



THE COLEORTON COLLIERY ACCIDENT, ADJOURNED INQUEST

Loughborough Monitor 19th November 1863

On Tuesday morning last the adjourned inquest on the bodies of the unfortunate persons, Henry Clements, a youth, Jeremiah Rose, and Thomas Bird, who lost their lives through the inundation of the Califat No 2 Pit, Coleorton, by the giving way of a “coal wall”, and a rush of water from an old working, was resumed at the Railway Inn, Swannington, before Mr. Coroner Gregory, and a respectable jury, Clement’s body, it will be remembered, was discovered shortly after the accident, on the 8th October, and that of Rose and Bird on the night of the day on which the adjourned inquest was held, namely, the 20th of October.

After the jury had been sworn the first witness called was **William Pickering**, who said: I am bailiff at the Califat and California Pits, and have been so for four months. I was on duty on the morning of the accident, the 8th ult. I was in the stall No 8 at three o’clock in the morning of the 7th of October. All the men were then at work. There was not any perceptible issue of water; the pit was just the same as before - in good working order. I did not hear of anything during that day.

On the morning of the 8th ult., about three o’clock, I again went on duty in the pit, and at half-past four o’clock, in the course of my duty, I went into No 8 stall. I met William Wilton, late deputy, who said “I want you to go in No 8 stall.” I said, “What’s the matter?” He said “There is a little water.” I asked him “How much?” He replied, “Not a vast deal.”

We went together to the stall. When we got there there were Newbury and Harvey holeing at the far end. I asked them what they were doing, and they said they were finishing a “stint.” I told them to “knock off” (give over) because the water was coming in at the bottom, from the back of the hole. It was coming in at the nigh ends and fast heads. There was not a deal of water coming in then; it was trickling down. I told them to set some spraggs against the wall, and they did so, and I brought the man away with me, and went and fetched the master, Mr Lewis.

It was about half-past six o’clock when I got to Mr. Lewis’s house, which is about a mile from the colliery; Mr. Lewis is the manager. I told him that water had come into the stall, and that I should like him to go with me to look at it. He went with me, and when we got there we met Thomas Bird (the corporal), a little distance before we got to the stall. He turned back with us.

When we got there we agreed to have the crevice packed up with timber. The water was then coming through rather faster. Bird said “We have had worse jobs than this, if you send me two or three shift men we shall soon make it right.” So we all left, and Bird said, “I’ll take the two men out of this stall (No 2). They have no coals to go on with.” Those men were Josiah Hibbert and George Wright. Bird then said, “I’ll go and begin it if you and the master will send me two or three more men.”



I went up to Mr. Lewis about a quarter-past 7 o'clock, and sent for some men from their homes. I met them at the pit, and went down with them about a quarter-past eight o'clock. We (three others beside myself, Wm. Misson, Wm Wilton, and Parkinson) went to the stall together, followed by Mr. Lewis who overtook me just before I got to the stall.

We walked up to the head or stall, and found the men carrying out our orders, Jeremiah Rose was also there. Mr. Lewis and I had sent him from the carpenter's shop to assist in sawing spraggs. We then began to help the men in packing timber and stone against the wall. We had been at it about a quarter of an hour, and Bird said, "We'll have two or three longer spraggs, and set them to the top." He set them, and said "We shall soon get master of it now." The water had abated for a few minutes, but it increased to its original rapidity.

Mr. Lewis left us there at about half-past nine o'clock; he did not return again as he had not time. Then we thought we had got the stall secure, we had finished what we intended doing with the exception of setting up two or three spraggs. While they were setting those, at about half-past nine o'clock the water broke through where it had previously been trickling through.

Bird, who was in the gate road hastened to me and told me it was breaking. I told all to make haste out. They all got towards the way head, and all lights went out at once. I don't know what made them go out. When I got six or seven yards from the way head I fell down, and Bird passed me. Rose was down the gate road the last time I saw him. After I fell I passed a horse and got to the bottom and was brought up by Mr. Hadley.

I have been connected with collieries for 39 years. I have assisted in the management of the Whitwick pits for five years, and came from there four months ago. They are more extensive than these pits. I act under the instructions of Mr. Lewis. I have two deputies, one for day and one for night, at the Califat pit. I have the same number for the California pit. The pits are not left either day or night without some one in charge. I go on between three and four o'clock in the morning. I then go round the waggons and stalls in both pits. We have twelve stalls in the Califat pit, and four in the California.

I have seen water coming into several of the stalls in the Califat pit. The water always came through the breaks, - in the same way as it did in No 8. I knew there were old workings about there, and that we were driving towards them. We had put bore holes in several stalls, in No 2 for one. We put them in as far as twenty yards in advance. We bored a hole in No 2 and that stall was "knocked off" (the working of it stopped) with a bore hole twelve yards in advance. It was about nine or ten weeks before the accident that we knocked off at that stall.

We had No 14 stall adjoining and following up No 2. The face of that was 52 yards from the back of the bore hole in No 2. No 8 stall was five yards and a half behind No 14 stall that made the stall 48 yards further back than the bore hold in No 2, The hole was bored in No 2 when I went to the colliery. We carried the stall a dozen or fourteen yards further before we stopped.



We have not had a bore hole in either No 14 or No 8 stalls. I did not know that one was required, as I thought No 2 stall having gone 58 yards further with the bore hole, that we had 58 yards of coal before us for the present, in both No 8 and 14 stalls. I had not had any talk to Mr. Lewis or any one about putting in bore holes.

The Tuesday before the accident happened I asked Mr. Lewis if the two stalls were all right. He said they were. Old Clements never did ask me, a fortnight before the accident, whether I was going to put a bore hole in; he did speak about one on the morning of the accident, when he said, "I thought of asking you about a bore hole before, but it slipped my memory." I am not restricted about material of any kind; I have what I want.

By a Juror: The boy Clements was with Bird and Rose; he was holding a candle there. There was nothing the matter with the stall on the morning before the accident to cause the least suspicion. By Mr. Hedley (the Inspector): - It always has been a wet stall, and we frequently had water there. It was no worse than No 2 and No 14 stalls. The reason we set the spraggs to in the crevice in No 8 was because it seemed to be a break. We did not decide upon doing that until Mr. Lewis came. The water that came through the crevice did not smell, but seemed stagnant or old. I never hear Walton express any alarm about the state of the stall.

Wm. Worswick, Esq., co-proprietor of the Coleorton colliery, who was examined by Mr. Hedley, said Mr. Walker was formerly manager of the pits; he ceased being so 2 years last March. He had the responsible charge.

After Mr. Walker's death, Mr. Bailey took Mr. Walker's position with an arrangement that Mr. Lewis should be resident on the spot, and take the management under his uncle's, Mr. Bailey's direction. That arrangement had been continued up to the present time. I don't place any restriction on my manager as to the provision of materials for the safety of the workings.

Mr. W. Walker said: I am interested in the colliery and I gave my management of the colliery up at the time spoken of by Mr. Worswick. I was manager for 11 years. We have made borings towards the old Swannington workings. We were boring before the time I left. I had given instructions for those borings. The reason I bored was because I knew we were approaching the old workings containing water.

I always began to bore when I supposed I was 50 yards off the works. We had surface indication that we were approaching the old pits - the shafts were marks for them to go by. I believe those pits were closed about Christmas 1784 - 79 years ago. I have seen a rough plan of the old workings, but it is not to scale. When we approached the old workings I endeavoured to obtain the position of them from documents and plans.

I had access to an old plan showing the whole of the workings in the Linby Hall colliery. It showed a working below the water level, but not at the point we were approaching. According to the copy of the old plan produced, coal had been worked 3 or 4 chains below the level, at a point 20 chains south of the Linby Hall pits, and of which there is a record stating the quantity to be 1a. 1r. 11p.



There is no record on the plan of a head driven from the Linby Hall pits in the direction of No 8 stall. Mr. Lewis has seen the plan of the old workings, and I gave him what information I possessed about them. I am not aware that the "Snibston Royalty" came up to the old workings. Coleorton, Snibston and Swannington pits surround the old Linby Hall workings.

Mr. George Lewis said: I am resident manager at Coleorton collieries. I produce two plans - one "A" showing a portion of the Califat pit towards the Linby Hall old working, and an enlarged plan "B" of stalls No 2, 8 and 14 with the old heading driven from the Linby Hall workings towards No 8 stall, and likewise a portion of the old Linby Hall level.

Mr. Julius C. Bailey said: I reside at Newton-en-le-Willows, Lancashire. I am manager of the Swannington and Coleorton collieries. I have been for two years and a half. I was aware of the existence of the Linby Hall old workings containing water. I have caused holes to be driven in advance in the face of stalls, so as to be secure from water in that district. I have bored in every stall up to that point. We generally began to bore when we supposed we were two chains from the old workings. I generally instructed Mr. Lewis to that effect, but not in this particular stall - that was a general instruction.

I visited the colliery about every 4 or 5 weeks. Judging from the plan respecting the old heading from the Linby Hall pits (just discovered) I believe that had we used the boring rods as we generally did - in the deep cutting - we should have missed the heading. The bore would have run parallel with the heading. I have not given any instructions about the boring in No 8 or No 14 stalls.

I considered that the borings in No 2, which were 58 yards in advance, showed that there was no occasion for it. According to the rule we laid down, No 8 would have had to go 12 or 14 yards further before we usually commenced boring. The workings of the stalls 8 and 14 approach the level course of the old Linby Hall workings.

The inquiry was here adjourned for half an hour, after which.

Mr Lewis was recalled and further examined by Mr Hedley: I have had charge of the collieries in question. I have ordered borings in several stalls - we have bored three in the district in which we were working. I found the borings in the 7th and 8th stalls north of No 14. When I came to take charge of the workings, I had the 6th stall bored. We generally kept the bore in from 10 to 15 yards from the face. None of the holes tapped the water.

Nos 8 and 14 stalls have not been bored. I did not bore those because I considered there was a large distance, nearly 60 yards, of coal before us in No 2 stall adjoining 14. From that I inferred we had as much solid coal before us; as the old level did not run parallel with the stall faces, the pillar of solid coal, I calculated, would be diminished between No 8 stall and the old workings five yards. I had decided to take the stall No 8 ten or eleven yards further before I used the bore rods. Pickering would receive instructions from me about the boring.

When I was in the stall on the morning of the accident, and saw the water, I did not think I was close upon the "hollows;" - I thought it was a break - such as is frequently met with. The breaks are in my opinion caused by the water coming through the road roof, and running down the joints in the coal. I have met with many of those kind of breaks.



One in particular in new No 2 stall, in August last. The men sent for Pickering, and they thought they had gone into the “hollows.” But they were 130 yards to the deep of No 8 face, and 170 yards from the deep of Linby Hall level. We are constantly meeting with breaks in the coal throughout the whole district.

The staff of management is constituted as follows:- Pickering (the overman), a day and night deputy, and the night deputy has an assistant.

When the water broke in the steps taken to get out the men, were to secure a ventilation of the pit, to make towards the breach and search for the men there. We found it impossible to get further than 400 yards from the shaft owing to the damp, which I presumed arose from the water rising so much in the other shafts as to stop the ventilation. We then tried to pipe the air down No 2 shaft but that was insufficient. We adopted the readiest means at hand.

In the meantime “brattice” cloth was ordered from Manchester. We then bratticed the shaft and the level for about 800 yards. Our progress was slow on account of the roof being so loose as to cause us not to be able to fasten the bratticing. The foul air was very strong and hard to move. We put a jet of steam in the up cast shaft, which caused better ventilation.

We did not get up to the road where the men Rose and Bird were found, until the 12th day after the accident. We had relays of men every 6 hours; towards the latter part of the time - the distance being great we had twelve or fourteen men on at once. Six hundred yards from the shaft we met with a very large heap of slack; this we removed thinking the poor fellows might have been under it.

We at last found them in an old gate-road which had been “gobbed” within 10 yards of the bottom of it. The road was about 130 yards from the “breach.” At the time of the accident I was going to warn the men in the “clip.” I met them coming out 100 yards down the incline.

I have surveyed through the breach. We had cut into a coal head about 3 feet 4 inches wide. It has been driven from from the level of the old Linby Hall pit. It is 38 yards through, from the breach to the level, and 5 or 6 yards from the left hand side of the stall, and between 8 and 9 yards from the way ahead.

I went through the head to the old Limby Hall pit bottom; it is about 4 feet wide all the way through, and about 6 yards from where the head strikes to the level of the shaft. The water broke through about 4 feet of coal. The breach is 15 inches wide, and 43 feet 6 inches high. The body of water must have been very great as where the men were found in the road 6 feet wide and 6 feet high it was roofed. The area of the old workings was 300 acres. The pressure on the breach would be about 130 lbs. to the square inch.

It is all pumped out now, but a stream of water still comes through the head, down to the pumping engine. I had only left the pit for about 10 min. or a 1/4 of an hour, when I heard that the wall had given way. When I left it I thought all would escape. I was the last man out of the pit with the exception of one or two.



By a Juror: We had been boring every stall one day or another. No 5 was one of the stalls; but that was bored 12 months ago; and it is in the California pit. Pickering never did mention to me about the boring of the walls a few weeks before the accident. It was my impression that there was a large mass of coal before us. Pickering daily reported to me the state of the stall. We never did bore into No 8 stall. We keep two men on constantly boring, and one other nearly so.

By Mr. Hedley: No 15 general rule says - "sufficient bore holes shall be kept in advance, and if necessary on both sides, to prevent inundation in every working approaching a place likely to contain a dangerous accumulation of water."

Mr. Walker, re-examined, said: We have run off the water at the Coleorton hollows for the better security of the California pit. Our workings surround those hollows, also the "Gels Moore" hollows, and we have also run off the water there. We did not propose to run out the water in the old Linby Hall workings, as it would have entailed an expense of upwards of £3,000 to erect a pumping engine, and would have been a manual expense of at least £8,000. There would not have been anything to compensate us for the outlay, and we should have greatly benefited an adjoining colliery. We therefore arranged to keep Linby-hall water impounded.

Mr. Hedley, Government Inspector, having been sworn, deposed as follows: I am Government Inspector of Mines for the district in which Leicestershire is situated. I have inspected the breach. I found it of the dimensions spoken to by Mr. Lewis. The plans produced are also correct. I have passed through it.

In the bottom of the shaft belonging to the old Linby-hall workings, I cannot conceive what the head has been driven for towards the No 8 stall, as they have gone below the water level. I may say the position of it is such as regards No 8 stall, that it would be difficult to detect it with boring holes.

Nevertheless, I think borings should have been made in the stalls No 8, or No 14. The general rule (15) leaves it to the judgement of the manager as to whether he should make borings, and at what distance from the old workings, as it states they are to be made in every work approaching a place likely to contain a dangerous accumulation of water.

Several years ago I was anxious about these collieries, on account of the great area of hollows containing water by which they were surrounded. I therefore suggested to Mr. Walker to let off what water he could. That has been done in the Coleorton Colliery. In the Linby Hall the question of benefiting other collieries and the expense interfered. There is no power or authority to enforce the draining of old workings, so that boring is the only means of safety.



I have long been of opinion and am more confirmed in it, that where working collieries adjoin old hollows, those who will be benefited by the water being pumped out should join in the cost of getting it out.

I think the rule leaves it to the judgement of the manager as to when boring should be employed. If they do not, the question is whether it is done wilfully or through error of judgement.

The Coroner: From what you have heard, do you think this accident arose from wilful negligence or from error of judgement.

Mr. Hedley: From error of judgement, arising from the supposition that there was a large mass of coal in front, between No 8 and the old workings.

Mr. Lewis, re-examined by a juror, said: Lakin, the former bailiff, had never given him any warning about there being water behind No 8 stall.

Mr. Worswick observed that when Lakin was there five months ago, No 8 stall was not started.

The Coroner then summed up the evidence, and at half-past four the jury were left to themselves. At a quarter-past six o'clock they returned the following verdict:-

“We find that the three deceased parties have lost their lives owing to the bursting in of the water from the old Linby-hall hollows into No 8 stall of the Califat pit, which might have been prevented had “bore holes” been kept in, according to the requirement of the Act of Parliament, 22 and 24 Vict., chap. 101; though from the opinion of Mr. Hedley, Government Inspector (from the position of the heading as shown in the plan), even had there been “bore holes,” the accident might have occurred. But we further find that when the water had commenced coming in, underneath the coal, due care and attention was not shown by the manager in allowing the men to continue working at the break, when it was evident there was great danger. We believe that the manager was led to act as he did through having placed to great confidence in the practical experience of his workmen.”

As there is still a strong feeling in the locality as to the cause of the accident, the jury requested that plans of the old Linby-hall workings, showing the “heading,” be inserted in the Leicester and Loughborough newspapers, so as to enable the public to understand the condition of the pits. It was understood that this request will be complied with.

Newspaper articles used paragraphs very sparingly, with columns of more than 100 lines of text without a paragraph break. Paragraph formatting has been added to make it easier to read and digest the article. Likewise the names of the men giving evidence have been highlighted.