

Living in Hetton Square Part 4.

By Martin Lewins

Many things were happening during the year 1935-36, at work for my father, for me at school and at Sunday School.

My father worked in two or three houses that the Council had “stoved” out. The dwelling would be empty and a tin of powder with a wick would be placed on the concrete floor, lit, front door sealed and the fumes would kill any germs that were about, particularly infectious disease germs. After four or five days the house was opened again and repairs would be carried out so that new tenants or the previous ones could move in. When one entered the house there was a musty smell that hung around for days. If the concrete floor was cracked a new one was laid, and when removing the old one, you would come across a colony of beetles which were killed with boiling water. Silver fish were found and they were killed the same way. When all work was done the houses were smelling like new. The whole of Caroline Street was renovated, each house received a flush toilet and inspection cover in the back yard. I often went to see my father at work where he was forming the new gulleys and doing up the brickwork which was all tested by the Council C.O.W. Unfortunately one of my father’s colleagues, working, doing the same job as my father, on the other side of the street, a Mr. Tom Dixon, caught a disease and within a few days he died. His funeral was at Union Street Chapel of which he was a member. One Sunday afternoon at Sunday School there was a funeral of a girl about two years older than myself. The coffin was brought to the church porch and placed on two trestles, within the inner door of St. Nicholas’ church. The door was left open because the girl had died of an infection. After the service a man closed the door and fumigated the small area before approximately seventy of us were allowed out.

At school, our teacher, Mr. Baldwin informed us that a miner had been trapped down Eppleton pit and he had been saved by his workmates. At that time I did not know what that meant. Of course most of the boys in my class just forgot the matter. When I returned home I mentioned it to my mother. She said, “ We will find out from the newspapers what exactly happened.” This was Monday 1st June 1936 and the incident had happened on Friday 29th May. When we read the Sunderland Echo later that week it said that a number of men had been working in the Busty seam when the roof started to collapse. Everyone rushed out of the area and one man, in order to pull himself out quickly, grabbed the top of a tub but the roof lowered down and trapped his fingers. There was nothing one could do. The hewers called for the officials. Mr Ralph Stokoe and Mr. George Storey, the fore overman and back overman together with Deputy John Tubby and deputy Albert Simpson all arrived on the scene. The man trapped was Mr. W. Moffat and he lived at No. 13 William Street, Hetton Downs. Mr Stokoe stayed alongside the trapped man the

whole of the time. The roof was continuing to sink. The men brought timber, head trees and shores and they had to start work in a small space to release the man. All the loose stones around the men were removed and more props and head trees were fixed in the location. Meanwhile Bill Moffat asked to have his trapped fingers cut off but Mr Stokoe said "We will both get out alive and with all your fingers on." Some of the other men were all for removing the man's hand. Wooden wedges were hammered in close to the trapped hand and his thumb was released. This was followed by the first and second fingers. Meanwhile the roof was breaking and thundering heavily. Ralph could see that Bill was not as nervous as before. The clock continued to tick and must have seemed a lifetime for the trapped man and his rescuers. Twenty minutes later after a great deal of effort Mr. Stokoe freed Bills other two fingers and he was brought out of the area where the roof had collapsed. Bill Moffat was then brought to bank for medical attention. The accident took place about 3 p.m. and it took 2 hours to free the miner. During the episode the men involved had been at great risk.

The colliery Manager, Mr William Stokoe was so impressed by the actions of the eight men that he, through the mines inspectorate had the matter reported to the Carnegie Hero Fund Trust for official recognition. Before the Carnegie Trust reported back Ralph Stokoe was informed by the Under Secretary of State, that His Majesty the King had been graciously pleased to award him the Edward Medal (Workers V.C) for his gallantry in the rescue. This was carried out on October 10th 1936.

In November of the same year the eight men received notification that their names were to be inscribed on the illuminated Roll Trust, which was formed in oak plus a cheque for £95 to be shared, the money coming from the Trust Fund. A presentation was held in the Hetton Workingmen's Club on the 17th December 1936. Mr. T. Greenland Davies, H.M. Divisional Inspector of Mines made the presentation. The hire of the hall was free and the overall cost including a concert party was less than £7. The following year on the 26th February 1937, Mr. and Mrs Stokoe attended Buckingham Palace where Ralph was decorated by the King.

Early in 1940 when I was a paper boy for Barrass the newsagents, I took the evening paper to Mr. Stokoe's house and sometimes he would ask when I was going back to school. The reason being, that the school was closed at the time until all the air raid shelters were built. He also told my father and me how he was nearly killed down the pit. He had his foot trapped under a rail when he heard the noise of the tubs coming towards him. He always carried a pocket-knife, a custom of many in those days. Quickly he cut his bootlace and was able to pull his foot out of the way in time. Afterwards he had to renew his boots. "A man of Courage and Humility", the words that are above the Nurse Cavell Memorial, close to St. Martins-in-the-Fields, London.