

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

(1957)

On the 19th November, 1957, the village of Muirkirk suffered what every mining community in the land dreaded—a disaster at the local Colliery. And so this was the case at Kames Colliery on that fateful Tuesday night, and anyone who lived through that drama will never forget the experience. Let the files of the "Advertiser" unfold the details as it happened. From the Issue of 21st November:—

Disaster at Kames Colliery

17 Lives lost in Underground Explosion

Our little community suffered a grievous loss on Tuesday night in the worst mining disaster in Scotland for many years. Seventeen lives were lost when an explosion occurred in a section of the West Mine.

The victims, all of Muirkirk, were:—

THOMAS BURNSIDE, 1 Burnside Cottages
THOMAS CASEY, 25 Colthart Drive
ALEX. CRAWFORD, 92 Pagan Walk
JOHN DALZIEL, 43 Springhill Terrace
TIM DILLON, 6 Shawknowe Avenue
ANDREW FINDLAY, 19 Lapraik Avenue
RONALD GRANT, 14 Colthart Drive
WILLIAM HENDRY, 8 Stitt Place
ROBERT LOWE, 24 Hawkshaw Terrace
JAMES MARSHALL, 54 Springhill Terrace
DON MCGARRY, 10 Colthart Drive
WILLIAM MCKAY, 19 Springhill Terrace
JOHN MCKEAN, 84 Henderson Drive
JAMES SAMSON, 27 Miller Road
ROBERT SMITH, 17 Stoneyhill Avenue
WILLIAM SMITH, 52 Colthart Drive
JOHN WALKER, 99 Henderson Drive.

Andrew Findlay, Don McGarry, Thomas Casey, and Ronald Grant were all teenagers; William Smith, John Walker and William Hendry, single men; and the remainder married. Mr Marshall was 69 years of age.

Twenty-eight men were working in the Section when the explosion, believed to have been caused by coal dust ignited by gas pockets in the farthest workings of the colliery, took place, and ten miners working at the coalface and seven men working farther along the Section were killed. The other men were blown off their feet and suffered mainly from shock.

The injured men were brought out by rescue workers, and three were taken to Ballochmyle Hospital:—Archie Smith, 8 Meanlour Drive (body and arm injuries); John Frew, 10 Pagan Walk (shock); and James Marshall, Wellwood Street (gassing and shock).

When the grim news spread throughout the village, hundreds flocked to the Colliery, and through the night the crowd waited silently in the rain.

Emergency squads of rescue workers were organised at the Colliery, and official mine rescue parties from Coatbridge, Alloa, Whitehill, Highhouse, Auchinleck, and Kilmarnock were summoned. In all more than 100 men working in teams of five took part, and it was eighteen hours before their work was completed. They were hampered by several roof falls, carbon monoxide gas, and wrecked plant and equipment, and at times they were dragging stretchers through workings with less than three feet of headroom.

Ambulances were sent to the pithead from Ballochmyle Hospital, New Cumnock, and Cumnock.

In addition to the Colliery staff, officials of the National Coal Board, and of the National Union of Mineworkers, the local clergymen, and the police were present. Dr Weir went underground, and Dr Duke was on duty at the rescue station set up in the engine room. Local lady volunteers did good work in the canteen.

Survivors stated that there was a shattering blast and a tremendous rush of air. All lights went out and the whole area was filled with dense clouds of choking fumes.

One of the rescue teams said it was almost impossible to enter the explosion area immediately after the report because the fumes were so heavy and thick.

The first news of the missing men was that two bodies had been found. Later it was learned that the other fifteen were all dead.

Mr Raymond Parker, Chairman of the Scottish Division of the N.C.B., in a statement, said: "It is with the very greatest regret that I have to report that seventeen men who were missing have now been found dead. They will be brought to the surface as soon as possible."

by two o'clock yesterday afternoon (Wednesday) all had been recovered and were taken by ambulance to Ballochmyle Hospital to await identification by relatives last night.

From about four o'clock in the morning Rev. Chris. Jack (who had rushed through the night from Crieff), Rev. W. B. Stewart, and Rev. Father Conway had the sad task of conveying the news to the bereaved relatives.

The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh have expressed deep concern at the accident, and have sent a message of sympathy to the bereaved families.

All day yesterday enquiries were being received from anxious friends and relatives, and widespread sympathy has been expressed with Muirkirk folks in their heavy loss. It is the bereaved families who have the heaviest cross to bear, and our hearts go out to them in their great sorrow so suddenly thrust upon them.

The Scottish Parliamentary Labour Party have sent a telegram of sympathy to the NUM. local branch and the relatives of the deceased.

It was also announced yesterday that a public enquiry will be made into the cause of the accident.

The N.C.B. have announced that immediate compensation of £150 will be paid to the widows of the victims, with an additional allowance of £25 for each child under 18.

Several local functions and the weekend football match have all been cancelled.

Disaster Relief Fund Set Up

At a meeting in the Parish Church Manse last night, Kames Colliery, Muirkirk, Disaster Relief Fund was launched to make an appeal on a nationwide scale. It was decided to approach the N.C.B., N.U.M., and civic authorities for their support.

Officials of the Fund were elected as follows:—Chairman—Mr James Masterton; Vice-Chairman—Rev. Chris. Jack; Secretary—Mr James Auld; Treasurer—Mr T. J. Drife; Executive Committee—Rev. T. K. Conway, Rev. W. B. Stewart, Mrs M. Love, and Messrs G. M. Bain, Hugh Love, A. J. Glashan, and A. Moreland, other members to be added.

FUNERALS OF DISASTER VICTIMS

(From 28th November Issue)

The funerals of the 17 men who lost their lives as the result of the explosion at Kames Colliery took place to Muirkirk Cemetery on Friday and Saturday last in cold but sunny weather.

On Friday a crowd of about 1,000 mourners attended the first ten funerals, which commenced at 11 a.m. and continued at intervals until about 4 p.m. in the afternoon. Each funeral was preceded by a short family service at the homes of the

bereaved. Those buried were James Samson, William Smith, John McKean, Alex. Crawford, John Walker, Tom Casey Ronald Grant, Robert Smith, William Hendry, and James Marshall. Five of the services were taken by the Rev. Chris. Jack, three by the Rev. W. B. Stewart, and for the two members of the Christian Brethren—William Smith and James Marshall, the services were conducted by Mr Robertson, Cumnock, and Mr Tom Ferguson, Coatbridge, and Mr T. McLeod, Muirkirk, and Mr J. Cowan, Motherwell, respectively. Hundreds of wreaths and floral tributes surrounded the graves, many from fellow-workers in other parts of the Scottish coal-field.

The remaining seven funerals took place on Saturday, when the attendance of mourners was even larger than on Friday. The internments commenced shortly after 10 o'clock, and continued until fully one o'clock. The first funerals were those of John Dalziel and William McKay, conducted by the Rev. W. B. Stewart and Rev. Chris. Jack respectively, then followed four from St. Thomas' R.C. Chapel—the cousins Andrew Findlay and Donald McGarry, laid to rest in adjacent graves during the same service; Robert Lowe and Timothy Dillon. These services were conducted by the Rev. T. K. Conway of St. Thomas' The final funeral was that of Thomas Burnside, and was conducted by Rev. Chris. Jack.

The coffins with the Roman Catholic victims had rested overnight in the Chapel, and on Saturday morning prior to the funerals, and before a congregation which overflowed the Church, Requiem Mass was celebrated by the Right Rev. Joseph McGee, Bishop of Galloway. Also present were Father Moriarty and his assistant, Father Grogan, Dalmilling, Ayr; Father Duffy, Annbank; Father Quinn, Waterside; Father Lyon, Kilwinning; and Father Tom McCann, Ayr. From the Chapel a large concourse of mourners walked behind the hearses at each of the funerals.

On both days the new Parish Church Hall at Glasgow Road was opened as a canteen, and Woman's Guild members served tea—a gesture very much appreciated.

Many officials and well-known personalities attended the funerals on the two days. Along with Muirkirk folks from over a wide area, they came in hundreds of cars, and on Saturday special 'buses brought parties of fellow workers from neighbouring collieries.

Mr Emrys Hughes, M.P. for South Ayrshire, was among the mourners, and the National Coal Board Officials attending included Mr Ronald W. Parker, Chairman of the Scottish Division; Mr W. Smith, Deputy Chairman; Mr L. Milligan, Industrial Relations Director; Mr J. Rimington, Finance Director; Mr G. Kirkwood, Area General Manager; Mr A. Gardner, Area Production Manager; Mr L. Bourke, Staff Director; and Mr H. R. King, Reconstruction Director; and many others.

From the Scottish N.U.M. Mr Abe Moffat, President (who was accompanied by Mrs Moffat); Mr Alex. Moffat, Vice-President; Mr John Wood, Treasurer; and all the members of the Executive Committee were present; and well-known local mining personalities noted included Mr John Colthart (who was accompanied by Mrs Colthart), Professor George Hibberd, and Mr Henry Wilson.

Rev. Wm. McIntyre, Scottish Industrial Chaplain of the Church of Scotland, represented the Moderator of the Church of Scotland and the Home Board, and the Salvation Army was also represented.

Representing the Burgh of Cumnock were Provost John Weir and Town Clerk Mr R. D. Hunter, and there were others from many airts whose presence betokened sympathy with the bereaved families and with the village.

Many womenfolk also made their way to the Cemetery, and the scene over the two days is one which will remain for ever in the memory of all who took part.

There were very large congregations in the various places of worship on Sunday, when sympathetic reference was made to the disaster and prayers offered up for the bereaved.

The following Sunday a United Churches Memorial Service was held in the Parish Church. The Church was filled to capacity with a congregation of about 500 adults, and an overflow was accommodated in the E.U. Congregational Church at Wellwood Street, where by the use of a loud speaker system the worshippers were able to hear the service from the Parish Church.

RE-CONSTRUCTION AT KAMES COLLIERY

It seemed rather ironic, but prior to the disaster, a great transformation had taken place at Kames Colliery, and a scheme of modernisation, re-construction, and development had been going on for about three years, and was nearing completion when the tragedy happened at the Colliery.

New pithead towers were erected, as well as a new administrative office. A new electricity sub-station has been erected at the pihead, through which the current for Muirkirk village itself is now being supplied. The former canteen has been transformed into a medical centre, with a fully-trained nurse in attendance.

In March, the new canteen was opened. Built alongside the Baths building, it is most attractive and well equipped

66 YEARS A MINER

Mr Thomas Ross, formerly of Kirkgreen, was presented with a gold watch to mark 66 years service in local mines. Mr Ross, who was born at Hurlford in 1878, and came to Muirkirk when he was 11 years old, starting work the following year. He is still hale and hearty.

Mr Ross commenced work at the pithead at Lightshaw Pit at the age of 12 years. In 1916 he transferred to Kames Colliery, and worked there until his retiral in November of last year.

THE DISASTER VICTIMS

BURNSIDE.—Thomas Burnside, aged 58 years, beloved husband of Christina Wallace, 1 Burnside.

CASEY.—Thomas Casey, aged 18 years, beloved son of John and Robina Casey, 25 Colthart Drive.

CRAWFORD.—Alexander Crawford, aged 37 years, beloved husband of Elizabeth Stitt, 92 Pagan Walk.

DALZIEL.—John Dalziel, aged 34 years, beloved husband of Mary McBirnie, 43 Springhill Terrace.

DILLON.—Timothy Dillon, aged 44 years, beloved husband of Sophie Dalziel, 6 Shawknowe Avenue.

FINDLAY.—Andrew Findlay, aged 20 years, son of the late William Findlay and of Catherine Findlay, 19 Lapraik Avenue.

GRANT.—Ronald Grant, aged 20 years, son of the late William Grant and of Mrs Ruth Grant, 14 Colthart Drive.

HENDRY.—William Hendry, aged 30 years, son of the late Benjamin Hendry and of Mary Hendry, 8 Stitt Place.

LOWE.—Robert Lowe, aged 53 years, beloved husband of Annie O'Brien, 24 Hawkshaw Terrace.

MARSHALL.—James Marshall, aged 69 years, beloved husband of Margaret Pearson, 54 Springhill Terrace.

McGARRY.—Donald McGarry, aged 18 years, son of the late Patrick McGarry and of Mary McGarry, 10 Colthart Drive.

McKAY.—William McKay, aged 48 years, beloved husband of Janet Chapman, 19 Springhill Terrace.

McKEAN.—John McKean, aged 53 years, beloved husband of Jean Robb, 84 Henderson Drive.

SAMSON.—James Samson, aged 37 years, beloved husband of Jean Russell, 27 Millers Road.

SMITH.—William Smith, aged 47 years, of 52 Colthart Drive, son of the late Mr and Mrs Adam Smith

SMITH.—Robert Smith, aged 33 years, beloved husband of Elizabeth Murray, 17 Stoneyhill Avenue.

WALKER.—John Walker, aged 37 years, son of the late William Walker and of Annie Walker, 99 Henderson Drive.

CHAPTER FORTY

(1958)

The dawn of the new year in Muirkirk was not to be one of celebration, but one of coming to terms with the tragedy which befell the community with the Disaster at Kames Colliery. But life had to go on, and villagers bravely tried to continue with everyday chores and build a new future. But it was difficult, because there was hardly a person in Muirkirk who was not affected in some way with the awful event of last November. At the "Adviser" Office messages of sympathy and understanding continued to arrive, and it would be some time yet before village life resembled some sort of normality.

THE DISASTER ENQUIRY

(February 6th Issue)

The inquiry into the explosion in the West Mine at Kames Colliery on 19th November, in which 17 miners lost their lives, was commenced in Ayr County Buildings yesterday.

The inquiry is being heard by Sir Harold Roberts, Chief Inspector of Mines.

In evidence the section oversman on the day shift on the day of the disaster said he paid particular attention to safety, and in his inspection he usually looked for bad roofs, made sure that safety devices were used, and that the air conditions were kept up, but he admitted that he never carried a safety lamp, and he had never carried out a full inspection for safety in the West Mine. He had, however, seen one deputy in particular testing for firedamp, and he knew there was black damp in the west section known as Wylie's Slope. The place was fenced off and flushed out. Answering questions about five underground roads which were stopped up, the oversman said that four of them were not ventilated and the other one was ventilated until 11.30 a.m. on November 19. He had uncoupled an air fan in the West Mine on that day, intending to recouple it the following day, and the Under Manager had agreed with this decision. Several faults had been encountered in the working of the six-foot seam, he said, usually water faults, and several underground roads were sealed off, some because of roof falls. After the explosion some of the stoppings were found to have been destroyed. Special steps were taken to reduce coal dust in the mine by using wet sprays at loading points. The reason for uncoupling the fan was to get a scraper installed in Wylie's level for the night shift.

The statutory surveyor for the Colliery, who said the last quarterly survey before the accident was made on September 9, 1957, gave evidence with regard to faults, and when asked by Mr Abe Moffat if he knew whether plans for the dust zones in the Colliery had ever been submitted to the Inspector of Mines, he did not know, but agreed to a National Coal Board query, that Kames had been regarded as a safe,

or naked light pit. Two deputy oversmen said they had considered Kames a perfectly safe pit, and one of them said that on the day of the accident he had carried out a pre-shift test before the afternoon shift went on duty. He had tested two spots in the West Mine, but did not find any gas.

Four miners all said in evidence that they had never seen anyone testing for gas.

Eight of the fifty witnesses who have been cited appeared yesterday.

February 13th Issue

When the inquiry was resumed at Ayr on Thursday last, witnesses told their stories of the explosion on November 19, in which 17 miners lost their lives.

A shot-firer said that when he was at the coal face with other men there was a tremendous build-up of air pressure which he felt in his ear drums. It increased so much that he felt his head was about to burst, then it suddenly stopped and there was an inrush of air which rocked them to and fro, but there was no noise and no report of any kind.

A colliery deputy said that after the inspection of a fault in which explosives were used he found everything in order. He went to the engine house and while he was there, there was a sudden heavy pressure of air which pushed him and others against the wall. There was no noise and he thought there had been a fall somewhere, so they ran along the haulage road, where they met fumes and smoke, but were able to carry on. When they reached the pony road two men were lying and a deputy was attending to them. He spoke to the one who was least injured, but the man could tell him nothing. He arranged for emergency calls to go out, and took another workman into the 6-ft. intake airway and down 30 feet to the pony road, but could not get through for the smoke. They had attempted to get to another road, but had to retrace their steps. The road was in a very bad condition, but there was no stoppage. It must have been blown out, but the atmosphere was very unhealthy. Two bodies were lying in the road. He made his way back to the main entrance and met the rescue brigade coming in.

The witness, in reply to a question, said he always carried a safety lamp and went into every place in the Section, and he had made a test for black damp the day before the explosion. The lamp went out and he had to re-light it. He had made a test for fire-damp on the Friday before the explosion, and he had found fire-damp at Wylie's Stoop the week before the accident. In reply to a question by Mr Abe Moffat, for the NUM., the witness agreed the miners were producing coal merely by blasting it out and that shot-firing was rather excessive.

A coalface worker, in answer to another question by Mr Moffat, said that he had never seen a deputy testing for gas in his place, nor did the deputies always carry their flame safety lamps on pre-shift inspections. After the explosion he managed to get 100 feet down the intake level in an attempt to reach the bottom of the pit, but was forced to return because of billowing smoke.

The safety officer at the pit, asked by Mr Moffat if it was correct that in February,

said he did not know it was inflammable gas. He had not reported it, but had talked 1957, gas was found in the intake airway, said he had not heard of it. Mr Moffat said that according to the record there were also traces of gas on April 15 and 20. The safety officer, asked about taking samples of coal-dust gas, admitted that he had no special training, but said it was a naked light pit and "gey near as safe as outside."

Flame caused by Gas

On Friday a coalface worker described an incident in the Colliery in which a flame caused by gas was observed in a shot-hole. He said he had seen a blue flame between the stemming of the charge and the entrance to the hole during a shot-firing operation.

Asked by Mr G. C. Emslie, Q.C. (for the N.C.B.), witness agreed that this had been a matter of great importance, but when Mr Emslie suggested that, for some reason or other, it had been kept secret by him and his mates, he said he didn't think it had been kept secret. He had told his mates about it, and the following day showed a deputy what had happened.

The deputy had denied having received a report about the incident.

Another coal-face worker, who was with the previous witness during the shot-firing incident, said it was the first occasion he had ever encountered gas. He had not reported it, but had talked about it to the men in the section. The under-manager said he had never heard of gas being lit in the pit, nor had he heard of any report of such being received.

Died Instantly

The senior pathologist at Ballochmyle Hospital said that most of the 17 victims of the explosion had died instantly. His post mortem examination showed asphyxia in all cases with saturation from carbon monoxide varying between 10 and 80 per cent. In some cases death was due to pure asphyxiation. Some of the men had severe burning injuries and fractures.

Fire Damp

On Saturday Mr Turner, Colliery Manager at Kames, asked if he could give any explanation of the cause of the accident, said that in a broad way he felt that it was fire-damp that had exploded. He had no idea where the fire-damp had ignited, and said there was no physical signs of violence in the pit except two falls near a working called Casagranda's Level. He did not think there had been any ignition of coal dust.

In his evidence the Manager said he had been ill since August 26 and only returned home from hospital on November 18. On the day of the accident he was still convalescing, his personal supervision having ended on August 28. He had endeavoured to the best of his ability to see that deputies carried their safety lamps, and he was of the firm belief that they did carry them. During the statutory inspec

tions he had never seen a deputy without a safety lamp. In reply to a question by Mr Moffat, Mr Turner said he did not think there was any urgent need for the suppression of coal dust because the places were damp, and he thought the position had remained unchanged.

Also on the question of ventilation, Mr Hill, the Under-Manager, said that one of the workings, Wylie's Level, was not ventilated. He also mentioned several other places which, he said, did not require ventilation because they were kept for a sump for water. They were waste sections and were to be fenced off. He said he saw nothing wrong with the system of ventilation.

The Under-Manager denied he had been consulted about the uncoupling of a fan in the pit on the day of the explosion.

On Monday, Mr Richard Evans, Inspector of Mines, Ayrshire District, in reply to questions, said he thought the explosion had been of fire-damp, which served as a tinder for an explosion of coal dust. There was evidence of coking that he had not previously found. It was not normally associated with a fire-damp explosion, and the only thing he could think of was a naked light. The power had been cut off below the working, Wylie's crosscut, at the time, so that electricity could be ruled out. The explosion could have been caused by someone in the area innocently lighting his pipe.

Earlier, Mr Peter Milligan, Deputy Production Manager, and formerly Group Manager of Muirkirk Area, said he was satisfied that every step was taken to recover anyone who was alive. Kames Colliery had for years been considered as an experimental ground for explosives work, and following the success of these experiments it was decided, with the permission of the Mines Inspectorate, to use detonators for shot firing. With the use of detonators there were less fumes, less concussion, less dust and more coal. He agreed that the existence of coal dust in a pit was a serious matter, and the best precaution was to take samples of the dust. Asked to explain why no steps were taken in the West Section, he said from information he had received the Manager was satisfied that it was not necessary. To another question suggesting that he should try to do something himself to guarantee that on all roads dust samples were taken whether he knew that dust was there or not, witness replied in the affirmative. In his opinion the explosion was caused by fire-damp, but from where he could not say, except that it came from somewhere in the strata.

Questions in similar vein were put to Area Production Manager, Mr A. Gardiner, who agreed it was odd that a deputy should make an examination for gas when all around him men were smoking cigarettes and pipes and lighting matches.

On Tuesday Professor Poole, eminent Professor of Mining at Durham University, said in his opinion electricity and shot-firing could be eliminated as the cause of the explosion, which left smoking. He criticised the method of shot-firing at Kames, particularly the practice of stemming the shots with coal dust, which was very explosive. He thought there should be no naked light collieries at all, except perhaps a few shallow mines which could possibly be exempted. On the question of ventilation, he also criticised the arrangements in the West Mine, and said there was a bad leakage of air at the shaft top.

Dr Tideswell, Safety of Mines Establishment, Sheffield and Buxton, considered that the explosion was started by gas and that gas flame played an incidental part in its development. But while it was extended by gas, it was extended for the greater part by coal dust. He said that on the night of the explosion the men were working in clean, fresh air, but he presumed it was natural, under the circumstances, for the men to have run for safety to the main roadway, where they would be overcome by asphyxia.

Professor George Hibberd, of the Dixon Chair of Mining, Glasgow University, and Professor of Mining, Royal College of Science and Technology, Glasgow, said in evidence that he thought the ventilation system at Kames was adequate. He did not think the explosion was propagated by coal dust. His opinion was based on observations particularly in the main dook. Asked if, assuming there had been no participation of coal dust at all, what in his opinion would have been the extent of the fire-damp explosion, Professor Hibberd said he did not think there would have been any difference really. He thought the flame path would have been the same.

The inquiry was concluded yesterday, and a report will be given in next week's issue.

INQUIRY CONCLUDED

(February 20 Issue)

On the final day of the inquiry at Ayr on Wednesday of last week, the Commissioner heard the submissions of the agents representing different interests in the mining industry, and said he would prepare a report as soon as possible and would do his best to make recommendations which, if observed, might help the industry.

Mr Walter Widdas, Scottish Divisional Inspector of Mines, said that the heating had proved that immunity from inflammable gas in the past was no reason for assuming that there would never be inflammable gas in the future. It was vital to safety that proper inspections for gas should be made at all times, and it was recognised that flame safety lamps were the best detectors of fire damp and black

damp. The way to prevent the danger of explosions was to have a supply of large quantities of air to all working places, and to stop off wastes efficiently so as to ensure that at no time could the dangerous emission of inflammable gas occur.

Mr Abe Moffat, President of the Scottish Area of the National Union of Mineworkers (who represented the N.U.M.), said that in all his long experience in the mining industry he had never witnessed so many breaches of Coal Mines Act and regulations as there were at Kames. Playing about with human lives in that way could not be tolerated any longer, and he hoped that such conduct would be condemned and steps taken immediately to stop such practices at Kames Colliery.

Mr Moffat claimed that there had been a complete disregard of elementary safety precautions on the part of the management, and it was deplorable to think that statements had been made by deputies and officials at the Colliery on the failure to carry safety lamps for tests for fire damp.

Mr Moffat said that when a miner committed a breach of the Coal Mines Act he was usually prosecuted or dismissed immediately. The Miners' Union, to their credit, had never defended a miner in court when he was charged with a breach of the Act. Was the same treatment meted out to others in the mining industry who had an even greater responsibility than miners to ensure that regulations were carried out in the interests of safety? He was afraid quite the opposite was the case. Everything was done to defend them in court, and in place of prosecution or dismissal in certain cases we found they were actually promoted.

Mr G. Emslie, Q.C. for the N.C.B., said it seemed to him that no breaches of Statutory duty, either under the Act or regulations, had been established. There had not been the slightest evidence to suggest that at any time before the accident there was any explosive or ignition of gas anywhere, even of a minor nature, in the Colliery.

On the day of the accident air samples were taken. There was no duty upon the management to take these air samples, and it was very praiseworthy that these additional precautions had been taken. These air samples showed no methane whatever in the atmosphere. When precisely gas began to enter the mine was unknown, but it must have preceded the accident by a comparatively short time.

Mr A. S. Lockhart, Ayr, who represented the National Association of Colliery Managers and the British Association of Colliery Management, submitted that there was no evidence that any manager was not doing his duty properly, was forgetting, or slacking. The management made proper supervision. He said that there was an adequate system of ventilation and that effective measures were taken to deal with coal dust. When the curtain finally fell on the tragic night of November 19 and the dust finally settled the cause of this accident would forever be shrouded in mystery.

Mr Barth Walsh, secretary of the National Association of Colliery Oversmen, Deputies and Shotfirers, suggested that the Ministry of Power should be recommended to increase the staff of inspectors in the Ayrshire district, and that he should not observe the economies which appeared to be the rule of the present Government.

The Scottish Area of the N.U.M. was represented by Mr Alex. Moffat, Vice-President, and Mr John Wood, General Secretary.

CHIEF INSPECTOR'S REPORT

(July 17 Issue)

In his report, published last week, on the disaster at Kames Colliery on November 19, 1957, when 17 miners were killed and 12 injured, Sir Harold Roberts, Chief Inspector of Mines, urges that the National Coal Board should forthwith prohibit below ground the presence of naked flame in any form.

According to the report, the explosion was originated by a workman striking a match in order to smoke, which he was quite entitled to do in what had always been regarded as a "safe" mine, but the inescapable conclusion from the disaster was that "no coal mine can be regarded as immune from the danger of explosion."

The accident at Kames was the worst for six years. The pit was considered so safe that it had been used for experimental blasting practice.

After full consideration of the evidence given and the submissions made at the inquiry, Sir Harold had reached the conclusion that a mixture of firedamp and air near the face of an unventilated heading in the Six Feet Section of the West Mine Area of the Colliery had been ignited by a match; that this caused an explosion sufficiently violent to raise an inflammable cloud of coal dust; and that the explosion continued thereafter as a coal dust explosion.

Primary Cause of Explosion

The primary cause of the explosion was failure to ventilate and to make thorough inspections for gas in the heading.

The deputies had frankly admitted that they had rarely carried flame safety lamps during their general inspections, and by no means regularly during their pre-shift inspections. "I have grave doubts whether, even when they carried them, they made thorough tests for firedamp as they were required to do," states the report.

"The attitude of the deputies was epitomized by one of them, who said in evidence, 'I never dreamed about gas.' It must be said, however, that they were not alone in this respect; their attitude was reflected in the failure of the management to observe good ventilation practice and to take effective measures against coal dust, in spite of the high volatile content of the coal."

The Chief Inspector adds that he is satisfied that these failures were not due in any way to the mine being, at the time of the explosion, in the charge of a temporary manager.

Clearly the safety standards at the mine, at least as regards the risk of explosion, were not of a very high order. Having said that, however, it would be quite unrealistic not to recognise that most mining men would have thought the mine immune

from such risk because of the general dampness of the roads and the fact that firedamp was unknown in any practical sense.

No Coal Mine Immune

But no coal mine could be regarded as immune, and proper precautions must be taken at all times, even if in the minds of some people they were, in the popular phrase of the day, just "bull."

Sir Harold was satisfied from the evidence that the explosion originated near the face of the north-westerly extension of Casagrande's Level, which for four days had neither been ventilated nor thoroughly inspected; that when two workmen went into it to see what work might be necessary, one of them struck a match, in order to smoke, which he was entitled to do, and that this originated firedamp.

Kames workings were thought to be so damp that the coal dust present could not be raised into an explosive cloud. Nobody had ever contemplated the possibility of an explosion, naturally enough, workmen were allowed to smoke.

Such was the mistaken feeling of immunity that simple precautions were not observed. The ventilation, particularly of blind ends, was not what it should have been, the sampling of the road dust and the application of stone dust were inadequate, and the statutory inspections for gas were either ignored altogether or made in a most perfunctory manner.

It was the tragically simple story of a combination of errors and misjudgments not of great danger individually but together leading to disaster—a story paralleled time and time again in mining history, and far too frequently in the past few years.

The inescapable conclusion was that no coal mine could be regarded as immune from the danger of an explosion, and he therefore recommended that the National Coal Board should, as a matter of policy, forthwith prohibit below ground the presence of naked flame in any form, and by the 31st December, 1960 (the date from which "mixed light" mines are prohibited) make all their mines safety lamp mines in every sense.

Co-operation Essential

Such a step, to be fully effective, would need the co-operation of the workmen, but he was confident that the National Union of Mineworkers would give it their full support.

Of regulations regarding inflammable dust, the report says that these must be given the most liberal interpretation. Managers must ensure full compliance with the requirements about dust suppression and the use of incombustible dust.

Rescue Work

With regard to rescue teams, the report comments that although it was known at the surface by 7.50 p.m. that an explosion had occurred, it was not until 11.15 p.m. that the first rescue brigade left the fresh air base to explore the affected area.

In this instance the delay did not have the slightest effect upon the possibility of saving life, but in other circumstances it might have done. Where permanent rescue corps were maintained it was possible to get a brigade to the scene much more quickly, and he recommended that this system should be extended to all central rescue stations, without reducing the present strength of the mine brigades.

The primary responsibility for ensuring that statutory requirements were complied with must always rest with the manager, but he could not discharge that responsibility effectively without the active co-operation of everybody in the industry. This matter was being investigated by a sub-committee of the Safety and Health Committee of the Coal Industry Consultative Council, and he had great hopes that the results would go a long way towards achieving that co-operation, but there must be between the manager and the deputies a two-way system of communication of a more effective kind.

Tribute

The report also pays tribute to those persons who, although in comparative safety when the explosion occurred, had risked their lives to do what they could to help their workmates.

DISASTER RELIEF FUND

The Relief Fund set up after the Kames Colliery Disaster was officially closed in April, when the Committee reported that the magnificent total of £39,173 had been reached, and all who in any way had contributed to the success of the fund were heartily thanked.

It is not possible to estimate the number of individual donors, since collieries, trade unions, and a number of townships and communities organised and consolidated their collections, but the number of individual donations sent direct to the Treasurer was over 1,500. Over 700 people subscribed to the Muirkirk door-to-door collections, and similar collections were made in neighbouring towns and villages. Lists were placed on the counters of all Banks in Scotland for four weeks in November-December, and it is estimated that over 11,000 persons contributed by this means, and £17,728.10s 11d was received from these lists.

All donations of £1 and over, and all donations sent direct, were acknowledged where the donors had supplied a name and address. Over 2,500 acknowledgements were prepared and posted, and several more have been handed out. Correspondence with the Press, B.B.C. and I.T.V., with donors and organisers of special efforts and civic heads has involved the sending of about 400 letters. The biggest incoming mail was on 25th November—The Monday following the broadcast appeal of Friday, the 22nd—when 181 donations were received. On the 26th the number was 137. Scarcely a day passed from then until the end of March without something coming in for the Fund. Up to Mid-January it was unusual if the day's total was not in three figures.

Personal donations have ranged from 6d to £50. Four persons each sent £50 to the Fund, two of whom gave no name, and address. Contributions have come from

as far as America, Canada, Venezuela and Australia, and from various other places abroad. In this country they have arrived from Shetland in the North and from Jersey in the South. The donors were from all walks of life, earls and admirals, old age pensioners and schoolchildren.

So far as can be ascertained, the amount contributed by the people of Muirkirk to this generous effort was £2,362 0s 9d, a very fine total for a small community. This does not take into account the amount contributed by them through the raffle, for which a beautiful television was gifted by Mr Alex. Little and a radio set by Ultra, and from which a very considerable sum was raised.

We understand that annuities have been bought which will provide the widows of the disaster victims with an allowance of £13 a month during their life time, as well as 10s per week for each child under 16 years of age. Each child will also receive £52 10s worth of Savings Certificates, and the balance left will be divided among the widows to give them not less than a further £40.

It is very gratifying indeed that such a grand response has been made to the appeals for The Fund, and we should also never forget our debt to the officials and Committee for a grand job well done.

(Concluded)

KAMES COLLIERY, AFTER RECONSTRUCTION, 1960



KAMES COLLIERY DISASTER

culled from the files of

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by

JAMES TAYLOR