wouldn't it?—There was need to go into it.

Dr T. Corkery Alfreton, said he had made a post mortem examination of both the bodies of the deceased men. He noticed only an external mark or a slight abrasion on Severn's wrist. Severn had a fresh-coloured appearance, as though he was asleep. In the course of his remarks, witness said he examined the chest and though deceased had been dead about 30 hours, the natural heat was retained far more so than in a natural death, when the internal organs would be perfectly cold. The heart and lungs were perfectly sound.

The Coroner: What were the symptoms you found indicative of?—Suffocation, undoubtedly.

And the nature of the gas?—That is difficult. I should say that there was carbonic acid, and more particularly carbon monoxide. This is shown by the fresh colour and flush on his face and chest.

Will a light burn in carbon monoxide?—It will burn more brilliantly.

How is carbon monoxide produced?—It is common. There is a large percentage in ordinary coal gas. In coal gas poisoning in 99 cases out of 100 death is due to carbon monoxide.

You have heard how the men were found, and are the symptoms indicative of carbon monoxide poisoning?—I should not like to say positively it was so, but everything points to this kind of poisoning.

In reply to Mr Stokes, Dr Corkery said the gas was very insidious, and the men would not feel the effects of the gas until they found themselves unable move through loss of strength. Then they would fall.

In reply to the Coroner, the doctor said Hatherley's organs were healthy, except there were signs of old standing pleurisy on the left side. The same symptoms in Hatherley's case existed as in Severn's case. There was more flushing upon Hatherley.

Dr Corkery said he had been into the fan-drift with Mr Eardley, and he found that the air made his head ache. That was indicative of the presence of carbon monoxide.

A MATE'S TESTIMONY

ALBERT MAYCOCK, of Riddings, a miner, said he worked at the Swanwick New Colliery. He was work at the Colliery on Wednesday before the accident in No. 32 return airway. Jno. Severn, the deceased, was working with him. They began to work at 6.30 a.m. Their work consisted of clearing the airway out, having to remove a quantity of coal from the side to make room for the dirt. The airway where they worked was about three-quarters of a yard high and two feet wide, which was due to the upheaval of the floor. There was a very good ventilation when they worked, and plenty of air going through. He noticed nothing amiss until about 9 a.m., when he began to feel bad with a severe headache, and could not go on with his work. He stopped working and went to a manhole where they had snap. Severn remarked that they might feel better after having some food. After being in the manhole Severn came out and presently complained of having headache, and he stopped work. They both then went into No. 1 Jig road, and stayed there about five minutes. At first he felt worse, but in the course of ten minutes he felt better.

They then went back. They did not begin to work. The under-manager came first, the deputy coming about 10.30 or 10.45 a.m. They complained to the under-manager, Jno. Brentnall, in the jig road about their illness, and they all came back together. Witness told Mr Brentnall that he felt very bad, and that he had a severe headache. He said, "We will go and see," after which they went into the airway. He went up the airway with a lamp, and they stopped at the bottom. Mr. Brentnall came back to them, and said there was a good ventilation going through. He said he could smell nothing, and it appeared to be all right. They commenced a conversation when the deputy (Henry Brentnall) arrived. In the meantime Severn had gone up the airway to fetch his clothes, with a view to going home.

The deputy asked him what was amiss. and the witness said, "I don't feel well." The under-manager said to the deputy, "He is complaining about the air." After that Henry Brentnall, the deputy, went up the road to liberate a cloth, so as to allow the air to pass more freely down the road. He afterwards went up the road with the under-manager to the cloth.

The under-manager said that if they did not feel well enough to work they could go home. He tried the ventilation with his lamp, but he could not say anything about the result. Witness' lamp had burnt better that day than before. The air seemed to be rather "heavy," but he felt no taste. His head ached severely, however. They did not start work again, but went to the bottom of the shaft. Witness did not go to work on the next day, as he did not feel very well. Hatherley, who trammed for them, was taken in his place, the two deceased managing the work between them.

The Coroner: What did you put your headache down to?—The air. It seemed so funny that it was better in the fresh air, and bad again when we went back.

Have you ever felt it like that before?—Never.

Have you worked in that airway before?—About a year.

Did you tell Hatherley how you felt before he went to work?—I never saw him.

Mr. Stokes: Were you working in that place on Tuesday?—Yes.

Felt any effects?—No.

The Coroner said there was no question about the quantity of air which was passing through the roadway. The quantity of air passing through brought the gas, and to increase the volume would probably bring the gas through in greater quantities.

Mr. Stokes: To remove the cloths may have an opposite effect and bring in more gas.

Mr. Haslam: What caused your lamp to burn brighter that day?—Sweet damp.

The Coroner: Did you say anything about the sweet damp to the under-manager or deputy?—No.

When did you think of it?—Afterwards. I didn't think at the time about it. I was too bad to think.

THE UNDER-MANAGER'S ADMISSIONS.

JNO. BRENTNALL said he was the under-manager at the Swanwick Colliery, where he had worked between 28 and 29 years. There were a large number of old workings at the Colliery, which covered a great area. The airway of the colliery was close to the old workings, but there was no passable road of communication for examinations. The No. 32 return airway was a long way from the old workings. The air from the old workings came into the No. 32 return airway. The airway was supposed to be examined once a week. There were reports of examinations made of the airway passing near the old workings, but he could not show them.

The Coroner said it was an extraordinary thing that there should have been no reports of examinations made of that airway.

Mr. Nelson: There is a general report, which is clear.

Witness went on to say that he had examined the roadway himself, and others had made examinations. He could not say whether anybody had been in the old workings, neither could he say whether any attempt had been made to ascertain what accumulation of gas there might be in the old workings. At times he had held his lamp through the fence to see if any gas was coming through, but he had never found any.

He saw the men on the previous day about 11 or 11.15 a.m., and Severn complained of feeling unwell. He said the air was warmer than usual. Witness went into the airway and made a minute examination of the road, but he could detect nothing. There was plenty of air in the road passing at the time. They complained of feeling ill, and he advised them to go home.

Mr. Stokes: When was this airway travelled last?—I can't say.

You are the under-manager of the pit, you know. I assume that you know the rules of the pit?—Yes.

How is it then that the rules were not adhered to? They say that the air way will be examined every week.—They say they have been.

Have they reported anything to you?—No, sir. I cannot show anything.

How is to get to Mr. Eardley? How can he know about the state the road?—That is right enough.

Mr. Stokes: It is not right enough for me.

The witness: I mean that Mr. Eardley cannot get to know.

Mr. Stokes: Suppose you had come to a part of the road, 3ft. by 2ft., wouldn't you think it was your duty to report it?—Yes.

Is it correct that there was such a place?—Certainly.

If you would report it, why haven't your deputies reported it?—I cannot say. Mr. Eardley knew we were repairing the road.

Did Mr. Eardley know this road had got into such a bad state?

The Coroner: It is your duty to report these things.

Mr. Stokes: I suggest that it ought to have been done. Probably this air road would get less and less, and the quantity of fresh air would also get less and less of an undiluted quality, while there would be an increased quantity of gas. It may come to this that half a cubic foot in 100 is sufficient to kill a man. Could there not have been brick stoppings to seal up these old workings if they were not periodically examined?—Yes. There was a wooden fence.

Mr Simms (a juror): That does not stop the bad air. Have you been in this place since the accident?—Yes.

What did you find in it?—You are asking me a question that is difficult to answer.

Would you like to have stopped in it?—No. It was full of noxious gases. That is the long and short of it.

The Coroner: There is no doubt that the gas came from the old workings and got into the airway, and so caused the death of the men?—That is my opinion.

Have you met with a case similar to this which has killed these men, before now?—Not to my knowledge.

And you didn't know it?—No, sir.

Do you know what "sweet" damp is?—Yes. It is something similar to that.

Mr. Stokes: You have tried the road after the accident?—Yes, and I should not like to have stopped in it.

Do you think that if somebody had gone to the place and put their head in, that they would have found the same gas?—If someone had gone in before the accident they would have been the same as me, glad to get out.

Is there any reason why you should not have these old workings stopped up by brick stoppings, and so seal them up so that no gas could possibly get into the road?—There is no reason why it should not have been done.

Would it interfere with the working of the colliery if you had sealed these old workings up?—I cannot say. If it commenced to bleed we might find the gas somewhere else. I think it would have forced itself out higher up.

Then could you not have sealed up the workings higher up?—Yes.

The Coroner: One can quite understand that something might have been done. To me the examinations appear to be most irregular, and the report book anything but properly kept.

Mr. Stokes: These are technical questions which should go to the jury.

Mr. Stokes: when the men complained of illness, did you go to the secret[sic] of the No. 10 level, where the gases from the old workings entered, and examine to see what was amiss?—No, sir.

Why?—Because I did not think the gas was coming from there. If I had thought there was anything in the air from that gas I would have gone there.

Wasn't it your duty to try and find out the cause of any complaint about the air?—Yes. I thought there was nothing wrong about the air.

Mr. Nelson: Have you ever had any complaints about the gas from these old works?—Never.

Mr. Haslam: Didn't it strike you as being peculiar that two men complained of the same illness at the same time?—No, because I had never heard speak of it before.

THE CORONER'S OPINION

The Coroner reviewed the circumstances of the case at great length, and said there was no doubt that the men had been poisoned by carbon monoxide gas. He was bound to say that the examinations of the old road do not show that they have been carried out with regularity, and the reports of the examinations were not recorded in a book. The reports, if made, did not show that there was anything wrong with the old workings. There was no doubt that the gas oozed out from the old workings, and reaching the men, that was how they came by their deaths. It was a great pity to his mind that the reports should have been kept in such a terribly lax way.

Mr. Nelson: I have two deputies here who will say that they made systematic examinations of this return airway.

The Coroner: Where are the reports?

Mr. Nelson: There are no written reports, but they are prepared to swear that on the 20th of December and the 24th, and the 14th and 15th of January, careful examinations of this return airway were made.

Mr Stokes: If the officials do not report a roadway when it is only 3ft. by 2ft. how can you expect that they will report anything else?

The Coroner: I hope and trust that the reports will be kept more systematically at this colliery.

THE VERDICT

The jury then considered their verdict in private, and after a consultation, lasting about 20 minutes, they came to the conclusion that the deceased men met their deaths from poisoning by carbon monoxide, accidentally, and added a rider to their verdict censuring the management for their great neglect in not having reports properly written down in the report book.

The inquiry, which had lasted close upon five hours, then terminated.

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