

floating forward in straw and wreckage. He at once sprung forward, caught the lad, and, swimming with him to a higher level by an under passage which led to an opening in a shaft higher up, reached the surface with him safely. The mine is 85 fathoms deep, and of the 45 miners who were below at the time of the accident, three only were drowned.

THE DISASTER AT MUIRKIRK

REWARD FOR BRAVERY

At a special meeting of the Royal Humane Society held on Wednesday at the offices, Trafalgar Square, Charing Cross, London—Colonel Horace Montagu presiding—the remarkable incidents in connection with the Muirkirk Pit Disaster on 11th ult., were brought under notice. As a result of the evidence furnished to the Society by Sir W. Arrol, M.P. for South Ayrshire, the Society conferred its medal upon Robert Blyth (29), of Bankhead, and Robert Gibson, of Smallburn, who "most gallantly risked their lives in their exertions to save their fellow workmen" in the Auldhouse Pit, Muirkirk, on the above date.

The evidence showed that a sudden inrush of water from an old mine flooded the pit till the water rose 4ft above the doorheads, and the pit bottom was full to the roof some 50ft back. Blyth, in his effort to escape, turned from the pit bottom and faced the rising water till he met with the other workmen, whom he conducted to a higher heading, and by this means was mainly instrumental in saving 16 miners who had been imprisoned in a critical position for over 24 hours.

JAMES TAYLOR

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The Bankhead Pit Disaster

1898

Compiled from
Old Newspaper Cuttings

by

JAMES TAYLOR



ROBERT BLYTH

THE MUIRKIRK DISASTER

Ayrshire has, unfortunately within recent months, been the scene of several sad catastrophies. There were the Barassie railway collision, the Dreghorn Pit accident, and the Muirkirk mine disaster. We know what was the cause of the railway smash—deliberate ignoring, in fact, transgressing of rules. At Dreghorn the cause was clear enough, but the responsibility was not made so plain as in the other case, though there was the suggestion, at least, of carelessness. The public inquiry into the Muirkirk disaster during the week resulted in a verdict by the jury—guided by the Sheriff—which is exactly tantamount to attributing it to negligence. The verdict very specifically is that the influx of water and the flooding of the pit were caused by failure to comply with the requirements of the Coal Mines Regulation Act, 1887, and in particular by failure to comply with the provision that where a place is likely to contain a dangerous accumulation of water there shall be constantly kept at a sufficient distance, at least one borehole near the centre of the workings. The evidence established the fact that adjoining the pit where men were working, it was well known that there was a large accumulation of water. In spite of this knowledge, no borehole was kept near the centre of the workings for some days. This was a daily transgression of the Mines Act, an exhibition of wilful foolhardiness and a risking of life that seems almost incredible. It is a case in point where a blunder becomes greater than a crime.

No one connected with the Pit in question desired the destruction of property or loss of life, but they were jeopardising both in face of the regulations that all employed at the ill-fated pit must have been familiar with. Parliament in the past has spent much time in the consideration, discussing, and passing of Mines Acts, and the great masses whose business it is to work in the bowels of the earth have been enthusiastic in their support of these measures still show scant disregard of those in whose interests the Act are passed, being their wilful transgressors. and in whose interests the Acts were passed. There is no good in legislation if we trample its provisions under foot.

The attention paid now-a-days to the working of mines; the close inspection by Government representatives, and the restrictions of the law have done much to lower the casualty rate in mines, but we find that the Inspectors, in their reports, remain incessant in attributing most of the accidents to neglect and carelessness. This distressing accident at Muirkirk, which issued in the death of three men, and, but for the courage and resource of one of the temporary entombed, would have been more disastrous, is another instance of gross carelessness. Surely, ere long the tragic and costly lessons will exterminate carelessness, particularly where life is involved.

At the earliest opportunity he again left the only place of refuge, and, breasting the water, reached the shaft and gave notice of the safety of his companions. Gibson stood bravely to his post to the last, signalling the men away in the cage until the water reached his neck, but just before leaving his attention was called to a lad of 17 named John McGladrie, who, in the darkness, was just dimly perceived to be

Witness repeated that it was simply as a precaution; he could give no definite reason. He expected from the measurements he had taken that at most they should dip at 8ft. from the heading, so that he supposed that he was 20ft. past the Crossflat dook.

You also knew that the plan in your possession had a note upon it to the effect that it was not guaranteed, being surveyed up to the date of the abandonment of the Colliery. Ought that not to have put you on your guard?

The date of the plan was 20th September.

But are you not aware that the Colliery was working for a considerable time after that?

Witness replied that he had no personal knowledge of it.

Can you tell me why you allowed this place to be driven 12ft., wide?

It was simply to make room for the rubbish; that was the only reason.

Police-Sergeant James Thomson gave formal evidence as to the names of the deceased.

Sheriff Paterson, in addressing the jury, said it seemed to him that the accident resulted through failure to comply with Rule 13 of the Coal Mines Act, and particularly through failure to keep a borehole in the centre of the workings. Had there been such a bore, he thought the danger would, or at all events most probably would, have been averted.

The jury returned a verdict that the fatal influx of water was caused by the failure to comply with the requirements of General Rule 13 of the Coal Mines Regulations Act, 1887, and in particular to comply with the provision that where a place is likely to contain a dangerous accumulation of water, there shall be constantly kept at a sufficient distance, not less than five yards in advance, at least one boring near the centre of the working.

The Bankhead Pit Disaster

Compiled by JAMES TAYLOR

The Bankhead Pit of Auldhouse Colliery, Muirkirk, which was flooded on Friday (11th March, 1898) morning by an inrush of water from the old workings, belongs to the Cairntable Gas Coal Company (Limited). It is situated on the south side of the Caledonian Railway Company's line from Lanark to Ayr, about half a mile to the east of Muirkirk Station, and has been worked for a period of about thirty years. The shaft, which is close to the side of the line, is 68 fathoms in depth, and the portion of the mine at present being worked lies to the east and south, the western section having been exhausted some time ago. From the bottom of the shaft the main road runs north-eastwards for a distance of about 130 fathoms. At that point it turns at an obtuse angle to the southward, the road being continued in that direction for about eighty fathoms. At the apex of the triangle thus formed, a heading had been driven towards the south for about 300 fathoms, with a rise of about 1 to 3. To the east of the rise are the disused workings of the Crossflat Mine, and it was from these workings that the inflow of water took place. The Auldhouseburn Colliery is, not of great extent, only some 50 or 60 men being employed.

On Friday morning, between six and seven, the day shift went down to the number of 44, the majority being engaged in the rise workings. Work went on as usual until about a quarter to nine o'clock, when an alarm went through the mine that the water had burst in. The accident took place in the eastern end of the pit, at the working place of a man named John McMillan. According to his account, the water came at first in a stream about the diameter of a man's arm, then with a rush, which lifted him from his feet and flung him out onto the road level. Seizing the boy who was employed along with him, he rushed towards the pit bottom, which was distant about 300 yards, shouting as he went that the water had broken in. William Caldow, William Kilpatrick, James Lochrie, and John and James Dempster, who had been working at a lower level, knowing well what this meant, at once made for the pit bottom, several of their number running stripped to the waist as they had been working in the seam.

On the alarm being given, at the pit bottom, Robert Blyth, the fireman at the lower level, sped along the rise heading, shouting as he went to the busy miners to escape for their lives. Meanwhile, Robert Gibson, the bottomer, gave the signal to the pitheadman, and, with the utmost despatch, the miners, who by this time had begun to congregate at the bottom of the shaft, were brought to the surface. Those who were nearest the bottom outran the rapidly-increasing torrent, which was coming in heavy volume from the Crossflat mine; but those who were at a greater

distance found themselves in a stream which took some of them up to the knees, and others to the waist, while Gibson, the bottomer remained at his post until he was immersed to the armpits. By this time he had succeeded in sending 23 of his men to the pithead; and, seizing a boy named John McGrowth, who had been carried off his feet, he rushed for a trap door which he succeeded in opening, and by an old road reached the shaft at a higher point, where he got into the cage. He was the last of the men who managed to escape from the flooded mine on Friday.

The manager of the Colliery, Mr John Shaw, who had been down in the pit early in the morning, was speedily apprised of the accident, and he at once took steps for the rescue of the men still below. From the character of the workings, confident hopes were then entertained that, without exception, they had all succeeded in reaching a place of safety. So far as was known, they were all employed in the rise workings, which are at an elevation considerably above the point where the water broke from Crossflat mine into the main level, and it was considered by the manager and the more experienced workmen that when they found the main road flooded they would have been taken themselves to the higher levels. The only risk was that in the confusion following on the alarm they might have become bewildered, and rushed into the quickly gathering waters and perished. Indeed, a rumour was current in the course of the afternoon that cries had been heard by some of those who were last to make their escape, but it was impossible to verify the statement

The following is a list of the 19 men entombed for 12 hours:—

James Hazel, married.

John Hazel, married.

F. Hibberd, and his sons, Charles Hibberd and James Hibberd.

James Lochhead, married.

John Marshall, Married.

Hugh English, married.

John Kilpatrick, married.

Alexander Gilfillan, married.

James Shaw, unmarried.

Robert Blyth, unmarried.

James Moran, married.

William Gemmell, married.

William Dempster, married.

Daniel Matheson, married.

William Thomson, youth.

James Thomson, youth.

Alexander Vallance, unmarried.

the inrush of water flung him out of the road. He made for the bottom of the pit, and got up the shaft.

By Mr Robertson—He had bored fully two feet before the water burst in the place where McMillan was working, according to the plan shown, runs

Robert Gibson, pit bottomer, said he was the last man to get up the shaft on the day of the accident. He heard his boy crying and went back to get him. The water came in a stream about seven feet broad—the whole width of the mine. The water rose to a height of five feet in as many minutes. There were 44 men in the pit. He heard the cries of men, but he had not the time to get a man out. He cried back to them, but, the water rising, he went to a higher level, and got the cage and went up.

John Shaw, the manager of Auldhouseburn Pit, was the next witness. The Sheriff warned him that he was not bound to answer any questions which might incriminate him or tend to incriminate him.

Examined by Mr Robertson, witness stated that he was aware that he was approaching the old workings. The workings had not been surveyed for about three months prior to the accident. He had not received from the surveyors the workings up to that date. He had been making a survey of his own so as to get an approximate idea of the nearness to the Crossflat workings. He expected that they were within 40 yards of the old workings. The boreholes that were made in the place approaching the workings were put in according to his instructions, and the width of the place was also driven according to his instructions. There had been a borehole straight in advance of the place where the water came through up till within a few days of the accident. There was no borehole straight in advance on the day of the accident.

Mr Ronaldson—Can you explain why there was no such borehole on that day?

His Lordship said that the witness need not answer that question.

Mr Dougall said that he understood that an agent for the Company was to have been present, with whom he would have consulted. He thought, however, that Mr Shaw might answer the question. Witness replied that from the measurements he had made, and from the appearance of the coal, he came to the conclusion that the old workings were behind them, and therefore he did not think it necessary to keep a borehole in advance any longer.

That being the case, can you explain the reason for putting in a flank borehole in the dip at the working place?

It was simply a precaution.

Yes, but you have just said that you thought that you were past the old workings, yet you put in a flank borehole in the dip. Why did you do that when you did not consider it necessary to put in a straight borehole?

cause it was approaching the waste workings, and which was no less than 18 feet wide, and there was not a single borehole in it.

The Sheriff—Of course that had nothing to do with the accident. The right into the workings shown in the Home Office plan, but not shown in the owners' plan.

There is some mistake in the surveying; the plans are not exactly correct.

By Mr Orr—If the Company had consulted Mr Tait's plan they would have seen that they were in close proximity to the old workings.

The Sheriff—What sort of material was between the seams of coal where the water broke in?

A sort of fireclay.

George Pearson, Assistant-Inspector of Mines, corroborated Mr Ronaldson's evidence.

Adam Easton, oncost man, said that his duty was to attend to the boring, and to tap the water.

Witness, in answer to the Sheriff, said that the last borehole was put in on the Monday before the accident happened.

By Mr Ronaldson—It is more difficult to bore straight ahead than to bore flank holes. He could not say if that was the reason why they were not bored. He made no borings except on the instructions of the manager, Mr Shaw.

Robert Easton, oncost man, corroborated.

William Kilpatrick, a miner, stated that for some days before the date of the accident he was working in a place where the accident took place. Boring was stopped on the Monday night. He told the manager on Monday that he thought that he was past where the water was. On the morning of the accident Mc Millan sent for him and when he went he saw water coming in. Witness advised him to send for the foreman, but before the latter arrived the burst had taken place..

By the Sheriff—He was not present when the water came through?

By Mr Dougall—When he told the manager that he had passed the water he believed that he was safely past. it. He had been a miner for about thirty-three years. He was aware that the manager was arranging to start from another heading, and that a start was to be made on the day following the accident.

John Kilpatrick collaborated.

John McMillan, who was working at the place where the water came through, said that the manager remarked to him "that the place was very dry now." Witness saw no water. That was at seven o'clock in the morning. Between eight and nine o'clock he saw water coming in, and sent for William Kilpatrick, who advised him to get the fireman of the section. While waiting for the fireman the hole burst and

The water rose rapidly in the mine shaft until it reached a total height of about 12 or 13 feet, and without delay operations were commenced with a view to clearing the mine. It is known in the district as a somewhat wet mine, and is provided with two powerful pumps, one of 14 and the other of 16 inches. These were at once set to work. In addition, two water chests which had been employed during a former period of flooding about six years ago, were happily at the mine. These were also rigged up and brought into use, bringing to the surface each about half a hogshead of water at each ascent. Between the pumps and the chests it was calculated that the water was being lowered at the rate of 300 or 400 gallons a minute.

The pathos of the scene at the pithead increased as night fell. When the news of the disaster first reached the village it was not thought that the matters were quite so serious, and during the afternoon the people who found their way to the pithead were comparatively few; but as the evening advanced and the gravity of affairs became known, the crowds who flocked to the scene greatly increased in numbers. When darkness came the village seemed veritably wrapped in melancholy. Muirkirk at ordinary times wears the characteristically dreary aspect of the mining village. The uneven village streets are unlighted, save, as by the weak gleams shed by the flickering oil lamps in the houses. The brightest part of the village was when the lurid glare from the Eglinton Ironworks pierced the gloom. Along the uneven roads men and women wended their way to the pit. At midnight the scene in the neighbourhood of the pit was pathetically impressive.

Auldhouse Pit is difficult to approach. One was to wend one's way up a stiff incline, a rough road crossed by railway lines and strewn with lumber. This road was filled with a mining throng numbering between 200 and 300 people. The crowds made their way not without danger. The light which guided to the mine was somewhat dim. A wooden railing—broken in many places—was all there was to cling to on the way to the pithead. But the eager people stumbled on. The scene at the head of the shaft was grimly pathetic. A fire generously heaped with coal—coal that is so often bought at so dear a price—blazed at the pithead. Its glare shed a weird glow on the solemn-faced group who were gathered round. On one of the rude poles an oil lamp hung, its light dimmed by the great glow from the fire.

NARRATIVE BY ROBERT BLYTH

Robert Blyth, the first of the men to get out of the pit, was escorted to his house, which is in the near vicinity. Here he was interviewed. He is a man of about 29 years of age and of modest demeanour. He was evidently shaken by his terrible experience, but though his voice trembled once or twice, he gave a very coherent account of the disaster. "As you may have heard," he began, "when the first word of the catastrophe spread through the pit, I ran to the rise workings to warn the men there at the time. I knew that the water would cut us off, but I wasn't going to be a coward. I have gone through some stirring experiences in this same pit, and have been in it all by days, and I hope it will never be said that Bob

Blyth shirked his duty. I was near the bottom of the pit when the water rushed in, and after getting the men in the lower working to run for their lives, I made my way through the rushing torrent of water to the rise working, where I got the men there together. We found that air was being returned through the rise working, and there was absolutely no sign of damp or foul gasses. The atmosphere was quite fresh, and but for the privations, which a long stay in the pit would have meant, we would not have suffered from the atmosphere. The air was wonderfully fresh when they got the company of 16 gathered together. I took it upon my self, from my knowledge of the pit, to presume myself a sort of leader, although none of us thought anything of that kind at the time. We were all too glad to comfort one another. I knew it was folly to move from the place where we were, as any attempt to get through until the water had subsided would have been fatal. We collected all the coats and clothing we could get and huddled together for warmth, covered ourselves with blankets, and waited until the pumps, which we knew must be working, had finished. We were not badly off for light. Each of us had his oil lamp, and I got all the men to put out their lights, with the exception of two. When these were at their last flicker we lighted two more and so on, so that we did not suffer the inconvenience of darkness. There were two flasks of cold tea in the company. Some of the men wanted to drink the tea right off, but I induced them to hand over the tea cans into my custody. When I thought the strength of the men was giving way, about midnight I fancy, I heated the tea with an oil can, and we each got a sip of the hot tea. When we saw that the water was going down I made two attempts to get near the pit bottom, but was unsuccessful. At the third attempt, however, I succeeded. I waded through the water, which was up to my neck. I could only keep my head above water with the greatest difficulty. It was a bit of a struggle to get to the cage, as you may imagine. When I got to the pit bottom I saw that the water boxes were still at work, and, waiting until the "kist" had risen, I sprang forward and "belled the pit." That means I caught hold of the bell and rang to let the men above know that some one, at least, was safe. If it gave as much relief to those above as it gave me to ring that bell, it must have been very great. The men quickly came down and took me to the surface. There was a great amount of wreckage in the pit, and I saw the dead body of at least one pony. None of us saw anything of John Hazel, William Gemmell, and the boy James Shaw. What became of them I do not know."

RECOVERY OF THE BODIES

Pumping was further continued to clear the workings and enable a search party to ascend and look for the three missing men, as to whose sad fate there now seemed no doubt. At eleven o'clock it was reported that the bodies of Gemmell, Hazel and Shaw had been found. The news, however, was premature, the actual discovery not taking place until after two o'clock. There were plenty of willing helpers to explore the workings. A party was selected to go down with Mr Andrew Pearson, Assistant Inspector of Mines for the West of Scotland. They were—

were put there, because it was known to the miners and manager that they were in close proximity to the Crossflat old workings. It was known that the workings were full of water. Holes were driven in advance. That was done to enable them to tap the waste before actually working through upon it, and prevent the water from inundating. He considered that there ought to have been another flank bore hole in the rise between the east bore hole and the working face. It was according to rule to have at least one centre hole straight ahead, also for the purpose of precaution against water coming in suddenly. There was no centre bore hole in advance in this place at the time of the accident as required by Rule 13 of the Mines Regulation Act, 1887, which was to the effect that where a place was likely to contain a dangerous accumulation of water there should be kept, at a distance of not less than five yards in advance, at least one boring near the centre of the workings, and sufficient flank borings on each side. The part marked E in the plan was the place where John McMillan was working at the time of the accident, and where the water came through.

By the Sheriff—The centre bore was the most important from a commonsense point of view.

The hole that was made by the rush of water measured 8ft 7in. wide by 15in. high. That was the measurement after the water had been run off.

The Fiscal—What was the distance from where McMillan worked to the old Crossflat workings?

Three feet 9in. of coal. McMillan stated that he holed into a depth of 2ft 6in., leaving only a barrier of 1ft. 3in. at most to stand the pressure of the water.

Was that sufficient to withstand the pressure of the water?

The result has shown that it was not. Witness had been sent the plan which was deposited by the late owners of the Crossflat Colliery with the Home Office.

If the directors or managers had been in possession of that plan or guided by it, would they have been more careful?

I don't think they would have been. They knew that they were in close proximity to the old workings. The plan which they had, a footnote that its correctness was not guaranteed, and therefore in the circumstances they ought to have been more careful with the plan they had than if they had a copy of the plan which was given to the Home Office.

The Sheriff—Did the water break in at the point in the old workings shown on the plan or at a point not shown on the plan?

The water broke in at a junction of the old workings not shown. Had there been a borehole right in advance it would have gone right through into the waste working, and the accident would never have happened. The water would have been tapped to a certainty. Witness pointed to a place marked number 6 on the plan which ought to have been no more than 8 feet wide according to regulations, be

adjoined Auldhouseburn Pit. Operations at Crossflat were abandoned about 12 years ago, and about two years ago the Company took a lease of the minerals. His directors knew that the operations in Auldhouseburn Pit were approaching the old Crossflat working. His Company got a plan of the workings from the engineer of the Crossflat workings. A plan was also sent to the Home Office. They did not consider it necessary to get any more. They did not take any means to find out whether there were more workings than was shown in the plan.

In reply to the Sheriff, Mr Ronaldson, Inspector of Mines, said that it was the object that all plans supplied to the Home Office should show the whole workings. Witness, continuing, said that Mr Tait's plan was sent direct to the office of the Company. He could not say whether the plan was seen by the directors. It was sent to Mr Shaw, the manager. There was a note on the plan given by Mr Tait that he would not guarantee the correctness of the plan at the time the mine was abandoned.

Mr Ronaldson, Inspector of Mines—When you noticed that Mr Tait would not guarantee the correctness of the plan, did you not think, seeing it was such a simple matter, of getting a copy of the plan which was sent to the Home Office.

Witness replied that they had written to the Home Office. He was not aware that the plan sent to the Home Office showed more than the other plan.

James Tait, surveyor, Wishaw, said he was asked by Mr Clarkson in June last year to give him a tracing of the Crossflat workings. He was a surveyor of the Crossflat workings at the time they were in use, about 18 years ago. When he put the note at the foot of the plan he meant to indicate that in the plan from which he copied there were parts done in pencil which he did not do, and which had been done after the date of his survey. He thought from the look of it that more coal had been taken out since he surveyed it.

Did you think your note sufficient warning?—It was all I could give them.

Witness put in pencil the same markings that were on the plan he copied from. He thought the plan in the Home Office would have been made out by him.

By Mr Ronaldson—20th August, 1882, was the date of the survey. He could not say how long the pit worked after the date of his survey. Assuming the plan shown him by Mr Ronaldson was the same as the one sent to the Home Office, it showed more stooping at the extreme dip workings in Crossflat Pit.

How were you unable to give the owners the same information on the plan supplied to them?—The plan lodged with the Home Office is mine as a whole, but additional workings may have been added to it.

J. M. Ronaldson, Inspector of Mines for the West of Scotland, stated, in reply to the Procurator-Fiscal, that he was at the Pit on the day of the accident, and a plan was made of the portion of the workings where the water broke in. Six bore holes

Samuel Robb, William Kilpatrick, Robert Gibson, John McMillan, and Alex. Leggatt. The party had not been long down when Mr Pearson ascended and reported that the bodies of the three men had been found. The water boxes, which had been kept busily going for thirty hours bailing the shaft, were removed from the cages, which were prepared for the reception of the unfortunate men. A cart and stretchers were in waiting, and the bodies were placed in them, reverently covered, and removed to their homes in the village. The scene was very impressive. The bodies, followed by groups of mourners, were taken slowly down the long street, and deposited at the houses, which the men had left in the full flush of health the previous day.

DROWNED

The following are the names of those drowned:—

William Gemmell, Garronhill; married, eight of a family.

John Hazel, married; two children.

James Shaw, single; resided with widowed mother.

While there is the deepest sympathy expressed for all the bereaved, the lot of Gemmell's widow is the hardest. There are eight of a family, and the eldest is a girl of 15 years of age. Shortly before four o'clock in the afternoon the bodies were taken to their respective homes. Surely, however, a better method might have been adopted for this sad duty. To city people at least it seemed harsh and irreverent to have the bodies carted and carried so publicly. One lay on an open cart covered only by a bed mat; the others were carried on stretchers.

No work was done in any of the collieries on Monday. Bankhead Pit was visited by a number of the partners of the Company, by H.M. Inspector of Mines, and by Mr Howatson of Glenbuck. Sir William Arroll, M.P., sent through Doctor Ritchie £25 to the bereaved families and £5 to be divided among the workers who rescued the men. Telegrams of sympathy were received from Messrs J. G. A. Baird, M.P., C. Howatson of Glenbuck, John L. Hunter of Auldhouseburn (at present on the Continent), and James Johnstone of Ailloway.

INTERVIEWS

John McMillan said—I began work shortly before seven o'clock in the 3ft. seam. My place was about 100 feet from the face, and I saw nothing until the water burst through. It was totally unexpected. It came suddenly at first in a small stream, and then with a great rush. I was sitting on my bench, three or four feet up, and it lifted me and flung me on to the level road. The boy was standing on the level, and when he heard the rush he ran to the bottom. So heavy was the flood that I had some difficulty in getting to my feet, but having done so I shouted to the roadman and to the rest of the men that the water had burst in. The men working in this section ran to the pit bottom as quickly as possible, keeping ahead of the water. Several of them had nothing on but their trousers. As I have said, the burst

was quite unexpected. I had been working in another place further along. It had become very wet, and the place in which I was working to-day was very different. The manager was down and said to me "This place seems as if it was to become dry altogether."

Robert Gibson, the bottomer said—I went on duty at six o'clock in the morning. About nine o'clock a man came rushing to me and said a burst had taken place in the working place of John McMillan. It was about the thickness of his arm at first, he said, but it come so strong that it flung him on the roadway. A number of men came running to the bottom, and I sent them up as quickly as possible. I did so for about ten or fifteen minutes. The water came very rapidly. I remained until it was up to my armpits. From the time it reached me until I left would not be more than four or five minutes. I went out through the trap-door, seizing as I ran a boy named McGladderie, who had been thrown off his feet in the torrent, and made my way by the rise road to the 45 fathom level in the shaft. All the others had been sent up. The boy was the last to reach the bottom. Unless the men got confused in the darkness, I think the rest of them must have escaped into the rise. I do not think they would have rushed into the water when they knew that they would be safe in the rise.

William Caldow—I was working directly below McMillan's place. I heard the burst and at once ran to the pit bottom. I warned, as I passed, William Kirkpatrick and his son, James Lochrie, Ned Brown, John and William Dempster, who were working in the lower level. I reached the pit bottom before the water, and went up in the first cage.

Hugh Henderson—I was in the rise working at the time of the accident. The roadsman, James Moran, came rushing along and cried that the water had broken in. I flung on my jacket, ran as quickly as possible, and by the time I reached the pit bottom the water was nearly up to my waist. I did not hear anyone coming behind me. I think those who were at a greater distance would go back to the rise heading.

FUNERAL OF THE VICTIMS

At two o'clock on Tuesday afternoon an impressive ceremony took place in the Established Church, in which all the Ministers of Muirkirk took part. The Rev. R. Montgomery, E.C., presided, and was supported Rev. J. Greenshields, F.C.; Rev. John Dundas, U.P.; Rev. Mr Aitken, E.U.; Rev. A. M. Nelson, E.C.; and Rev. Colin McKenzie, E.C., Glenbuck. After the bells had finished their solemn tolling, Mr James G. Richmond, organist, played the Dead March in Saul, after which the proceedings were of a most impressive character. The Rev. Mr Montgomery announced a portion of the ciii. Psalm, after which the rev. Mr Greenshields read Psalm xc., and the Rev. Mr McKenzie xv. Corinthians, while the Rev. J. Dundas offered up prayer. The last verse of the last paraphrase was then sung, and the service terminated. At the conclusion Mr Richmond played Benedictos by

Webb. Thereafter the mourners marched to the houses of William Gemmell, and his body was removed from the house to the cemetery. This was afterwards repeated in the case of John Hazel and James Shaw. There were upwards of 800 mourners and as the huge mass passed by the way the sight was a most memorable one.

In fact, the funeral is stated to be the largest that has ever taken place in Muirkirk. The shopkeepers, to show all true respect to the deceased miners, closed their shops for about three hours. Amongst those present at the funeral, besides the Ministers, were Mr Charles Howatson, Glenbuck; Messrs Stewart, Angus and McCulloch of Messrs William Baird & Co.; Drs. Ritchie, Fulton and Carruthers; Mr Jackson, Clydesdale Bank; Mr Kitch, Cashier; and Mr Shaw, Manager, Cairntable Co.; Mr Leslie, Inspector of Poor; Father Puishant, R.C.; Mr Kerr, Chairman of the Parish Council; Councillor Crawford, Cumnock; &c. There was also a large representation of the merchants at the grave of William Gemmell. A funeral service was held, as he was one of the principal members of the Baptist denomination in Muirkirk. All the survivors of the disaster were in attendance, including Robert Blyth, the hero. The following gentlemen have agreed to become a Committee for the purpose of receiving and administering donations in aid of the dependants of those who lost their lives by the disaster, viz.:—The Rev. R. Montgomery, Rev. J. Greenshields, Rev. J. Dundas, Rev. D. Aitken, Rev. C. A. McKenzie, Rev. A. M. Nelson, Mr Charles Howatson of Glenbuck; Messrs Thomas Jackson, Clydesdale Bank; and R. A. Leslie, Inspector of the Poor.

Besides receiving £30 from Sir William Arroll, Mr J. Lockhart, Solicitor, Ayr, has sent £3 as a donation towards the bereaved.

THE MUIRKIRK PIT DISASTER

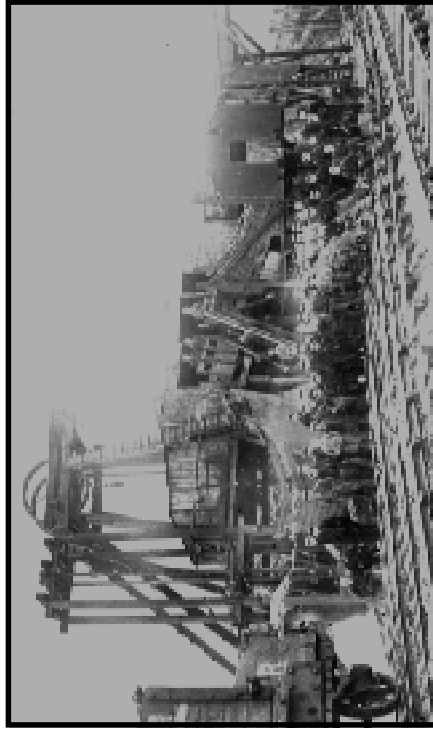
INQUIRY AT AYR

Under the Fatal Accident Inquiry Act, an inquiry was held on Wednesday in the County Buildings, Ayr, into the deaths of William Gemmell, John Hazel, and James Shaw, who were drowned in Auldhouseburn Pit, Bankhead, Muirkirk, on the 11th March. It will be remembered that 19 men were entombed in the pit, all of whom, however, were rescued except the three named.

Sheriff-Substitute Orr Paterson presided, and Mr David Ferguson was procurator-fiscal. There was a small attendance of the public. Mr David Dougall, writer, appeared for Mr Shaw, the manager of the pit, and Mr T. J. Orr, writer, attended on behalf of the relatives.

John Clarkson, secretary to the Cairntable Gas Coal Company, was the first witness. His Company, in which there were four Directors, were, he said, the owners of the Auldhouseburn Pit. Crossflat Pit, of which the witness exhibited a tracing,

THE BANKHEAD PIT DISASTER



Compiled by JAMES TAYLOR



TEMPERANCE HALL BRAE

The Muirkirk Disaster

11th March, 1898

Away on yon heath where our martyrs have bled,
And moulded in dust lie the glorious dead,
Where high, towering hills wear spring caps of snow,
And gallant Muirkirk lies asleep far below.

There out of their homes at the cold break of day,
To Bankhead the miners now start on their way.
While out to the doorstep the fond mothers come,
To whisper "Good morning, God send you safe home."

Ah! Deeply pathetic and hard is the life,
Of the brave-hearted miner and his loving wife;
When they part in the morning they never can tell,
But they may have taken their short last farewell.

The sun now is risen and all is so still,
Except the gay lark singing over the hill.
And the gileless wee lambs that race o'er the heath,
Unconscious of all the grim horror of death.

While hard at their labour with blow upon blow,
Three hundred and ninety feet far below.
The miners toil on without warning or fear,
That a great flood of water is lurking so near.

When sudden and swift as the lightnings that fall,
With a rent and a roadway goes the wall,
And the great flood of water comes boiling and hissing,
Oh, who will be saved and who will be missing?

They run for dear life, age, and swift they must run,
For the water is coming on, ton upon ton.
Run on you brave hearts no foothold now miss,
Oh God, what a scene! What a moment is this!

Some reach the pit bottom. The bottomer's there.
As brave as a lion to do or to dare,
He stands at his post till the waters have passed,
Up over his haunches and over his breast.

Then turns he to flee from his dangerous post,
When lo, on the waters, about to be lost,
A boy he spies fighting death and despair,
And stretching his hand takes him into his care.

But who is the hero of this awful scene?
Ah" That is Bobby Blyth, he is with the nineteen.
He could have gone home but he choose to try
To save his companions or nobly die.

To thee Robert Blyth, what words can I say,
To show thee the depth of my feelings to-day?
Thy dearest reward now awaits thee on high,
From an Almighty power and an All-Seeing eye.!

My heart and my hand, here they fail to unite,
My thoughts are too proud for me now to write,
But the world now knows how he breasted the wave,
And saved sixteen men from a watery grave.

And when the great flood the poor fellows entombed,
And the wail went abroad that, alas! they were doomed,
Our hero's great soul then arose to the call,
While he led them to wait till the water would fall.

Weary they waited a night and a day,
And slowly the water receded away,
While with every heart-throb a deep, muttered prayer,
Was whispered to God for his merciful care.

And God heard their prayers and deemed them good,
He let willing workers reduce the great flood,
And now from the jaws of grim death they have come,
Bringing joy unbounded back into each home.

But, alas, there are those who shall never return,
Their souls have departed across the dark bourne.
Oh comfort the sorrowing, give them thy care,
Sothe them in their dark hour of despair

From

THE POEMS OF A POLICEMAN

By MATHEW ANDERSON

Waterside