

GRESFORD. Wrexham. Denbighshire. 22nd. September, 1934.

Description of the colliery & the accident

The Gressford Colliery was owned by the United Westminster Wrexham Collieries, Limited and was at the village of Gressford about two and half miles to the north of Wrexham. The mine had two shafts the downcast which was known as the 'Dennis' and the up cast which was called the 'Martin'. Coal was wound at the Dennis and materials down the Martin shaft. men were raised and lowered in both shafts. the sinking of the shafts started in 1908 and coal was first wound in June, 1911 so the was not 'newly opened' within the provisions of the Coal Mines Act, 1911 and the provision that there must be two intake roadways from each seam did not apply to the colliery.

The mine employed about 2,200 persons, 1,850 below ground and 350 at the surface. Three seams were worked at the colliery. They were the Main, Crank and Brassey but by the time of the explosion the workings in the latter were idle. The Dennis section of the Main Seam, in which the explosion occurred, was made up of five districts each worked on the longwall system. These sections were known as 20's, 61's, 109's (which included 92's), 14's and 29's and employed 280 men on the day shift, 240 on the afternoon shift and 195 on the night shift.

Coal was got and wound on the morning and afternoon shifts and some coal was wound on Friday and Saturday nights. The packs and faces were moved during the night shift. The weekly output of coal from each of the Districts during the ten weeks prior to the explosion were 928 tons from the 20's, 732 from the 61's, 813 from the 109's, 1,617 from the 14's and 1,340 from the 29's.

Mr. William Bonsall, the manager had occupied that position since 1917 and for three years previous to that he had been assistant manager to Mr. Groves. Previous to that he had been a deputy for three years, an overman for three years and undermanager for two years at Swanwick Colliery, Derbyshire. Before that he had worked for nine years as a filler, holer and contractor at Pinxton and Cotes Park Collieries and for four years as a haulage hand at Birchwood Colliery, all in Derbyshire.

Until two years before the explosion there was also an agent, Mr. T.H. Cockin but that office had not been filled and Mr. Bonsall was left to work the mine without guidance from any technically informed official. He visited the several districts in the Dennis Section from time to time but before the explosion, he had spent most of his time in the South-East Section where belt conveyors were being installed. He had been underground during the night shift but it was so long ago, that it emerged at the inquiry, he could not remember when it was.

For many years Mr. Thomas Hughes was undermanager but in 1933, he fell sick and Mr. Edward Alan Roberts acted in his place. After January, 1934, there were two undermanagers, Mr. Edward Alan Roberts and Mr. Andrew Williams, Mr. Roberts supervised the South-East and No.1 North Section of the Main Coal Seam and the Crank and Brassey Seams and Mr. Williams the Dennis Section of the Main Coal Seam. Since 1914, Mr. Roberts had been employed as an overman at the colliery. Before 1934, Mr. Williams was not employed at the colliery but, up to nine years before he had been employed at the Hafod Colliery for 24 years. During the time he was not in the North Wales Coalfield he was the manager of the Blaenhirwaun Colliery in Carmarthenshire. Supervising only the Dennis Section, Mr. Williams was underground daily but not at night. he arrived at the pit about 5 a.m. each day and left about 5.30 p.m. but very often returned to the pit. He was underground during the night shift of the 27th. April to see that repairers working on the 142's deep and on the night shift of the 7th. August he visited the face of the 14's district to see how a newly installed coal cutting machine was working.

Electrical power was used for coal cutting and conveying and the chief electrician at the colliery was Mr. Josiah Ernest Hague. Mr. Sydney Erwin Hayes was the Colliery surveyor and he was assisted by Mr. William Idris

Cuffin who was also given additional duties under the manager's directions for taking air measurements and the collection of dust samples. there were three overmen on each shift but only one of these, Mr. Frederick John Davies on the night shift, exercised any supervision in the Dennis Section and that only occasionally. Previous to the explosion, the last time he had been at the face of any of the workings in the Dennis Section was on the 21st. August when he went along the face of the 14's District. sometime during August he had been along the face of 29's district and on the 19th. August he was in 20's district but did not visit the face. In June he had been in 23's face and 109's district and in March he went round the 95's district and in two or three faces on the 20's district. At the inquiry Mr. Davies stated that he devoted his time to the South-East Section of the Main Coal Seam and only went into the Dennis now and again. This meant that, except for the time that Mr. Andrew Williams, undermanager of the Dennis Sec and R. Jones in the 14's and H, Thomas, W. Davies and D. Jones in the 29's on the Day, Afternoon and nights shifts respectively. The remaining deputy, Edwin Chester was employed o the night shift when he supervised men in the drift at the in bye end of the Dennis main haulage road beyond the 'Clutch' and travelled and reported on that haulage road and the Martin return airway. Three phase current at 3,300 volts was taken down the Dennis shaft to two transformers at the bottom of the shaft where the voltage was reduced to 570 volts top work the haulage engines, coal cutting machines and conveyors. each transformer was connected to a separate switch board. The lighting at the pit bottom was supplied from a small transformer at 110 volts. There was one main cable installed in the Dennis main intake airway which carried the whole of the current in bye for the section. The cable was controlled at its origin by a switch and fuse. Some of the coal cutting machines and conveyors were certified flameproof but others of another design were used which were supposed to be flameproof. The bells were certified flameproof but the magneto telephones were neither intrinsically safe not in flameproof casings.

The haulage in the Dennis Main Intake and 142's Deep was by endless rope driven by an electric motor placed near the Dennis shaft bottom. The districts generally ad tail and main rope haulage driven by electricity and compressed air. The mine was generally dry but there was a and a small one for pumping water from the Dennis shaft sump to the Martin shaft sump lodgement pump at 500 feet from the surface between the two shafts and a small pump for emptying the Martin sump into tanks in the cages in that shaft and wound to the pit bank.

Thirty electric lamps were used by the electricians but most of the lamps were flame lamps of the Prestwich Patent Protector Type. The ventilation was produced by a double inlet Walker fan placed at the surface and steam driven. There was no proper air lock at the top of the up cast, Martin shaft. Platforms called 'butterfly boards' or 'policemen', raised by the cages as they came up were relied on to prevent the air from the fan flowing directly from the surface to the fan.

The explosion occurred shortly before 8 a.m. on Saturday when there were 480 men at work. News of disaster became known only early on Saturday morning and relatives of the night shift men rushed to colliery. Rescue men from Gressford and Llay Main Collieries rushed to colliery to fight fire and doctors and nurses, St John Ambulance men and Wrexham Fire Brigade were quickly on scene. A party went down the mine Including Mr. T. Boydell, the Divisional Inspector and District Inspector when it was found that the location of the explosion was about three quarters of a mile from pit bottom and that fire and smoke were intense.

Within a short time seven bodies had been recovered and brought to surface and Rescue parties under Mr. H. Herbert, superintendent of the Rescue Station at Wrexham, equipped with gas masks and apparatus, were working underground.

There was continual activity at pit head with cages being raised and lowered at frequent intervals containing the rescuers and large quantities of sand in paper bags, then in sacks, then loads of stone dust and dozens of fire extinguishers. One of rescuers described the scene underground as 'a blazing wall of fire'. Rescue appliances were rushed from Lancashire and batches of men arrived from various parts of the county to offer their help.

Lorries loaded with sand continually drove into the pit yards and were unloaded at the pit head into sacks by a host of volunteers including the Vicar of Rhosddu, The Rev G.R. Davies. Dozens of these sacks were taken underground but the bulk of them remained at the surface to underline the seriousness of situation. The pile of sacks led to rumours that the mine was to be sealed but this was denied by management. Relays of rescue

workers were going down pit in teams of four and grim realisation of what had happened came to hundreds of silent men, women and children on pit banks when the bodies of two of rescue men were brought to surface. They were taken to the ambulance room where artificial respiration was tried for half an hour before they were pronounced dead and removed to the temporary mortuary.

They were Daniel Hughes, Second Avenue, Llay and William Hughes, Jackson's Cottages, New Rhosrobin, both members of Llay Main Rescue Team and were in first party to descend after the explosion. To add to the bitterness, news came that a member of the same party, John Lewis of Railway Terrace, Cefnybedd, was missing and had not been recovered.

The 'Leader' reported of the scenes at temporary mortuary

"What a tragic sight a scene which brought tears to the eyes of many while a comrade sat silently weeping in the rescue station."

Writing about the rescue men the 'Leader' reporter said "

I was standing near the ambulance room not far from the pit head on Saturday morning just at the time when the ambulance men and doctors were trying to revive the two rescue party who had been overcome whilst engaged below. Dr. J.E.H. Davies of Wrexham, the veteran St. John officer was in charge and the men were working for all they were worth, trying to revive them. News soon came out, however that they were dead. They had sacrificed their lives for their friends. There was scarcely time to realise the tragic nature of the announcement before another party of rescuers with their masks and apparatus could be seen coming along on their way to the pit bottom again, there to continue to fight for the men entrapped below. Few who saw these things will forget the courage of these rescue parties returning to the scene of death and passing near the building in which the dead bodies of their comrades in the Rescue Brigades were lying. The rescuers shook their heads when asked for news of any progress. All they would say was, 'Things are pretty bad.' The state below was reflected by the strain that showed in their faces. Very little information was available apart from the fact that an explosion had occurred in the Dennis District and parts of the Main Dennis Road were on fire. Rumours were rife and it was not until 10 a.m. that colliery management issued an official statement "The managing director, Mr. H. Dyke Dennis wishes to state that it is feared there has been an explosion at Gressford Colliery near Wrexham in the main district. As far as can be ascertained the number of men involved is approximately 100 and the Inspectors of mines and colliery officials are present underground." Almost immediately after the explosion it became known that about half of the men who were not working in the district where the explosion occurred, had reached the surface safely but there was great uncertainty as to the number trapped in the mine. At an early stage, the number given was 102 but it was not until Sunday evening that an official figure of 261 was announced. Mr. H. Dyke Dennis, the managing director of the colliery explained how the original estimate of 102 men missing came to be made. He said "In the early confusion many lamps were missing, but it was discovered later that some of the men to whom they belonged were safe, having thrown the lamps away in the rush to escape. It was because of this that the first estimate of about 100 had perished. This estimate was made in good faith, and in the honest belief that it was accurate."

Men women and children were waiting in the drenching rain. The men, many of whom knew better than others the prospects which confronted their comrades, and in some cases their own fathers, sons and brothers bravely consoled the women. Time passed slowly and anxiety increased but hope remained and a ceaseless vigil was kept. Mr. William Jones, a rescue worker and one of the most experienced miners at the pit said "I have just come back from facing a wall of flame through which we cannot break. At the moment there are 100 men in the fire fighting party near the main shaft. We made little progress. We attacked the fire with fire extinguishers and by throwing sand against the flames. We were able to advance about twenty yards but we could go no further. We came across a number of bodies and sent them up." As the morning wore on the work went on but the fire was burning fiercely with timber at the sides of the roads ablaze. It was hoped that three firemen with the trapped men could have gathered them were the air was breathable. Volunteers came forward in increasing numbers and men went down the pit in relays.

During Saturday afternoon Sir Henry Walker, H.M. Chief Inspector of Mines arrived at the colliery and at 6 p.m. the following official statement was issued

“The fire on the main road which is preventing exploration of the mine has been fought throughout the day and the latest report is that it is being overcome. It may be that beyond the fire men may be found alive and it is with this hope that no effort is being spared but in any event the death toll will be heavy.” Work went on all through the night and when Sunday arrived there were reports that good progress had been made and it was hoped that the men in 29 district would be reached by 3.30 p.m.. prospects appeared brighter and it was reported that the rescue workers had progressed three quarters of a mile and that the road to the dip had been cleared to allow a pony to work clearing debris. The body of George Roberts of Glanavon, Maesydre was recovered and brought to the surface but soon afterwards, cage loads of sand were seen to be carried down the pit. It was thought it was just a change of shift but the news came that a door had been reached, the fire was getting worse and more explosions had occurred and conditions had become so dangerous that it had been decided to withdraw all the men from the mine. The last men to leave the pit were Edward Williams, E. Povah, A Alderman Cyril O. Jones and Edward Jones, miners’ agent for North Wales, Sir Henry Walker, T. Boydell, P.G. Doniny, Percy Heyes and John McGurk. At this time only 10 bodies, including two of the rescue men, had been recovered. This meant that 258 men remained entombed and all hope of their rescue had to be abandoned .

Mr. John McGurk, President of the Lancashire and Cheshire Miners’ Association described the scene underground “

It is hell let loose and it is not at all safe for anyone to be near where the fire is raging. There were three explosion when I was down this afternoon. They may become more frequent because of the fire and the fumes. That is the risk, and therefore all safety man must be withdrawn from the mine. There is no chance of any man in the pit being left alive. I have been at about ten explosions in different parts of the country, but I have never seen anything like this. There is a point where the fire is raging for twenty yards and the stones are red hot.” A conference was held between H.M. Inspectors and representatives of the colliery management and at 8 a.m. came the fateful official statement signed by Mr. H. Dyke Dennis, managing director, Edward Jones, miners’ agent for North Wales and Sir Henry Walker The attempt to overcome the fire in the main road has gone on continuously since yesterday. In spite of very strenuous efforts and although some progress had been made in the road, the fire has got a further hold in a road to the right, through which it was hoped at first to reach any possible survivors. Today several explosions in by of the fire on the main road have occurred. this afternoon they became more frequent and closer to where the men were working on the fire. The return airway in both the main returns is carrying carbon monoxide in dangerous quantities, and it is with great reluctance that all parties - the management, representatives of the miners and H.M. Inspectors -have come to the conclusion that no person can possibly be alive in the workings. In these circumstances, and in view of the increasingly grave risk to the men engaged in combating the fire and on the main road, it had been decided that it would not be right to continue to expose these workers to such serious risk, and all persons have been withdrawn from the mine.” The number of dead and missing was put at about 260 and hope gave way to despair. In the darkness of the night weeping women and mourning men left the scene of the disaster with sad hearts and bodies weary from the long hours of waiting. No further statements were issued and on Monday morning work on sealing the pit was commenced. iron girders and timber were placed over the downcast shaft and tone of sand and cement were used to seal the up cast shaft. Work was suspended at the neighbouring Bersham and Hafod Collieries as a mark of sympathy and to assist in any work that was required at the stricken colliery.

Dramatic stories came from the eyewitnesses to the explosion who had got out of the mine alive. Cyril Challoner of Windsor Road, New Broughton told the local press “There were about six of us having our ‘snapping’ on the wicket road at about five past two. We were about 300 yards from the clutch and we were laughing and talking. Suddenly there was a gust of wind. It scattered our snapping tins and out clothes and covered our bread with dirt. We thought it was a burst air pipe. Suddenly an elderly fellow came running up and said, “You had better get your clothes and get out of here. Try the wind road.” (This was the return air road where the bad air passes). We knew something was up now. we did not bother with our clothes, and about twenty other fellows joined us. We started making our way to the pit bottom in just our shirts and working

knickers. Taking off our shirts, we began fanning to keep the air clear. we got to the end of the wind road and then we began to meet the gas. All of us fanned hard. the gas was getting in our eyes and we could taste it. We took turns in leading so that everyone would have the same risk. We now began to meet falls and we had to scramble over them. I thought the other twenty fellows who had joined us where we were having our snapping, were following us. I looked round but I could not see them. I don't know what happened to them. The gas was getting thicker but we kept fanning without shirts and we got through to the pit bottom where we met the rescue party. They brought the six of us to the pit top. we wanted to go back when we learned there had been an explosion but they would not let us and they sent the six of us home." Challoner came from a mining family and his three brothers were among those who volunteered for work with the rescue teams. Robert Edward Andrews was also one of those who got out of the mine. He told the press "We heard an explosion at 1.55 a.m. it deafened us. There were about 30 to 40 of us working on the coal face in No.22 district. The bang was followed by a cloud of white dust. then a young fellow, a haulage man named John E. Jones, exclaimed, "Good God, something terrible has happened." Our faces were covered with dust. a fireman named David Jones came up and cried, "Hurry from here." We all rushed put into the road. I heard someone groaning. We picked him up and got him out., His name was Walley. We were one and half miles from the shaft. Six of us decided to make a dash for it, David Jones, Bert Samuels and Jack Samuels, brothers, a man named Fisher, Cyril Challoner and myself. We got hold of pieces of cloth and waved then to make air. then we fought our way through the bad air - afterdamp -to where the air was good. It took half an hour to fight our way through. There was fire in the main road. We saw a man lying in the road. We turned him over and found he was dead. Then we came to the main road. the girders were twisted and the rails turned over. It sounded to me as if there was some machinery going, but I don't know what it was. We crawled over the top of the falls. We had three lights between us. We came to a dead end but there was small hole to get through. We got thorough one at a time, afraid that something would drop on us. Two hundred yards further on we met the undermanager, Mr. Andrew Williams. he was the first of the rescuers. He and others helped us out. Fisher had a slight injury to his leg. The other 30 who had been with us at the coal face could, I think, have got away had they come with us as soon as we did." Two members of the Llay Main rescue parties, Mr. Parry Davies of Llay Green and r. H. Povah of Second Avenue, Llay spoke to the local press. Parry Davies said "As a rescue team, we were called to Gressford at 5 a.m. on Saturday. We stood by until 9.30, No.1 team in charge of the captain, Mr. John Charles Williams, having gone down at 7.45 a.m. In response to a call for two more rescue men, T.P. Jones and R. Harrison went down. Ten minutes later another call came through for all available rescue men and four of us went down, myself Povah, Emlyn Jones and Peter Hughes. When we got to the pit bottom, we heard that three of the first rescue team had gone under so we went through the return airway. I, T.P. Jones, Price Beard and Dick Harrison helped to get J. C. Williams, the captain of the first team and Dan Hughes to safety after being gassed. Hughes was dead at the time, but there was doctor at the pit bottom in the fresh air, waiting to receive the men out. We went for another rescue member, W. Hughes of Rhosrobin, a member of the Gressford rescue team who had gone down with the Llay Main party. On reaching him we dragged him to safety but after artificial respiration had been applied he was found to be dead. We the volunteered to fetch John Lewis of Cefynbedd. We could see his lamp burning 100 yards ahead but he was certainly dead because he was further in than the other rescuers' bodies we had recovered. The heat was terrific and some of our men were feeling the effects of it and Mr. Boydell, the Mines Inspector, refused to allow us to go for Lewis. Our team was called down at 5 o'clock on Sunday morning and we went through the intake way. After encountering several falls, on which voluntary workers were engaged, we got to the doors behind which some men were supposed to be but the doors were all burnt away. The fire was still raging and we went in relays one very five minutes, but after getting through a fall we found fire -everything was burning, props, coal dust, brattice and all, and the more fresh air released on it made the fire a great deal worse. It was like hell. That is all you can call it." There was another explosion on Tuesday afternoon about 1 o'clock when people hear the shaft heard a dull thud. Upon investigation it was s found that up cast shaft was not damaged but the sides of the fan drift had caught fire and the Wrexham and Chester Fire Brigade were summoned to fight the fire. George Brown of Birkett Street, Rohostyllen was at work on the surface near the downcast shaft and was injured by flying material. He was attended on the spot by Dr. Harrison of Gressford and taken to hospital where he died from his injuries. Several men had near escapes when the second explosion took place. Mr. Baird, the engineer and other members of the technical staff of the colliery who were in duty, escaped just before the blast having been warned by Dr. T. David Jones, of Birmingham University who was making analytical tests was

able to give the alarm. A third explosion took place at 1.45 a.m. on Wednesday when the fan drift was blown out and considerable damaged done at the pit head. There were no injuries due to this explosion and afterwards men worked under the direction of Mr. Bonsall, the manager, emptying lorry loads of sand and other material into the space between the walls of the fan drift. Smoke and fumes continued to come from the shaft during Wednesday. The pit head was roped off and notices were posted warning everyone not to enter the pit yards because of the very great danger.