



Remembering the South Normanton Colliery disaster

Roger West pays tribute to those lost at the mine in 1937 – and the brave men who risked their lives for others

South Normanton Colliery had been relatively free from major incident. Indeed, it was one of the hallmarks of the company that this coal mine had been so free of tragedy and accident since the shaft was sunk in 1893/94.

That solid reputation of being a 'safe pit' darkened by the hour on the afternoon shift of Monday February 15, 1937.

It was almost 9pm on that dreadful evening when Clarence Dye, a contractor, noticed weighting in the roof with a tremble underfoot in the Elevens District of the 180-yard-deep Waterloo seam.

Without hesitation, Mr Dye immediately ordered all men from the coalface into the safety of the loader gate, a supply route from the coalface to the pit shaft.

Under Dye's instructions the mineworkers were hurrying to safety when, almost 25 yards up the loader gate, a powerful gust of warm wind sent the men flying in the thickest, blackest clouds of suffocating coal dust.

Dye reacted instinctively, shouting for the power to be cut off before sending men for stretchers. He then telephoned the pit bottom for ponies and tubs, ordering the men to move

further from danger.

Jonathon Waltho and Clarence Dye, both unprotected, lacking in respiratory helmets and with minimum light, advanced bravely towards the coalface left bank where the explosion seemed to have generated from, knowing men would be in there.

On their way inbound they met cutter operator John Johnson, John Thornley and Percy Ansell, all badly injured, crawling over rock and coal and struggling for the relative safety of the loader gate; Dye instructed them of the best way to safety.

Moving within 25 yards of the coal-cutter, Dye and Waltho were joined by pit deputy Bill Truswell. Holding up his safety lamp Truswell remarked: 'It's not fit for any man to go in there,' and at that the three men turned back for the loader gate, meeting other miners' still shuffling along the same route out to the pit shaft.

The three men made 50 or 60 yards up the loader gate, some 100 yards from the coal face, when there came a second explosion ten times worse than the first, with men flung around the loader gate.

Above ground Mr J. Gordon Mein, the colliery manager, had received the awful news at home

PHOTOS: PINXTON & SOUTH NORMANTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LEFT: South Normanton Colliery in the early 1950s

by telephone and at 9.40pm, within five minutes of receiving the call, had arrived on the pit top while underground men were still fleeing the blast.

Mr Mein rang the Mansfield Rescue Station, who in turn alerted the Chesterfield Rescue Station. The Mansfield team were down the pit by 10.11pm, followed by the Chesterfield team at 10.40pm, where they were met by a shaken deputy Truswell at the pit bottom.

Truswell informed the teams about the state and conditions of the affected district while outlining the best way in towards the coal face left bank, where he was certain men were still trapped.

Armed with breathing apparatus, safety lamps and a canary – taken down in such events as to ascertain whether poisonous gas is present - the team moved towards the face, reaching No. 4 engine house at 11pm.

It was here they found the injured William Petts. Treatment was administered as best as possible and he was despatched to the surface for further attention.

Between them, the two teams established a base at 11.25pm and were joined by Mr Mein the colliery manager and Mr Brown, manager of the rescue stations.

It was Mr Brown who gave the order for the Mansfield brigade to proceed into the face in the hope of finding any men.

With mouthpieces and breathing gear in place they noticed the ventilation was low and, further in, discovered tools, tool boxes, shovels, helmets, picks



Mr Percy Ansell who succumbed to his wounds in Mansfield General Hospital one week after the disaster

and lamps blown about from the two explosions.

A few yards further they found Henry Willis (59) in a crouched position over the conveyor belt, he was dead. They marked the spot and moved on.

Shortly after, they reached the electric coal cutter in the left hand bank and found the bodies of John Marriott (38) and Willis Lambert (45).

Again, the spots were marked but further progress was hampered by a wall of dirt, stone and rock: it was impassable.

Ensuring there was no naked flame, the Mansfield team withdrew to their underground base camp; it was eight minutes past midnight on Tuesday February 16.

As the Mansfield team retreated the Chesterfield team took their place while Ilkeston brigade members on the surface came down to make a third support rescue unit.

The Chesterfield brigade advanced up the face within yards of the cutter area but found the roof support timbers had

been blown out by the blast and was totally unstable.

It is often documented there is no braver soul than a mining man and there was no shortage of volunteer workmen who moved in to re-timber the roof for over three hours, making it safer for further exploration but, sadly, it was here they found the body of young Samuel Hill (19) buried in the waste.

The roof fall at this part of the coalface was so extreme that immediate progress was deemed impossible but three men, Frederick Pride, John Vardy and Everett Reeves, were still unaccounted for.

Teams of men worked tirelessly in relays around the clock for the next four days to clear the

‘Colliery company records listed more than 130 messages from sympathisers far and wide’

fall while above ground family, friends and sightseers waited patiently for any positive news with the Rev. T.H. Evans, rector of South Normanton parish rendering whatever service he could.

It wasn't until Saturday February 20 that the route was eventually pierced and the bodies of Everett Reeves (55), John Vardy (25) and Frederick Pride (31) were recovered.

The disaster caused a widespread outpouring of grief around the villages of South Normanton, Huthwaite and Sutton-in-Ashfield where the dead men had lived.

Colliery company records listed over 130 messages from sympathisers far and wide. Ex colliery workers, the Salvation Army, the Central Miners' Relief Fund, directors of the Derby & Notts Associated Collieries, the French Under-Secretary of State for Mines, the Duke and Duchess of Portland and the



South Normanton Colliery pit top, circa 1910



ABOVE: A grim-faced rescue team following the disaster in 1937

Duke of Devonshire all sent their condolences and there was even a telegram from the King and Queen; but what had gone wrong on that horrendous evening?

The inquest on Henry Willis, John Marriott, Samuel Hill and Willis Lambert opened the same day the bodies of the three buried miners had been found.

Two days later, the inquest opened on John Vardy, Everett Reeves and Frederick Pride. Sadly, that same day, Percy Ansell succumbed to his wounds, becoming the eighth victim.

Five possible theories about the source of a naked light were discussed at the inquest: A result of shot-firing; a safety lamp; an electrical fault; friction; or someone smoking.

Despite random and regular searches for 'contraband' of the miners' before going underground, PC Tansley reported finding smoking materials on the bodies of some of the men when he had examined them, including one 'spent' match

inside a metal tin.

Mr. T.E. Pickering, junior inspector of Mines for the District, concluded the explosion had been caused by someone smoking illegally. He felt placing a spent match inside a tin was the action of someone not wishing to be found out. He did not think this match had been the particular cause but was sure it was some action similar to that.

However, there was no 'direct evidence' to link any theoretical cause to the actual occurrence. The jury had no alternative but to return the verdict they did: 'We cannot find the cause of ignition of the explosion.'

When the inquest opened the Chesterfield coroner, Dr. R.A. Macrae, praised the men that had taken part in the rescue operations, paying a glowing tribute in particular to the actions of Clarence Dye and Jonathon Waltho.

Dr Macrae also paid tribute to the rescue brigades and volunteer workforce who toiled to clear the

fall, never knowing what dangers lay ahead.

It was left to Clarence Dye to offer the most fitting sentiments, which typify the heart and soul of a coal miner. He refused the idea of a gallantry award, stating: 'To see those injured men walking again will be worth more than any medal.'

South Normanton Colliery continued until 1952, when it became an office annexe for the New Hucknall Colliery. In 1954 it became the workshops for the National Coal Board No. 4 Area Road Transport. The shaft was filled in and capped in 1968.

The road transport depot came to a close on this site after privatisation of the coalfield and in 1998 became home to an out-of-town retail shopping outlet by the name of McArthur Glen.

One is left wondering how many of those out for a day's shopping will ever know of the dreadful scenario that took place underneath their feet over eighty years ago. ♦