

# Hetton-le-Hole Herald

The Newsletter for Hetton Local History Group

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## Information & Calendar

**This newsletter has been produced for the 60th anniversary to commemorate the nine miners who died in the Eppleton Colliery explosion on Friday July 6th 1951.**

**IT is also a testament to the 160+ men and boys who have given their lives to the pit since the colliery was initiated in 1825.**

### The Eppleton Colliery Explosion

Friday July 6th 1951

It was almost 2 a.m. on Friday 6<sup>th</sup> July 1951, it was the second hour of the fore- shift at Eppleton Colliery. The previous hours had been quiet and uneventful. Suddenly the engineman who was standing on the landing

at the tub loading point in the Busty seam felt a sudden rush of air from inbye followed by a substantial dust cloud. He immediately notified the shift overman, who, at the time, was working in another district of the colliery and also raised the alarm at the shaft bottom.

The shift overman on arrival at the landing decided to go inbye to investigate, which he did, testing the ventilation as he went farther into the district. After a short distance he located the body of Norman Holmes lying with part of the conveyor belt across his body and nearby the body of William George Hicks. Both were alive but very badly injured. He then made arrangements to get them to the surface as quickly as possible.

At the same time the four workers who were not at the coal face also had a terrifying experience. One of them, John Sidaway, aged 35, a maintenance man and ex navy man was knocked to the ground by the force of the explosion after which his visibility was entirely restricted by the cloud of dust. The cloud of dust hung around for up to 20 minutes and Sidaway groped his way out of the area. Fortunately he met the other three men, Robert Evans, aged 49, a light haulage engineman, Robert William Ridley, aged 50, a loader and John William Cresswell, aged 55, whose home was in Caroline Street, they also had been working outbye at the time of the explosion. At the first opportunity the men tried to contact the miners who were working inbye at the coal face by phone, but there was no response.

Checking their lamps the four men realised that they were left with two lamps, an oil lamp and the electric cap lamp belonging to Sidaway.

They were glad to see that the oil lamp showed that there was no gas present, this was a great relief to them and they were of the opinion that they had more than a fighting chance to get out of the mine safely. Evans, one of the survivors was very lucky since he had been working about 100 yards from the site of the initial explosion helping the engineman with the tubs. He too had been blown off his feet.

Robert William Ridley was also very lucky to survive the blast since a few minutes previously he had been working with Sidaway filling tubs but less than 100 yards from the scene. He too was also blown off his feet by the blast but as he was not directly in line with the explosion this probably saved his life. The shovel he had been using was blown away some ten yards from him. The men

then remained in the area to assist other rescuers from the colliery.

Following knowledge of the explosion being broadcast, rescue teams from other collieries were alerted and about an hour later three teams from Crook, Houghton-le-Spring and Benwell, specially equipped with breathing apparatus, arrived at Eppleton Colliery. Meanwhile other miners from Eppleton colliery were giving assistance to establish the whereabouts of the seven missing men and as soon as the rescue teams arrived they began to explore most of the district but turned back in the return airway due to thick smoke and fumes. The under-manager then discovered that two doors to the main return airway had been blown open by the blast and once these had been shut the short circuiting air was restored to flow in the correct manner. By 3.30 a.m. ventilation was back to normal and this allowed the res-

cue teams to enter the area where the missing men had been working.

During the ensuing hours the bodies of the seven remaining men were brought out of the colliery and this process was completed by 6.30 a.m.

The body of Thomas Laverick Box, aged 54 was found close to the Joy loader (coal cutting machine). Thomas resided at 17, Downs Lane. Ronald Foster, aged 25, a shuttle car driver, of 8 Percy Street, Hetton-le-Hole, and Richard Parkin, aged 32, shotfirer and Albert Patterson, aged 40 years were found at No. 4 Main Bord. Richard Parkin lived at 17 Patterdale Street and Albert Patterson a shotfirer lived at 103 Blue Row, Moorsley. The bodies of James Walker, aged 44 years and Allan Hunter, aged 38, both cuttermen were found close to their arcwall machine. James Hunter resided at 6 William Street Hetton and Allan Hunter at 26

Eskdale Street, Peat Carr.

**Robert Tait**, aged 38, the other cutterman was found on the main bord. He lived at 34 Edward Street, Hetton-le-Hole.

The two injured men, **Norman Holmes** and **William George Hicks** died some days later from their injuries which included extensive burns. Norman Holmes, aged 38, was a deputy of 18 South Market Street and William George Hicks, aged 32, a shuttle car operator, lived at 102 Blue Row, Moorsley. The St. Johns Ambulance Division in Hetton created a number of trophies for first aid which recognised the memory of the men who died. The Norman Holmes Trophy, Divisional Secretary, having joined the Brigade in 1931 and was captain of the Eppleton Colliery Senior Team. As captain he led his team to a runners up position in the Miners National First Aid Competition at Blackpool in June 1951. He won the individual championship

for being the best captain.

There was also an individual trophy recognising Ronald Foster who captained the Eppleton Colliery Junior Team. A shield, called the Seven Comrades Shield, was created in memory of the others who died in the disaster.

Robert Tait, one of the dead men had served in the RAF during the war. He left a widow and six year old son. Allan Hunter was a single man residing with his parents. Another, Albert Patterson was an ex regular soldier, a married man with two children. Richard Parkin left a widow and two young children the youngest being a mere 5 months old. Ronald Foster was a keen ambulance worker and was a member of the successful colliery ambulance team which came second in a National Coal Board competition a few weeks earlier. James Walker lived with his wife and family, Billy, 22 years (who also worked at the

colliery), Silvia, 20 years and Evelyn, 18 years. Evelyn was to marry later in the year and while some thought she was too young to marry, her mother reminded everyone that the final word was with her father before he died, who said "She could marry at 18". Granddaughter Dorothy Robinson (Silvia's daughter) remembers as a young child, going with her Nan to the Miners Hall in Richard Street to collect her 10/- shillings (50p) a fortnight from the Miners Benevolent Fund.

### **Eppleton Colliery**

Eppleton Colliery was sunk in 1825 and was initially owned by the Hetton Coal Company, who owned the Lyons Colliery which had been started a few years earlier in 1822. There had been trouble at first during the sinking of the mine due to excessive water and sand, flooding into the workings, but eventually

these problems were overcome by 1833. The mine had three pits, the Caroline shaft started in 1824, the Jane pit was sunk in 1837 and the New Pit (Lindsay Pit), the third shaft was sunk in 1870 and completed in 1873.

There were more than 1600 miners employed underground in the colliery's prime with a further 400 on the surface. The colliery closed in 1986, and was fully integrated by then as part of the Hawthorn complex. Like the majority of collieries throughout the country it had suffered due to responses to the miner's strike during 1984/5 by the Conservative Government of the day.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> January 1836 twenty men and boys were killed due to an explosion, and on the 13 December 1895 3 men were killed having been overcome by gas. Incidentally one of those who died in this latter incident was Anthony Harrison, a distant relative of Kate Middle-

ton, recently married to Prince William. All told there were 188 men and boys killed within the colliery over the years as a result of a variety of accidents and incidents. The seams were not particularly gassy but fire-damp was accepted as a hazard in all the seams necessitating the use of the safety lamp. The Busty seam, the one in which the accident occurred ranges between 5 and 6 feet in depth and some of the workings involved the use of districts originally started by the defunct Hetton Lyons Colliery. The geology of the mine was such that it was decided in 1945 to adopt the use of American machinery including Joy loaders and shuttle cars which transported the coal from the coal face to the conveyors.

At the time of the accident the electrical machinery at the face consisted of one, Universal arcwall coal cutter, two shuttle cars and two Joy loaders as well as two portable

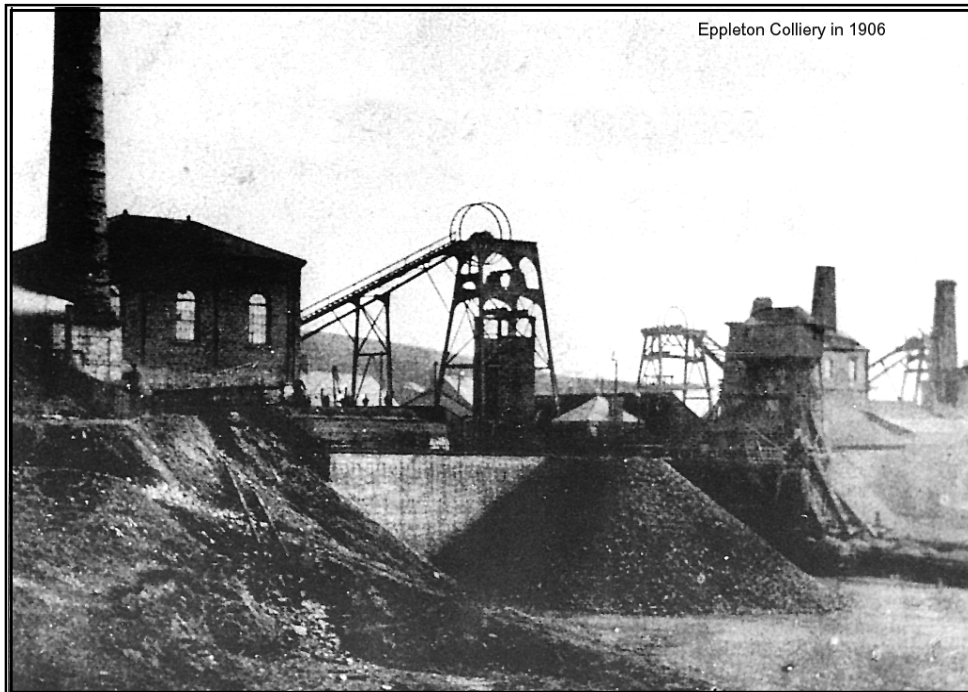
drilling machines. All of the equipment was to British flame proof standards except the Joy loaders and the Shuttle cars which were assessed to USA mining standards. The explosion occurred on the fore shift (12.22 a.m. to 8 a.m.). Each shift in a particular working area was in the charge of a deputy who was responsible for the safe working conditions of the men. It appears that Norman Holmes the deputy on this occasion had carried out the correct regulatory inspection of the area prior to the accident and found it safe to allow the men to work. Following the inspection of the explosion scene after the disaster had taken place, it appears that the explosion occurred because of a fault in the electrical equipment of the Joy loader.

#### **The Inquests and inquiry by the Inspector of Mines.**

The inquiry carried out by the Inspector of Mines was very thorough and his findings were

clear and conclusive. All aspects of ignition were eliminated during the inquiry, no contraband was found on the men who died, no shots had been fired in the area where the explosion took place, all lamps in the district were examined; two cap lamps

fixed electrical equipment was in a flameproof condition. As the only three pieces of portable equipment in use was the Joy loader and the shuttle car at the No.8 face and the arcwall machine in the return airway it appears that one of these ma-



had damage and it was possible that they could have ignited firedamp, but this feature was dismissed as being highly unlikely. There was no evidence of frictional heating and all

chines somehow caused the explosion.

The explosion had travelled along the working places near to the No.8 left face. It appears

that firedamp had ignited due to some form of electrical discharge. It had probably ignited at the master control box of the Joy loader and burnt back into the goaf (the cavity behind the coal seam) until there was sufficient impetus to bring about an explosion.

The inquest for the 7 men who died instantly was held in the Miner's Welfare Hall in December 1951. The coroner recorded the following verdict :-

" These men died as a result of an explosion caused by some fault in the electrical equipment of the Joy loader"

The jury added the following rider:-

" The lack of supervision with regard to maintenance and repair of these machines was most alarming and should be immediately rectified."

The second inquest, carried out in early 1952, for the two men who died later concluded :-

"There had been some negligence in the maintenance of a pit machine and also a lack of care in steps taken to discover the presence of gas".

The findings of the inquiry together with the statements from the two inquests resulted in the veto of shuttle cars when used on long wall faces and adopted a long term policy of modification of foreign apparatus now installed in British mines to the correct British standards. They have also adopted a new improved design for the adaptor of the main entry cable on Joy loaders and raised the standard of supervision of the electrical apparatus, especially that which is employed on the coal face.



## **Part 2. Coping with Tragedy**

With every tragedy there are always families who suffer, particularly if they lose loved ones. Even though the Eppleton explosion happened 60 years ago, to many people who are still living and to the families involved, the memories are much stronger, and for older people memories remain a constant feature throughout their lives. A recent interview with Mrs Ena Barker of Washington, sister-in-law to Richard Parkin, brought to reality the feelings of the family on the day of the disaster and how they have been affected over many years. Below can be found references to the past as recounted by Mrs Barker.

Richard Parkin known affectionately to all who knew him as " Dickie", had lived in Hetton throughout his boyhood and shortly after leaving school joined the Royal Navy, as this probably offered the best opportunity for employment for

him. Dickie came unscathed through the war and was demobbed at some point in 1945. Another important and happy event happened for him in 1945 and this was his marriage to Catherine, known as Kitty, a girl he had courted for some years prior to demob. The war had of course prevented them from marrying earlier and as was the case they were unable to get a council house to move into. Consequently they lived with Kitty's father and her sisters in 17 Pat-terdale Street. Kitty's mother had died when her younger sisters were still young children and Kitty had taken on the role of mother as she was much older than her two younger sisters.

During the period from 1945 to 1951 two girls were born to Dickie and Kitty, firstly there was Margaret Elizabeth who at the time of the accident was 4 years and 9 months and Anne who was just nine months old. They were a happy family looking

forward to the future. Dickie had taken a job in the coal industry since leaving the Navy as there were few alternative occupations available. Dickie's mother and stepfather lived close by in 12 Patterdale Street and he saw them on a regular basis. Richard was a quiet, dependable person who lived for his family. Ena remembers him bringing presents home whenever he came home on leave as he was a very generous man.

On the night prior to the accident Ena recalled how she had seen Dickie and Kitty out for a walk, and Dickie was wearing some new clothes recently bought. Later on she saw Dickie running, obviously going to work, but he was still wearing his new clothes. Later Kitty remarked to Ena that he must have kept his new clothes on because he thought he might be late for work. Apparently he had felt uneasy about going to work for some unexplained reason but decided he had better go to the

pit as usual.

At some point during the night Ena remembered a disturbance in the house and her dad explained that something had happened but they had no details as yet. Later on Dickie's mother and step-father Mr Derbyshire came to the back gate and said they were going up to the pit to get further details, and if everything was ok, they would make a signal by moving their hands across the chest on their return. They returned a short time later and made the signal as required.

Some time later, however, two men came from the pit and knocked at the door of 17 Patterdale with the news that there had been an explosion and it was thought that Dickie was among the dead. They asked Kitty's father and Mr. Derbyshire to go to the pit to identify the body.

This they did, then came home to convey the worst news.

Ena remembers that Kitty was distraught with grief as were other members of the family. Ena recalls how many people called at the house that day expressing their condolences including members of the local Salvation Army.

talking about the accident and their sense of disbelief that it had happened.

She also recalled that a few days prior to the accident there had been discussion at the dinner table about the sadness of the explosion at Easington

Colliery (a few weeks earlier) and it had been expressed there that it was hoped a similar thing would not happen at Ep-pleton, prophetic words indeed!



At some point later, Dickie's body was brought from the pit to his home prior to the funeral, but Ena was not allowed to see his body. She recalled being sent up to the post office in Hetton shortly after the accident, and she saw many people

Richard & Kitty during the war years

Eventually as the years passed, the family learned to live with the grief they felt, but a further desperate incident struck the fatherless family.

Margaret Elizabeth had been born with a hole in her heart and as treatment for this condition was at best rudimentary in the 1950s and in spite of the love and assistance she had received from her mother and father as well as other members of the family she died aged just 13 years. Mentally Kitty reached a very low ebb because of this tragedy and the loss was added to her previous grief and affected her throughout the remainder of her life.

Kitty did however marry again and had two further children. She must have been a very strong character to absorb first the loss of her mother, then her husband and finally her daughter. She died just two years ago being well into her eighties.

Richard Parkin was buried along with others who died in the explosion at Hetton and next to James Walker and Albert Patterson, in Hetton Cemetery. His daughter Margaret Elizabeth

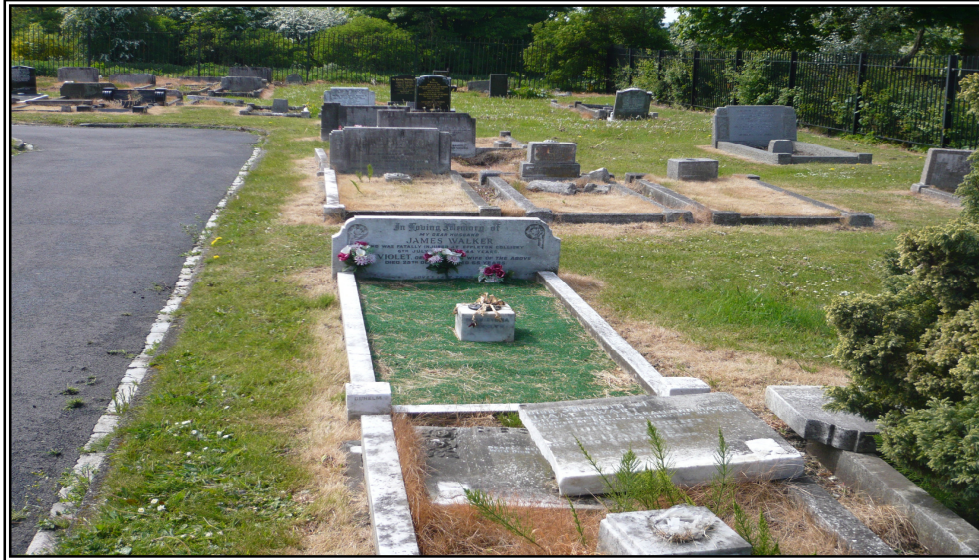
lies beside him. His younger daughter still lives in Hetton-le-Hole. She remembers little of her father except details which were told to her by caring relatives and friends.

Perhaps a more permanent memorial to the nine men who died, placed somewhere in the town may be a more appropriate recognition of the contribution the men made, not only to the mining industry but also the community.

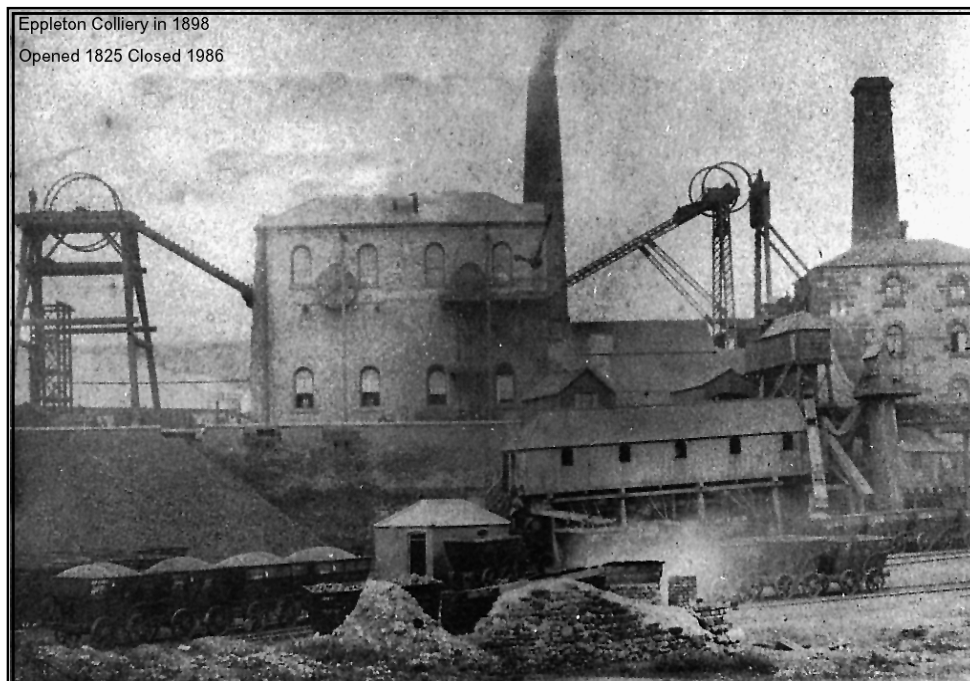


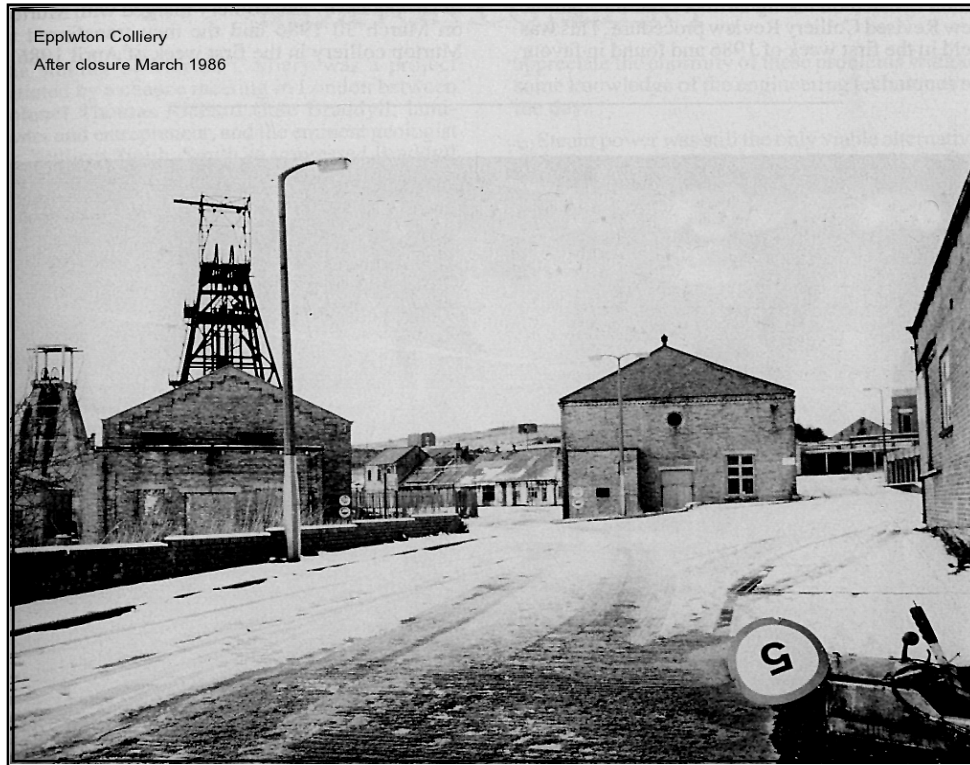
James Walker, one of the men killed in the explosion.





The graves of five of the men killed in the explosion at Hetton Cemetery . They worked together, they died together and they were buried together.





It has been a privilege to write this document and to have met some of the families involved, and received their co-operation. We trust that the document truly portrays the working spirit of the miners of the Hetton community who have, with their families, lived and worked together for more than 150 years and for the many who have died in the collieries in the neighbourhood of Hetton-le-Hole following their calling and the contribution they have made to the country over the years.

**Hetton-le-Hole Local History Group, who have prepared this document, normally meet on the last Monday of the month at 7 p.m. at the Hetton and Eppleton Community Hall . New members will be made most welcome.**