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## SHIREBROOK CAGE DISASTER

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The Adjourned Enquiry

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Today's Proceedings

SHIREBROOK, Thursday

As reported in last week's issue of the "Chronicle" nothing beyond the evidence of identification was taken at the inquiry held at the Colliery Offices last Thursday morning. It will be remembered that the inquest was adjourned on the application of Mr. W. E. Harvey, M.P. who said that they desired that a most searching inquiry should take place, as it was the intention of the Derbyshire Miners' Association and the Miners' Federation of Great Britain to be represented by counsel at the adjourned inquiry. He did not want any advantage over and above what was allowed anybody else concerned. They had no other object in view in deciding upon this question but to ascertain that everything had been done to prevent loss of life.

Mr Sanders, who represented the Colliery Company, said so far as they were concerned they were ready to go on at that moment, but said his clients desired to give Mr Harvey the fullest opportunity to make every possible enquiry and investigation, and they were desirous to assist him and the coroner and jury and all concerned to the fullest extent in clearing up the cause of the lamentable accident. It was an accident which had given his clients grave concern and they were prepared to do, as they had done, all in their power to alleviate the pain and suffering caused by it. He readily acquiesced in Mr Harvey's request. Other representatives having concurred, the application was granted.

The resumed inquest was held at the Victoria Hotel, Shirebrook, this (Thursday) morning.

### THE JURY

was composed as follows:- Amos Smith, Harold Woods (foreman), George Fletcher, John Henry Kelsall, Henry C Martin, George Parnham, Frederick Shouhut, Edmund Ball, Henry Yarnham, W. Bruster, Walter Limbert.

Inspector Nutthall; and Police - sergeant Grice had the arrangements in hand.

Dr A. Green, Coroner for the Hundred of Scarsdale, conducted the enquiry. There were also present Mr A. H. Stokes, Mr Hepplewhite, H.M. Inspectors of Mines; Mr H. A. Sanders,

Solicitor, Chesterfield, representing the Colliery Co.; Mr W. B. Hextall, barrister, London, instructed by Mr Elliott Smith, representing the manager; Mr John Wadsworth, M. P., general secretary of the Yorkshire Miners' Association and Mr T. E. Richards, M. P., representing the Miners' Federation of Great Britain; Sir William Clegg, representing the relatives of the deceased; Mr W. E. Harvey, M.P., and Mr Barnet Kenyon, representing the Derbyshire Miners' Association; Mr. W. Hay, general manager and agent; Mr Lewis Olden Roberts, certified manager of the colliery; Mr. T. E. Ellison, instructed by Mr. A. Muir Wilson, Sheffield, representing the National Amalgamated Union of Labour; Mr G. J. Binns, on behalf of the Coalminers' Indemnity Association.

Sir William Clegg, prior to evidence being taken, said that there were extensive rumours afloat with regard to the inefficiency of some of the workings of the colliery. As to whether those rumours were well founded, he had no knowledge at present, but since the rumours had been spread abroad it was only right in the interests of the miners that these reports should be tested to ascertain whether they were true or not. He would no doubt ask some very searching questions, but he did not wish it to be understood that he believed the reports, his only motive being to test the truth or otherwise of them. With permission he should like to have one or two men whose names had been given to him in the witness box. Their names were: Sam Hughes, shaft examiner; a man named Whitehead, banksman; and a man named Gibson. He also asked for the report books for the last three years.

In reply, Mr Hextall said he was present to represent the officials of the Colliery concerned. Their names were William Hay, the general manager and agent; Lewis Olden Roberts, certified manager; Samuel Clarke, the engine-wright; and Joseph Belcher, shaft man. With reference to Sir William's statement, Mr. Hextall said he had no doubt whatever that a perfect answer would be given to any questions which might arise, and that the rumours Sir William had referred to would undoubtedly be set at rest before the inquiry closed.

Mr Harold Woods was appointed foreman of the jury, and the Coroner asked if any of the jury were directly or indirectly having pay from the Colliery Co. An answer in the negative having been given.

The first witness called was Enos Phillips, stallman, of 205 Station Road, one of the men on the cage at the time of the accident. On the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> ult., he took his place on the cage of the No 2 shaft at the Shirebrook Colliery at about twenty minutes to six, that being the sixth draw that morning. There were fourteen men on the cage when the signal was given for it to be lowered. The cage was fitted at each end with a bar, which was placed in position by the banksman. The shaft was about 540 yards in depth. After travelling for some distance witness noticed the cage "fire up" at the conductor, as if it was "sluffing". The sparks caused by the friction lighted up the whole shaft. The chair then tilted up at one corner, and in that position the chair travelled a distance of a further hundred yards, keeping in about the same position all the time. The cage steadied down a little, but at no time came to a thorough standstill. The "sluffed" conductor then broke, causing the cage to tilt at the opposite corner, owing to the other corner being liberated. This threw all of the occupants down on to the floor of the cage, putting out all their lights. After the

breaking of the conductor the cage descended very rapidly for about a hundred yards, and then came to a standstill. They were then gradually lowered to the bottom and taken out. They were not aware that any of their mates had fallen out of the cage. Several of the men, including Richard Merriman, had to be lifted off the cage, and they were all considerably shaken. There were no means of communicating with those on top whilst the cage was descending the shaft. Whilst they were suspended they could hear the men at the bottom of the mine shouting, as the sound came with the air. During the four years witness had worked at the pit he had not known of any similar incident, and he had gone down the No. 2 shaft more than the other. He had never known of any mishaps with the cage before this, and he had never had to complain of the speed at which the cage was lowered.

Mr. Stokes: Is the pit top open after the cage leaves, or is it covered with a bonnet? – *No.* If there was any chance of hearing, the banksman at the top would hear any shouting? – *Yes, if the cage was not too far down.*

Was there any engine going in the shaft at the time? – *I believe the pump was going. That would make a noise, wouldn't it?* – *Yes, a little, from the exhaust.*

Were both bars in position before the cage started to go down? – *I believe so.*

Can you say whether they were both on when you got to the bottom? – *I could not say; we all came off at one end of the cage, and the bars were removed to get us off.*

Do you consider the bars used are sufficient for the protection of the men riding in the cage? – *I think they might be amended. The cage is four feet high, and if there was a door of sheet iron from the same height, made to open inwardly, I think the men would have been prevented from falling out.*

Mr Stokes: That is just why I am putting it to you.

Sir William Clegg: Have you heard any complaints from the men as to the speed they were either lowered down or brought up? – *No. I have heard them talk at times about the cage catching a little.*

When was the last time you heard? – *About two or three months ago.*

Was that in going down? – *Yes, sir.*

Is that rather a common occurrence? – *No, sir: Not that I am aware of.*

Do you go down swiftly as a rule? – *Yes, sir of a nice speed.*

And it catches occasionally at the side of the cage? – *Yes.*

Have you seen sparks frequently? – *No.*

Mr Stokes: Did he say that he knew of cages catching?

Sir William Clegg: Yes, he says so.

Sir William Clegg (to witness): Have you seen the sparks flying before? – *No.*

When you went on the cage on the morning of the accident, did you in any way notice the condition of the guide rope and conductors on your cage? – *No.*

You can't tell whether or not the conductors and guide ropes were in proper condition? – *No, sir, I have told you all I can recollect, I think.*

You have been asked whether you heard or knew about any accident through the cage catching before? – *I have not heard.*

Do you know a man named French? – *Not to my recollection.*

Have you heard that about 12 months ago a man was in the cage and the rope broke, and he was hanging there for some time.

Mr Stokes: I think you will have direct evidence of that presently.

Sir William Clegg: If you know that, I am quite satisfied.

Have you any evidence about an accident about 2½ years ago, when the conductor snapped in two near the pit bottom, and there was one man in it.

Mr Stokes replied in the affirmative.

Sir William Clegg: If you have got that, we won't bother this man any further about that now. You said you were hung in the shaft for two hours. You were waiting to be lowered? – *Yes*.

Can you give any reason why you were kept all that time in that perilous condition? - *No. sir.*

You were in the dark? - *Yes.*

Could you feel or hear anything was being done to get you down more quickly? – *We didn't know what they were doing, but we could hear some hammering, and I thought they were taking the old broken conductor down.*

The Coroner: We may take it that you were got out of your difficult position as soon as it was possible to do so? *Yes, sir, I think so.*

Mr. Hextall, in reply to the Coroner, said that he did not think it was necessary for him to ask any questions at this stage.

George Trantham, 13 Manvers Street, Shirebrook, said he was an onsetter at the Shirebrook Colliery. He was standing at the pit bottom at the time of the accident when heard an unusual noise in the shaft. The noise was like the rubbing of the cage against the side of the shaft. The banksman had signalled and the witness had signalled back. After hearing the noise witness saw one body drop down the shaft. In about a second another fell, and then a third. He proposed to signal with the rapper, and the rope conductor fell. Witness could not say what it was. There was no one standing at the pit bottom with witness at the time. The men who had left the cage from the previous run were walking away. A number of men had come to the spot some time afterward. Witness had been acting as onsetter a few days. His regular work was to lower tubs down into the bottom. There were a lot of men at the bottom of the shaft some time afterwards.

Mr Stokes: One of the bodies came down to the bottom of the shaft before the rope came.

Mr Stokes: Where was the regular onsetter?

Witness: He had been conveyed to hospital, having been an accident about three o'clock in the morning.

Mr. Stokes: Were you in the pit at the time?

Witness: *Yes*

Mr. Stokes: What was the accident?

Witness: There was a "run of coal" and the onsetter was trying to turn the points when a train turned over and injured him.

Mr Stokes: Where was the onsetter for No. 2 shaft?

Witness: There was no onsetter for No. 2 at that time.

Mr Stokes: In the morning when men are being let down, who is the onsetter at No. 2?

Witness: The man who happened the accident. He goes to No. 2 to receive the men coming down No. 2 after he has done turning coal up No. 1.

Mr Stokes: Who instructed you to act as onsetter that morning?

Witness: Jonas Smith

By Sir Wm Clegg: Witness said he had acted as occasional onsetter and was working in that capacity on the previous Monday. He had acted as onsetter about 20 times in twelve months.

Sir Wm Clegg: During the time you have acted as onsetter, have you had any complaints from any of the men as to the cage going unsteadily, or about it catching? – *No, everything had gone alright up to the accident.*

We are told the cage came down twice before that morning; did you at all examine the cage to see if everything was right; it is not part of your duty, but did you do it? – *No.*

Samuel Clark, the enginewright, said that he heard of the accident as he was going to work. It was the duty of the blacksmith and shaftsmen to make examinations daily and report to him. These reports were entered up in the report-book, which was produced.

The report-book showed that the conductors were reported as “sound” each day of the week preceding the accident. The last time the conductors were examined, continued witness, was the day preceding the accident, between six and eight in the morning, and had all gone right they would have been examined during the same hours on the morning of the accident. The conductor ran in “cups”, and fitted fairly closely. The result was that there was a certain amount of friction, which they endeavoured to check as much as possible by rope grease. This, however, was not very effective, as after the cage had been up and down once or twice it was no better than before the lubricant was applied, owing to the steam in the shaft. The wet shaft, however, acted as a sort of lubricant.

As soon as witness found that he could render no assistance at the engine house, he went straight down the other shaft. When he got to the pit bottom they were getting the last body out from amongst the conductor, which had fallen to the bottom. The other two bodies had been removed. He could see that the fallen conductor had “sluffed.”

The “sluffed” conductor was here produced and was mute evidence of the shaking received by the occupants of the cage. Continuing his evidence witness said that they then shouted to the men on the cage who replied that they were ready to be lowered. The men had been suspended for about 1¾ hours. He saw the cage when it was lowered to the bottom. The first thing he noticed was that one bar was down. He formed the opinion straight away that the accident was due to the “sluffing” of the conductor. It was the old conductor.

The Coroner: Of your own knowledge do you know that these “sluffing” accidents often occur? – *They don't often occur, but its not a rare thing.*

Witness then stated that after the accident he had examined and measured the conductor. He discovered that it had worn nearly half an inch. Originally the rope was 1¾ of an inch in diameter and after the accident the average diameter was fifteen-sixteenths of an inch.

The Coroner: Previous to discovering this did you anticipate that the conductor had worn as much as that? – *Yes, sir, about that.*

Did you propose to replace it? – *We had two conductors underground ready to replace.* Witness added that during the time he had been at the colliery they had never been without one conductor to replace if necessary.

In answer to further questions, witness stated that they were probably going to re-arrange the conductors in this shaft.

Did you think it was still safe? – *Yes, sir, for the work we had to do with it.*

Do you mean that you had less to do with it in this shaft than at any other shaft? – *Yes, sir.*

Is there less coal taken up and down? – *There was no coal taken up. Only a part of the men and the timber.*

Would you consider the work in this shaft was light? – *Yes, sir.*

And that the conductor could have borne it? – *Yes, sir.*

The Coroner said that he thought it would be best to adjourn for lunch at this stage.

Mr Stokes was of the same opinion.

Sir Wm. Clegg concurred. He said that it was quite evident that this witness was a most important one, and it was no use commencing any cross examination before the adjournment.

Accordingly, the proceedings were adjourned at a quarter to two for the lunch interval of 30 minutes.

On resuming the inquiry the Coroner intimated that several gentlemen wished to get away by train in the evening, and he suggested that the proceedings be adjourned at four o'clock, and it was decided that the adjourned inquiry be held on Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> inst.

Mr Stokes, cross-examined Clark with reference to the history of the conductors. In October, 1905, a man was being drawn out of the pit in the opposite cage to that where the accident occurred, when one of the conductors broke about 100 yards from the pit bottom. Witness also broke one of the conductors about three years ago. In June 1906, the chain attached to the cage got twisted round one of the conductors, and the result was that the conductor was bent.

Mr Stokes: Is the report of that in the report book? – *Yes, sir.*

Continuing, witness said that the conductor in No. 1 shaft had been in the shaft ever since witness had been employed at the colliery. He anticipated that they had been in ever since the colliery was commenced. All the conductors in No. 2 shaft had been renewed except that which broke. No. 2 shaft was only used for turning men and timber, and that not in full quantity, but only partially.

Witness had been engaged for 14 years as an enginewright, and he considered that with ordinary wear and with greasing a dry shaft conductor should last for about 20 years. No. 1 shaft was a downcast shaft, and was very dry, whilst No. 2 shaft was an upcast shaft, and was very wet.

Mr Stokes: Don't you consider it part of your duty to occasionally colter these conductors? – *Yes, sir and I did it some time ago.*

Mr Stokes: I put it to you that at least half of the wire was done away by internal corrosion? – *A good part of it.*

Witness considered that the conductor was of remarkably good material. Where the break occurred the conductor was much thicker than at some other parts.

Mr Stokes: I put it to you that the cause of the wire giving way was not the ropes being worn through but the brase or weld of the rope? – *It looks like it.*

Mr Hextall: You mean in the original manufacture of the rope, Mr Stokes?

Mr Hextall pointed out that he himself understood that was the way Mr Stokes meant it, but he was afraid that in the way it was put some of the jury would think there had been some brazing or something done on the premises of the colliery, whereas he (Mr Hextall) understood Mr Stokes meant in the manufacture, perhaps a hundred miles away.

Mr Stokes concurred with Mr Hextall.

PROCEEDING