Hetton-le-Hole Herald

The Newsletter for Hetton Local History Group

Volume ...3..... Issue ..3..... Date..Nov. 2011.....

December 2nd 2011 is the 125th anniversary of the mining disaster at Elemore Colliery in which 28 miners gave their lives. This document is a testament to their sacrifice and contribution to the community of Easington Lane.

Thanks are conveyed to Mr John Cook for much of the detail and descriptions in this article relating to the disaster.

The Elemore Pit Disaster

Background to Mining Disasters

Since earliest times any form of mining has not been without its dangers. With the advent of deep mining and the expansion of the coalfields during the 19th and 20th centuries the number of mining accidents increased alarmingly. During the eighteenth century the number of mining disasters (a disaster is described as an incident where more than 10 people are killed), involved the deaths of women and children as well as men. Hardly a year went past in the expanding Durham Coalfield when there was not a disaster from 1700 onwards. Below are listed some of the worst disasters during this early period together with their dates.

Place	Year	No. Killed
Fatfield Colliery	1708	69
Lumley Park	1727	62
Bensham Colliery	1743	80
Fatfield Colliery	1763	17
South Biddick	1766	27
Fatfield Colliery	1767	39
North Biddick	1773	20
Chartershaugh	1773	24

Place	Year	No. Killed
Picktree Coll.	1794	30
Lumley Coll.	1797	31
Lumley Coll.	1799	39
And so the 19th century continued just the way the 18th century had closed:-		
Oxclose Coll.	1805	38
Felling Coll.	1812	92

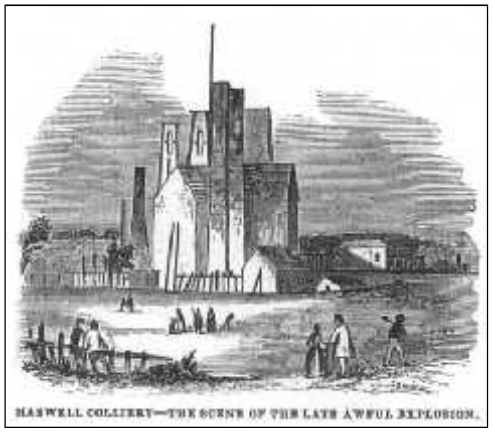
Just looking at the boxes above it appears that a certain pattern was developing i.e. Certain collieries were likely to experience a number of disasters within a short period of time and may have been more dangerous mines to work in. Disasters in mines generally are due to a number of reasons namely:- explosions (either gas or coal dust), roof falls and burial, inundation where flooding takes place and finally equipment or environment failures e.g. a mine shaft.

Safety precautions in mines during this early period was NOT a high priority and coal owners can often be accused of wilful neglect of the safety of their workers. Similarly there was inadequate training for miners and this led to mistakes which often caused serious accidents. Also in the early period some mining practices were dangerous and some equipment used also increased the likelihood of a disaster while offering little protection to the workers.

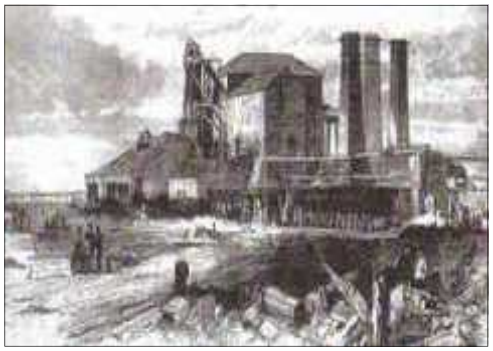
The seven worst disasters in the Northern Coalfield were :- Hartley (Blyth) (1862) 204 killed due to shaft damage and the miners entombed, Seaham (1880) 164 killed, Wallsend (1833) 102 killed, Haswell (1841) 95 killed, Felling (1812) 92 killed, Burradon (1860) 76 killed and Trimdon (1882) 74 killed.

In addition as well as miners' deaths pit ponies also suffered the same fate.

Chartershaugh Pit near Washington 1900



Haswell Colliery 1841



Hartley New Pit 1862

A brief history of Elemore Colliery

Following the sinking of Hetton Colliery and the success it brought to the owners the Hetton Coal Company in 1822, the Company decided to build up their colliery portfolio with the sinking of two further collieries, namely Eppleton Pit which was located a half mile to the north of Hetton colliery and Elemore Colliery the same distance to the south west.

Valuation of the Elemore Colliery showed that with an estimated outlay of around £68,000 the colliery would yield at least £23,000 per annum. Thus on the 25th March 1825 sinking of two shafts, the George and Isabella was started. The land where the colliery was located was close to the village of Easington Lane and was owned by the Baker Baker family of nearby Elemore Hall.

At the start of February 1827 the Hutton seam was reached and early in July the Main seam was reached. Although judged to be of poorer coal than the Hutton it was still worth exploiting.

Within four years, coal was being drawn from the Hutton seam via the George shaft and later in 1831 the Isabella shaft was used to lift coal again from the Hutton seam. Coal brought to the surface was moved along a branch line of the Hetton Railway which had been opened in 1822 having been built by George and Robert Stephenson. Originally a self acting incline plane the coals ran down hill from Elemore to a junction some distance from the Hetton Lyons Pit. It wasn't until 1900 that locomotives were used on the branch line.

The Isabella shaft was at first used as an upcast ventilation shaft operated as a furnace pit. Later in the 1830s reorganisation of the pit allowed the development of a third coal seam, namely the Low Main seam and full production ensued. By 1850 coal drawing was concentrated on the George shaft.

Throughout the period between 1850 and 1880 coal production continued to increase as the demand for the mineral increased in new developing markets. Various changes took place to the shafts and surface machinery to enable the coal once extracted to be lifted and carried away without stoppage. The colliery initially used the method of coal working known as Bord and pillar where blocks of coal within the seam (pillars) were left to support the roof while coal around them (headings and bords) was cut away in a grid fashion. This manner of coal extraction had been carried out for decades within the Durham coalfield and had proved to be relatively safe for the

manpower working it.

Eventually the pillars were removed within an area only when it was safe to do so, but on many occasions the pillars remained for safety and the coal was lost.

In the initial stages of development up to 1890 the colliery prospered but by that year coal extraction in the Hutton seam virtually closed down as the seam was worked out. Within three years the Low Main seam had suffered the same fate even though there was still a large number of coal pillars intact.

Most of the labour force of the colliery lived in Easington Lane and a large number of miners were transferred to Eppleton colliery where developments were going ahead. Closure of the colliery came about for five years and new resources were sought in an attempt to re-open it. In 1898 only fourteen men worked the colliery but this was sufficient to prove that viability was possible and in 1900 the second phase of coal extraction started at the colliery. On February 27th, 1900, Elemore re-commenced pro-

duction in its second phase. This second phase was completed on closure of the colliery in February 1974. During this period of nearly 75 years ups and downs were experienced. During the 1920s and 1930s the pit was closed for lengthy periods because of industrial unrest occurring due to the recession and the general strike.

Accidents and the Disaster Of 1886

Throughout its lifetime it is believed that over 160 men and boys lost their lives in the pit. Most died as a result of individual incidents but others died when a disaster occurred.

The winning of coal has always been accepted as being a hazardous occupation and the pit was generally accepted as being a "Safe" pit by both men and management. Nevertheless accidents occurred and at times seem to be all too numerous. As time went on, safety measures within the mine became more and more important and in its latter years Elemore had a very good safety record.

As early as 1834 the owners, The Hetton Coal Company recognised the dangers of mines and following an accident in that year when a steam boiler exploded killing one man and severely injuring three others, the Company started an accident fund (Relief Fund) whereby each employee contributed money from their fortnightly pay and the company added one sixth of the total of the fund. The money went to help the wives and dependents of those who were killed or maimed as a result of a mining accident.

This fund also had to assist the miners at both Hetton and Eppleton. This Fund was throughout the lifetime of the colliery a significant help to bereaved families even though the amounts provided were potentially a lot less than the money which could have been earned during the lifetime of the miner.

By far the worst accident which occurred in the pit took place on Thursday 2nd December 1886, at approximately 2 a.m. when 41 men were working underground. At the time a number of deputies were waiting at bank, ready to descend in order to examine the workings ready for the day shift men when they went down. Suddenly they heard the sound of a muffled explosion accompanied by smoke, dust and debris being thrown up the downcast George shaft covering the recent snowfall with a grey dust.

Information was immediately sent to Mr Lishman, the Viewer (Manager) and to other viewers and under-viewers at the surrounding collieries.

Immediately rescuers assembled sorting out equipment in preparation for underground exploration and where possible rescue. Within a short time Mr Lishman, Mr Johnson the resident under-viewer, Mr Todd the under-viewer at Lyons, Mr Lowden the under-viewer

at Eppleton, together with two shafts men descended the upcast Isabella shaft in a kibble (a large metal bucket) to the Low Main seam.

They travelled through the workings to the George shaft. They soon came across Thomas Charlton, a master waste man, who had been entering the cage ready to ascend when the explosion blew him off his feet. Fortunately he was alive although he knew little about the incident.

On entering the low main they found the body of Ralph Lawson who worked in the nearby dynamo House and a little further in, the group came across three stonemen, Robt. Appleby, Thomas Johnson and John Luke. All were badly burned about the hands and face and Appleby soon expired. Johnson and Luke were taken to bank and then on to their homes.

They continued travelling further in to the Low Main towards the ventilation furnace area where they found the body of the furnace man Thomas Spence and nearby in the pony stables they found the dead assistant horse keeper, Ralph Fishburn.

Rescuers descending in a kibble

At this point the after damp (gas) became too strong and they were forced to return to the surface.

Work then commenced on clearing the debris from the two George shafts and by 10.00 o'clock this was done, so enabling the eleven men working in the Hutton seam to be rescued alive.

As soon as daylight came, word soon spread throughout the community that there had been an explosion at the pit and people began to congregate in their hundreds, in spite of the cold, at the colliery, waiting for news.

The rescue attempts continued throughout the daylight hours in order to reach the trapped men. Progress, however, was slow due to the fact that blockages had to be cleared in the Low Main and debris removed. Additionally ventilation had to be restored to ensure the safety of the rescuers. At bank the damaged cages from the George shaft were being refitted ready for use.

By nightfall, fifteen men had been rescued , twenty one were still trapped and four were dead since two had succumbed shortly after rescue. Nevertheless there was still hope for those still in the mine and rescue teams continued to arrive at the mine.

It wasn't until Saturday morning, two days after the explosion that all but one of the trapped men had been found. Alas they were all dead.

In the Second South Way, Lady Hutton seam, put-

ters George Walton and George Nicholson were found dead and the bodies of hewers David Hunter, Matthew Tempest and William Seeds and deputy Robert Hills were located at their places of work having been overcome with afterdamp.

Samuel Grice and George Patterson, two wastemen were found in the Little Derby Way. In South Derby Ways two hewers George and Robert Thompson, (father and son) and a boy George Taylor were located. The Thompsons were both killed by a fall of stone and the unmarked body of George Taylor was recovered by George Johnson, the under-viewer, his grandfather.

In Hall Way Low Main eight men were discovered. They had all been trying to walk out to the shaft bottom when they were overcome by the afterdamp. They were found on the 4th December while a stoneman, John Johnson, had been found the day previously. On Tuesday the 7th of December the last missing man's body was found, that of hewer James Carr. In addition fifty pit ponies also perished in the disaster.

Once the pit was well ventilated men were set on to clear away all the rubble and debris left by the explosion. Every part of the pit had in some way been affected by the explosion. Many of the miners at the pit were however laid off as their working areas had to be remedied. It was expected that it would take some weeks before work could be resumed in some areas. Some men were eventu-

ally offered employment at the Eppleton and Lyons collieries but it appears that the arrangements proposed by the owners were not acceptable to the Eppleton and Lyons miners.

The Aftermath

The relief fund established within a day of the disaster was meant to take care of the eighteen widows and thirty six children.

A wish had been expressed that the bodies should be buried together in the churchyard of the Lyons Parish Church in Easington Lane

The first five funerals for **Thomas Spencer, William Seeds, Ralph Fishburn, Ralph Lawson and Robert Appleby** took place on Sunday 5th December while the following souls were buried on the next day, **Matthew Tempest, Robert Hills, Stephen Parkinson, Joseph Williams, John Laverick, Samuel Grice, John Johnson, George G Taylor, David Hunter, George Patterson, Thomas Robbins, Thomas Clark, Robert Pearson, William Robson, and George Patterson.**

The funerals were held in great solemnity in front of a very large crowd estimated to be in excess of ten thousand, drawn from the community and outside. Once the burials had been completed the relatives placed wreaths on the graves.

George Thompson and his son Robert were buried on the Tuesday afternoon and **James Carr**, the last body to be recovered was buried on Thursday 9th December.

Francis Straughan, John Luke and John Buckingham all died later of their injuries and were buried in the churchyard.

George Walton and George Nicholson were buried in Hetton churchyard

The inquest was presided over by the Coroner for Easington Ward Mr. T.C. Maynard and was held at the Three Tuns, Elemore, Davy Lamp, Easington Lane and the Colliery Inn at Hetton. The Jury returned the following verdict :-

" That Ralph Fishburn and others met their deaths by an explosion in the George Low Main seam, Elemore Colliery, on the morning of December 2nd 1886; that the said explosion occurred between the Dale Way and the "greaser" , but what caused the ignition there is not sufficient evidence to show".

The coroner than asked if they wanted to make any statement about shot firing. The Jury declined to make a statement.

An expert witness Mr George Baker-Forster was called in to establish the cause of the accident. He was not able to establish the exact cause of the explosion but he was able to establish the location of the explosion. In his experience explosions occur when a naked light is applied to an area exposed to gas or possibly coal dust or both. The location where the incident occurred would have been unlikely to have had a large amount of gas due to the volume of air in the vicinity of the location. Additionally he could say that in his opinion the level of dust

in the area was not significant. He also could not give a reason how the ignition had taken place as there were no naked lights and all lamps were locked. He thought the explosion did not take place in any other part of the pit and could not give any reason for the explosion taking place where it did.

The preponderance of the evidence suggested that the explosion was caused by the firing of a shot in the location where the explosion took place.

Another expert witness, Mr. John Daglish, a mining engineer of some 40 years standing also came to the same conclusions as Mr Baker-Forster. He was not prepared to say that the explosion was caused by the ignition of coal dust alone since where the explosion took place there were deposits of coal dust. The difficulty he had was that in that area there was likely to be no or low levels of gas but cracks in the sandstone roof may have given off quantities of gas at the time of shot firing. This accumulation of gas and coal dust may well have been the cause of the explosion but there is no substantive evidence to suggest that this is the case.

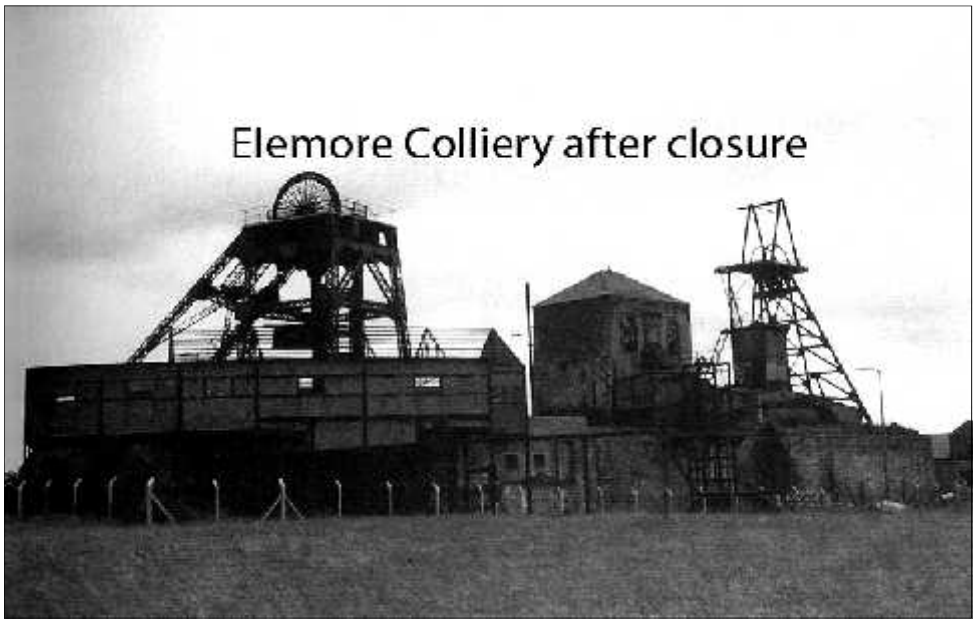
Thus the exact truth of the circumstances surrounding the explosion will never be known. It is significant to note however, that following the explosion at Elemore the Hetton Coal Company never again used gunpowder for shot-firing preferring the safer gelatine dynamite in water cartridges and fired by electricity, for that purpose.

The Miners who Died

Name	Age
George Patterson	54
David Hunter	40
Samuel Grice	29
Robert Pearson	54
Robert Hills	64
Ralph Lawson	44
Robert William Appleby	53
John Johnson	58
John G Laverick	23
William Robson	43
George Thompson (father)	43
Robert Thompson (son)	19
Joseph Williams	37
Thomas Spence	36
Matthew Tempest	38
George A Pattinson	31
Ralph Fishburn	60
James Carr	65

Name	Age
William Seeds	41
Stephen Parkinson	**27**
Thomas Robins	**20**
George Nicholson	**21**
George J Taylor	**17**
George Walton	**17**
Thomas Clark	**51**
Francis Straughan	**39**
Henry Buckingham	**23**
John Luke	**38**

Some months earlier in October 1886 a similar explosion took place at Altoft Colliery in West Yorkshire killing 22 miners. Again it was not proved how the explosion had occurred but it was assumed that coal dust in some quantity was responsible. At the beginning of the 20th century new regulations for the mining industry recognised that coal dust could be an accelerator or even the cause of explosions in mines and required damping down with water before shots were to be fired in the vicinity.



It has been a privilege to write this document on behalf of the miners of Elemore colliery, many of whom paid the ultimate sacrifice in providing for their families and the community in which they lived. It is difficult to estimate the totality of the contribution that the miners made to Easington Lane and the wider community, but it is significant and due to the working spirit they engendered; knowing that every day while they worked both above ground and underground they faced hazards which they accepted without complaint. ***They are still recognised today and will be remembered for years to come.*** ***HLHG.***