

The Hartley Pit Disaster Northumberland 1862

by Colin Wanless

In 1861, according to the census, a family called Wanless lived at 11 North West Row, Holywell, Northumberland. They were: Thomas, coal miner (48) born in Wallsend, Northumberland; Isabella, his wife (44) born in Jarrow, Co Durham; Peter, coal miner (23) born in Tynemouth, Northumberland; Christopher, putter in coalmine (19); Thomas, putter in coal mine (18); Luke, putter in coal mine (16); John, driver in coal mine (13) and Bateman, scholar (10), the later children all having been born in Earsdon, Northumberland. In January of the following year the family was to mourn the deaths of three of the sons. However, I have not, as yet, discovered that this family is connected to my own.

At New Hartley Colliery, on Thursday 16 January 1862, there occurred an accident, which, from its peculiar and unforeseen nature and disastrous extent, is unparalleled in the mining annals of the country. In 1844, a new winning had been commenced about a mile and a half to the north of the old colliery. The low Main Seam was reached on 29 May 1846. At this time the colliery was owned by Messrs Jobling, Carr & Co and shortly afterwards transferred to Messrs Carr Brothers & Co.

On the morning of the accident, in the new year of 1862, the Back-Shift had gone down and the Fore-Shift men were still in the pit, with the exception of 16 or 17 men who had "come to bank" and eight being drawn up in the cage, when at 10.30 am, the outer end of the beam fell down the shaft. The immediate cause of the disaster was the breaking into two pieces of the enormous beam of cast iron which weighed more than 43 tons, falling headlong into the shaft. Only Ralph Robinson, William Sharp and Thomas Watson were to get out of the cage alive.

It was soon realised that some 200 men were trapped

in the low Main Seam, the lowest part of the pit. Mr William Coulson, the master sinker from Co Durham took charge of the rescue. This was a dangerous task and, on the following Tuesday, some of the rescuers were overcome by gas. In order to improve ventilation, a canvas brattice was run from the High Main to the Yard Seams. Part of this brattice was made on the spot and the rest at Seaham, Co Durham. On Wednesday afternoon, 22 January, the bodies of the trapped miners were found and it was reported that they all appeared to have lain down and gone to sleep. The frightful work of bringing up the bodies began on the morning of Saturday 25 January and didn't end until 4 am on Sunday. The work of Mr Coulson and his band of gallant men was over, many of them not having left their post for over a week. Queen Victoria sent a number of telegrams to Mr Charles Carr expressing her sympathy for the poor widows and orphans and, before the bodies were discovered, her concern for the safety of the men and boys. The Rev R E Mason, incumbent of Earsdon, informed the relatives that there was not enough burial ground available, so provision was made outside the churchyard on ground given by His Grace the Duke of Northumberland and consecrated the bishop.

Names of those killed

The following names appear on the monument in Earsdon Churchyard, laid out in four panels:

J Amour 43	C Wanless 20
R Amour 14	T Wanless 19
J Ternent 44	J Wanless 14
C Ternent 15	W Jack 24
W Pape 14	W Gledson 71
T Sharp 48	W Gledson 43
H Sharp 44	G Gledson 41
A Elliot 29	T Gledson 36
C Sharp 49	T Gledson 16
C Sharp 15	W Liddle 40
J Sharp 13	W Liddle 17
J Bewick 34	J Liddle 15

J Bewick 32	J Liddle 46
R Bewick 30	T Liddle 18
T Robinson 42	C Liddle 16
T Dawson 49	J Liddle 11
J Dawson 12	T Liddle 41
A Richardson 22	T Liddle 18
J Johnson 41	T Laws 33
R Johnson 42	C Laws 23
T Coal 37	W Louge 30
T Chambers 55	L Long 15
C Chambers 19	R Long 17
J Humble 27	M Murray 28
W Dixon 34	R Murley 23

W Bannan 24	W Allen 36
T Brown 25	A Atkinson 20
R Brown 15	A Alderton 31
M Bell 23	J Ainsley 19
T Bell 13	J Armstrong 36
T Bell 23	E Armstrong 12
J Burn 52	J Armstrong 10
T Burn 18	W Anderson 17
J Bennet 25	J Broadfoot 19
J Campbell 28	C Brown 31
J Coulson 33	W Brown 25
R Coulson 26	S Birtley 24
A Cheetham 33	S Blackburn 26
G Carling 27	H Clough 47
P Cross 59	J Cousins 18
P Cross 20	R Cousins 12
J Coyle 28	W Dixon 27
J Davidson 38	R Dixon 12
W Davidson 11	J Douglas 25
P Duffy 34	E Elliot 19
J Duffy 10	J Foster 18
G Fulton 25	J Foter 15
J Ford 27	W Fairbairn 70
H Ford 32	G Fairbairn 33
P Ford 12	J Gallagher 32
G Hays 41	D Gallagher 28

P Manderson 50	W Palmer 35
W Miller 43	T Rutherford 32

W Miller 34 M Robinson 30
 T Macauley 38 W Redpath 24
 R McMullon 27 E Rowley 33
 I MulIon 36 W Rutherford 23
 R McClutchey 24 J Rutherford 25
 W Macfarlane 15 H Riley 30
 J McKee 55 R Robson 36
 A McKee 24 J Robson 12
 W Mcrachen 24 T Ross 46
 R North 26 P Randall 33
 G North 10 H Mason 24
 J North 14 E Stainsby 23
 A North 12 R Small 19
 J Nicholson 52 T Sebastian 19
 J Nicholson 21 P Sherlock 28
 J Ormston 32 W Stanley 34
 P Nesbit 20 F Smith 33
 J Nicholson 14 W Smith 19
 W Oliver 56 G Scurfield 52
 J Oliver 27 E Softley 17
 J Oliver 21 C Skinner 14
 W Oliver 17 W Telford 24
 P Oliver 15 J Taylor 38
 T Pearson 28 C Thirwell 27

J Terney 14 W Tibbs 32
 C Graham 27 J Tryer 33
 G Glen 12 W Ternent 40
 W Glen 14 T Veich 21
 J Glen 18 T Watson 30
 O Gleghorn 24 C Wilson 38
 R Hill 21 B Walker 21
 P Gormerly 25 J Watson 16
 H Gibson 18 J Watson 38
 F Hauxwell 25 C Wade 31
 G Howard 20 T Weirs 40
 J Harding 15 R Weirs 20
 T Harrison 16 P Walpool 30
 G Hall 26 J Watson 39
 P Hammel 33 T Watson 31
 T Hepple 27 W Wilson 16
 G Hill 31 J Wilkinson 23
 G Hindmarch 30 W White 16

A Houston 34 W Wilson 12
 J Hamelton 56 J Walker 16
 J Hamelton 12 W Walker 12
 J Hodge 33 H Younger 33
 H Hunter 13 J Young 25
 W Kennedy 30 J Youll 28
 A Morgan 44 D Wypher 24

The day of the great funeral

From early dawn on Sunday 26 January 1862, a crowd began to gather and it was later estimated to be 60,000 strong. The first contingent set off for Cramlington, where some nine or 10 bodies were interred. Separate burials took place at Cowpen and Seghill.

Earsdon lay about four miles from New Hartley and the first rough hearse had arrived at the church before the last had left the colliery. There was scarcely a break in the procession throughout the whole of that distance. The digging of the graves had proved so laborious and tedious that a great many bodies had been interred before the last graves had been prepared and darkness had well nigh fallen. The Hartley Memorial which lists the names and ages of the 204 men and boys can still be seen in Earsdon churchyard.

A relief fund was set up on 24 January 1862 and by April amounted to over £75,000. This was used for the widows and the education of the orphans.

Medals awarded

On 20 May 1862, a meeting was held in the Town Hall, Newcastle upon Tyne, under the chairmanship of Mr Hugh Taylor, for the purpose of giving public recognition to the services of the sinkers and for the presentation of testimonials. The medals were struck in silver with the exception of that for William Coulson Snr who received a gold medal. They were awarded to the following men, whose names are arranged in order of the length of

time during which assistance was given: William Coulson, William Coulson Jnr, David Wilkinson, Elsdon Heron, Richard Johnson, Henry Snowden, Richard Wilson, Mathew Chapman, James Muters, John Manderson, John Angus, Mitchell Bailey, Robett Milburne, John Nevens, George Emerson, Andrew Swaine, Ralph Heron, John Little, Mathew Dodds, Edward Davison, Ralph Harrison, Lashley Hope, George Pace, George Graham, Fenwick Charlton, Jesse Smith, William Shields, William Reed, John Heron, John Smith, R Maughan, John Burns, Peter Lindsay, John Sedgwick, John Henderson, William Johnson, Thomas Hetherington and Robert Hamilton.

In 1928 a drift was sunk at the Hartley Hastings Pit which, by pure coincidence, had 204 steps: the exact number of lives lost.

Hartley Pit closed in 1959 and, as Lord Robens so rightly said, "204 men and boys paid with their lives for the hard lesson that a coal mine needs two shafts."

These details were extracted from *Memoir of the Hartley Colliery Accident 1862* edited by TE Forster and published by Andrew Reid & Co Ltd, Akenside Hill, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1912, and *The Hartley Colliery Disaster*, J E McCutcheon, reprinted and published by D R Little, 1974. The former book varies in some of the forenames and surnames of the victims, which in the latter are shown in the form of photographs of the memorial.