

The Mansfield Chronicle, Friday 19th April 1907

(Transcribed 13 May 1998 by Rosalyn Pursglove from copies taken from Microfilm archives at Mansfield Library)

The Shirebrook Cage Accident

Conclusion of the Inquest

Comprehensive Recommendations by the Jury

For the second time the adjourned inquest with reference to the colliery disaster at Shirebrook was resumed at the Victoria Hotel on Tuesday. The cage accident occurred on March 26th and three men were killed by falling to the bottom of the shaft. Dr Green was the Coroner and there were also in attendance: Mr. Hepplewhite (inspector of mines), Messrs. W. E. Harvey, M.P., and B. Kenyon (Derbyshire Miners' Association), Mr. W. B. Hextall (barrister) for the Company and managing director; and Sir W Clegg (Sheffield) , for friends of the deceased and the Miners' Federation; Mr. S. W. Rowarth (secretary of the Notts. and Derbyshire Enginemen's and Firemen's Union), and Mr. Ellison (barrister) for the National Amalgamated Union of Labour, and also representing Joe Belcher, and Mr. T. Richards, M.P.

It will be remembered that Enos Phillips, a collier, who was in the cage when it tipped up, gave a graphic account of the terrible experience in mid-air, and of how the survivors saved their lives by clinging to the guards of the cage. The narrative was taken up by George Trentham on – setter, who gave as to the three bodies being hurled down the shaft and dashed to pieces almost at his feet. He touched the rapper. Giving the signal to stop the cage and then rushed frenziedly away in a pardonable panic. Samuel Clarke, engine-wright, was subjected to severe cross-examination as to the state of the conductors at the time of the accident, and as to what precautions were taken to ensure the safety of the men. There was stringent enquiry into the regularity of examinations of the cage and conductors, and witness denied that the men had complained that the cage was unsafe. At this point the enquiry was adjourned until this week.

John Belcher, shaftsman, of 26 Merchant Street, Shirebrook, was the first witness on Tuesday. He said he was on duty at the time of the accident, and it was his duty to examine the shaft daily, and make a report in a book that the enginewright receive. He examined the shaft the morning before the accident , between 7 and 8 o'clock. It consisted of an examination of the conductor, which usually took from twenty minutes to half an hour, or sometimes three quarters. His method was to pass up and down the shaft standing in the cage. He had been a shaftsman at the colliery about 21 months, but had worked in the shaft since he was 15, and had been a properly certified shaftsman for twenty years. He had only measured the conductors twice, but had seen Clarke measure them with calipers several times. Witness usually trusted to his hands, which was sufficient to enable him to judge of their condition. He and Mr. Clarke usually examined the conductors together, and on an average, once a week. He knew the conductor was

worn when he first came. He was at the colliery when two conductors were replaced, but he was convinced that the third was safe, although it was worn to an inch in diameter. At the last examination he made, he found nothing unusual in the conductors or the shaft.

He had knowledge of conductors “sluffing” before, as this one had done, but it had always occurred in coal shafts. He was not speaking of Shirebrook when he mentioned this fact, but of pits in general. It was not his duty to examine the cups of the cage, this being done by another official named Page, who was known as “chair examiner”. He considered this shaft to be rather a wet one, there being two pumps working in it, and producing a good deal of steam. He was at the bottom of the shaft soon after the accident and saw the deceased bodies but did not know the names of the men. Respecting the breaking of the conductor, he agreed with the other witnesses that it broke at a braze or weld. The conductors had worn better in No. 1 shaft than No. 2, because the latter was wetter and warmer.

Mr. Hepplewhite: Did you gauge this particular conductor when you first started in the shaft? – No.

How long after? – About a month.

What size was it then? – I can’t say. I did not keep a record.

Had it depreciated much since the first time you measured it and the last? – Not a great deal.

Continuing witness said No. 2 shaft was bad for oil, and it was practically no use lubricating the conductors. Had the weld in the conductor parted on the cage side of the conductor on the morning of the last examination before the accident, he would have seen it.

Sir Wm Clegg: Are you of the opinion that three-quarters of an hour is a sufficient time to thoroughly examine those things which comprise your duty? Yes, I have to examine the conductors and guides, top and head gear. The cage is examined by someone else.

How many conductors have you to examine? – Six.

How many do you examine at a time? - One.

It takes you at the outside three-quarters of an hour to make your examination? – Yes.

That means you have to examine 24 yards every minute if you do it in three-quarters of an hour. Do you think travelling at that rate you can make an efficient examination? –

Well, that is the time I take.

In your opinion can it be done thoroughly in that time? – Yes.

Would you not like more time? - Well, I could have more time.

If you had more time would it interfere in the working of the pit? – A little.

Have you had anyone to help you make your examination? - I have had someone a while back, early this year.

On the morning of the 25th March, who assisted you? - I believe I did not have anyone.

Why? - Because my man did not turn up.

Did you ask for anyone else? – I thought it was no use taking anyone else.

Was there any other competent man to be had? – I think so.

In your opinion is it necessary to have a competent man to assist you? – Yes.

I suggest that if you had made a better examination, and had a competent man to assist you on March 25th, you would have discovered this defect in the conductors. I suppose in future you will be accompanied by a competent man? – Yes.

I take it, it was by your own negligence that you did not have assistance? – Yes.

Have you heard any complaints from men about the condition of these conductors? – No.

Have you complained yourself? – No

Would it surprise you to hear that Clarke said he never examined this conductor with callipers? Here Sir William read from a newspaper report, but Mr. Hextall took exception and said that Clarke had not stated that he had not calliped this particular conductor.

Mr. Hextall: Taking your own time, would an examination made by yourself be as good as that made by another man and yourself? – Yes.

Had you ever had any idea that anything was wrong in the shaft? – Never.

Witness had not signed the report book of the shaft since the accident, and Sir Wm. Clegg asked if he had been superseded in the work. It was explained that Belcher had had charge of the repairs in the shaft, and he had also been off work owing to an accident. Clarke, recalled, said he had tested the conductor with callipers several times, the last about a month ago. He also said that Belcher had not been superseded, but would go back to his work as soon as he was quite recovered from his accident.

Sam Hughes was next called, and said he was shaftsman before the last witness, but gave it up because he could not work in a wet shaft.

Sir Wm. Clegg: Have you ever complained that you had no competent assistance? – Yes. What was said? – They said they could not spare a man.

Do you think the work can be done thoroughly without help? – Sometimes, but not generally.

Had you ever reason, when you were shaftsman before, to suspect this conductor? – No, it was considered one of the best in the shaft.

Have the men ever complained? – Yes, of the cage striking fire.

What caused that? – The conductors being slack.

What do you consider a time to take to examine the shaft properly? – Two hours.

Witness said he expected he would go back to the joiners shop where he had been working until when Belcher was ready to return to his work.

George Musgrove, banksman, said he had heard no complaints as to the safety of conditions in the shaft, or of the cage rubbing since the conductors were replaced. The last replaced was about two years ago.

Mr. Hepplewhite: When he saw one conductor tighten and another slacken on the morning of the accident he signalled the engine to stop. A signal came from the bottom about five seconds later.

Mr. Hextall said he did not think it was necessary to call Mr. Hay, because it was unlikely that he could throw any fresh light upon the matter, and he did not propose to ask him any questions himself. Mr. Clegg had intimated to him personally that it would probably be more satisfactory to the clients whom he represented that Mr. Hay should be called, and Sir William put some questions to him. Of course he put implicit reliance upon Sir Wm. Clegg's confining himself to questions strictly relevant to the unfortunate occurrence of March 26th.

Mr. Wm. Hay, general manager of the colliery said he had held that position for seven or eight years. He had had nothing to do with the construction of the No. 2 shaft.

Sir Wm Clegg: Would it not be better if there were no steam pipes in the shaft? – I should not like to say that.

It would minimise the present mischief? – Yes.

The presence of these pipes increased the corrosion, and if they were taken out it would improve the condition of the shaft? – Yes, it would have the effect of making it more pleasant.

Have you ever, at any time, heard complaints from the men in regard to the unsafety of this shaft? – Never once I have always used this shaft myself when I have gone down.

Just so, I merely put the question to you because it has been rumoured that these complaints have been made. – To me, personally, never.

Have you heard of complaints being made to any of your officials? – No.

I suppose, as a matter of fact, if you had been approached in this matter, and had been told that the conductors were considered unsafe, you would have had fresh conductors put in. It is not a matter of the expense. – Yes

The Coroner: What would have been the expense of a new conductor? - About £100, I think, for the whole thing.

Sir William: We are told the practice is to make an examination of the shaft once every twenty-four hours after some men have been lowered. May I suggest that it would be better to make the examination before sending any men down, rather than subsequently? - I don't see that it would make the slightest difference. There would still be only one examination every twenty-four hours, but since this unfortunate occurrence I have given instructions that there be two examinations every twenty-four hours – one more than the law requires.

Regarding the time that should be taken by the shaftsman to make his inspection, Mr. Hay said he thought that three-quarters of an hour was, perhaps, rather too short, but he considered two hours too long.

Mr. Hextall: If you had the steam exhaust removed from the shaft, in your judgment, would it have an affect on the safety of the men or would it only affect their amenity? – It would not affect the safety of the men.

I believe it is the practice of the company to keep one or more conductors on the premises in reserve? – We always keep two on the premises and generally, three.

Mr. Hextall referred to the presence in court of two gentlemen, Mr. Piggford, of the Stanton Coal and Iron Company, and Mr. Wardell, of Tibshelf Colliery, men of extensive experience in matters of Derbyshire coal mining. He was prepared, on behalf of the Company, to call those gentlemen before the Court, if was thought desirable to have their opinions as persons entirely unconnected with the colliery. It might seem to some uninitiated persons that these conductors had been in use for a considerable time, and it would be more especially enlightening, in reference to the fact that Mr. Stokes made clear, that this lamentable accident occurred in no way from the ordinary wear and tear of the conductor, but from an unforeseen cause; the undoing of a braze or weld.

It was not thought necessary to call the gentlemen mentioned, and the Court adjourned for lunch preparatory to the Coroner summing up.

On resuming the enquiry, the coroner briefly reviewed the evidence and put the matter clearly before the jury.

After deliberating for an hour, the jury returned a verdict to the effect that the deceased men were accidentally killed through the breaking of a conductor. They added a rider, in which they found Clarke and Belcher were guilty of an error of judgment in not condemning this conductor, seeing to what an extent it was worn. They were also of the opinion that there should be more efficient examination of all the conductors. They also recommended that instead of loose bars, the cages be fitted with gates. If that had been so on this occasion probably these men's lives would have been saved. They wished to commend the banksman (Musgrove) for his prompt action in signaling to the wind-driver to stop.