

**THE CALIFAT COAL MINE TRAGEDY
(COLEORTON NO.2. PIT)
OCTOBER 1863**

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BY SAMUEL T STEWART - OCTOBER 2021**

On Tuesday last the adjourned inquest relative to the circumstances under which the accident took place at the Coleorton Colliery was opened at the Railway Inn, Swannington, before J. Gregory, Esq, coroner, and jury consisting of the following persons :—John Porter, Joseph Pickering, John James Guttcridge, Wm. Shelton, John Hewes, Joseph Sharp, Michael Fields, William Brinsley, William Hensom, Joseph Wheatley, and Edward Moss. The particulars of the unfortunate occurrence were fully narrated in the Journal last week, showing that the inroad of water had drowned a boy and two men, whose names were Harry Clements (15). Jeremiah Rose (50), and Francis Doman (60). The body of the youth only had been recovered, and the inquest, which was formally opened at the time, had been postponed.

The Coroner stated that he expected that **Mr. Headley**, would have been present. He read a note which he had received from that gentleman, stating that the inquest no doubt would have to be again adjourned to afford an opportunity for them to examine the breach. As this announcement was being made the Government Inspector arrived.

William Wilton, the first witness called, stated that he was looking after the shaft men, and his duties took him into No.8. stall in the Califat Pit, belonging to Messrs. Worswick and Walker, Swannington, when the water broke in during the night of the 7th inst. A man named Ward, and a Staffordshire man named Richards, were holing in the stall at the time when it was noticed that water was running very fast to the right of them, about two yards in length, and between the men and the way-head where the stall was holed. He said "Where does this water come from?" and Ward said, "It is coming out of the break joint of the coal". Witness then said "Leave off holing; never saw water coining out of the break like that before. Do you knock off, and I'll fetch Mr. Pickering" (the ground bailiff). The stream of water at that time was about as thick his leg. His companion replied, "We have not over three or four blows to do," and he replied, if you have only half a blow, knock off until I fetch him" (meaning Pickering). He then left the workmen to find Mr. Pickering.

On his road he met William Clements—the father of the deceased—going to blow the coal down, and he told him not to do so until he fetched Mr. Pickering. After half an hour he returned with Mr. Pickering from another part of the pit. It would then be about half-past four o'clock. He told Mr. Pickering what he had seen. Ward and Richards had left the stall; Clements was there but had done nothing. Mr. Pickering looked at the break as the water was coming in, as before stated, and said that they had better set a sprag or two, or anything they could get, against the coal to support it. He set one sprag and Clements set three. He (witness) left the stall at about five o'clock, and said that the thing Pickering could do would be to go and let Mr. Lewis (the manager of the colliery) know. Pickering went towards the bottom of the pit, and he (witness) started to go No.12. stall. He saw one of the loaders out of No. 4. stall, called Domain, and told him to tell the night men in the roads to leave off their work, for he should be waiting for them to go up. He did not give the order because he apprehended danger just then. He then went up.

Between eight and nine o'clock the same morning he was informed that he was to go back to the pit with young Pickering, the son of the ground bailiff. He went, and descended the pit with Mr. Pickering and his son. Having reached the bottom he collected some wedges, whilst young Pickering went forward to the breach. He soon followed with two iron wedges. Mr. Pickering was missed. When he (witness) got up to the stall young Pickering was unloading a tub of stone. He therefore went to the end of the stall, and found Thomas Bird, corporal or deputy. The water was coming in with considerably increased quantity; that would be about half-past nine. : How had the water increased. If it was as thick as your leg first, how thick was the stream in the second instance ? The Inspector : I don't think you can measure a stream of water. Witness : It would be three times as thick as a leg when I saw it the second time. Bird said, "Bill, I'm glad you have come; have got rum job now. We must have a tree or two set to the roof." Witness replied "I have done what I am going to do," meaning, that he saw there was danger, and he should go away at once. He therefore went to the bottom to leave the pit, and met Mr. Lewis and Mr. Pickering, sen., on the road, at the distance of about forty or fifty yards from where the water was coming in. Young Pickering was near Bird. Mr. Lewis said "Good mornin?, Bird," and he replied " Good morning, sir." Mr. Lewis then said " Does it come any faster?" and he replied, a great deal, sir." Mr. Lewis then went towards the stall where the water was coming in, and he (witness) came out of the pit.

Mr. Headley. - Bird was the only person working in the stall when he left. Jeremiah Rose, young Pickering, William Parkinson, and man named Hibbert were close to the stall; other men were at work on the roads. He was not in the pit after the water had broken in so to cause the deaths. About half-past ten, when he was on his road home, he heard of the accident by young Pickering, who came up dripping wet, and quite alarmed them.

The Inspector : How was it that you undertook to tell the men to knock off when the water was coming in, **Witness** : Because I had never seen anything like it. **The Inspector** : Did it occur to you that it was from the old Hollows? **Witness**: Yes; because the smell was so bad.

William Clements, father of one of the deceased, stated that he was a miner, and had worked about eight years at the Califat or California pits. He went to work about half-past three o'clock on the morning of Thursday, the 8th instant. When he was going on the road to No. 8 stall to take some coal down, he met two of the men—John Stanley and William Newbery—who had been holing. They said that they had pricked a wet break. He rejoined, "Perhaps you have hit the hollow." They added, "William Cabley (meaning Wilton) had gone to look at it." On going further he met Wilton coming from the stall and the remark he addressed to him was, " Bill, I would not meddle with the sprags if I was you." He (witness) said that he would go and work at the place, and accordingly went up to the stall, pulled his jacket off, and found Aaron Stewart and Richard Lees holing in the fast ends next to the place Ward had left. He said to Stewart and Lees, "What are you doing" and Stewart said, "We are taking this knob (a piece of coal) out" He (witness) said, "Come out, this is the hollows;" the water was then coming out of the break in a stream thick as his leg. Stewart said he would "Stop and take the knob out" He (witness) said, " What, you would sooner take the knob out and be drowned than leave it in". Let it be, "I'll take it out." [**The Coroner**: You were not afraid of being drowned then? **Witness** : "Well, that's what I happened to say.

Stewart then left off. William Pickering and Wilton then came up to the stall, and said, "What do you think of it?, and he replied. "I think it is the hollows. Bring me some sprags." Wilkinson brought them, and he set them to hold the coal He then told

Pickering that they had better stop the men from taking the coal down in No. 14 stall, as the blasting might shake the place and make the case worse. He said also, " Pickering, I told you about fortnight ago about having the rods in before us". The forcing rods ought to have been before them. Pickering replied. "I told Mr. Lewis a week since this morning that there should be some rods," and he said " Pooh, pooh, there are forty yards of good coal before us." **A Juryman** : Had you been in the habit of having these rods? **Witness** : No.

Witness's examination continued: He remarked to Pickering, that if Robert Lakin (who was bailiff before Pickering came) had been here, the rods would have been thirty yards back. He remained in the stall about twenty minutes, and noticed that the water changed three times in colour. was white as milk, then like ochre, and red ; he considered that the colour was a sign of the water coming from the hollows. He went away about five o' clock, and met Pickering, who said, " How is it Bill" and he replied, " It comes faster." He said, " Well, Bill, I have sent for John Lakin (night deputy). He (witness) went away, and soon after left the pit.

He subsequently saw his son on the bank ready to go down, but happened not to warn him of doing so. If he had worked in the stall he should have believed it was the hollows. The men who were working were young chaps, and did not know of the danger. They had no books or guide to go by. **By the Inspector** : He had worked at stalls when boring was going on, but in the stalls in question there had not been any boring since they were started. The stalls in that direction were surrounded by the hollows. **Mr. Wheatley (juryman)** : Is there a top or surface plan of the workings showing the position of the hollows Inspector : No; that is immaterial Mr. Wheatley : There ought to be a corresponding surface plan to show the position of the old workings. William Springthorpe, miner, deposed that he worked at No. 2 stall in the Califat pit, near the place of the disaster, and about two o'clock on the morning of Thursday the 8th instant, the alarm came to them that they had hit a large quantity of water in No. 8 stall. He hastened with his work, and about four o'clock went to see the place. On arriving at the way end he found Stewart, Ward, and Richards, just coming out, having finished holing. He told them that they had prevented their working with the water coming in, and he thought they had struck upon the hollows. Mr. Pickering was in the stall, and ordered witness to send a man to No. 14 (the next stall), to tell them not to take any out or blow any more coals down He did so, and came out of the pit shortly after 5 O'clock.

William Clamp, miner, at No. 17 stall in the Califat pit, on the slip side, deposed that when he went down to work a little before six o'clock on the morning of the 8th inst. he was informed a man named Joseph Hodges alias Putchin, a loader, that the hollows had been tapped, and that the water had broken in. The work was continued for some time, and on being warned again by the boys that they had better go to the shaft bottom, eighteen men and a lot of lads went thither. They were there met by Mr. Lewis, who said, "Go back to your work, if there is any danger, I will let you know." They went to their work again, and filled about six tubs of coal in his stall, when the boy, John Greasley, gave an alarm for the second time that the water was rushing in. Accordingly, they all got to the bottom of the shaft and were drawn up as soon they could get The water had just got up to the shaft as they arrived to be taken up. The water spread about the pit. After the lapse of half hour he went down into the pit again to try to get out six men who had been left behind. William Bird, Henry Lakin, and Wm Walker accompanied him. When they got down the pit they found that the water was within a span or about six inches of the roof on one side, and about half a yard on the other. He swam off the cage to the stall, a distance of five or six yards, and said that a number of horses were standing then up to their bellies in water. They had to come the shaft again.

A second descent was made in five minutes, the party including this time Mr. Lewis. Four horses were sent up. He (witness) went to the main road about fifty yards. The water varied in depth in accordance with the incline towards the pit bottom ; in one place it took him above his middle, and in another the rails were perceptible. Generally speaking, he should think the water was half a yard lower than they found it at first. He returned to the pit bottom to tell Mr. Lewis and the rest of the party of the depth or shallowness of the water. The party, with the exception of Mr. Lewis, went up the road, and after a while separated.

He (witness) returned for some more candles, and his comrades proceeded. When he again joined them, his mates went to the right, and he went to the left. He was soon to the neck in water, and had to refrain from going further. He came back and met Mr. Pickering, who advised him to tell his three companions return. He went and met them.

Josiah Hibbert deposed : I am a miner, and have worked in No. 2 stall, in that pit about three months. About half past six on the morning of the accident, Bird came and asked me to go with him to No 8 stall. did so, and he immediately sent me back to fetch Ward and Lagar. We all commenced ramming stones under the holing keep the coal up. This continued for an hour, but in spite of this the water came in faster. We became alarmed, left the stall, and came to the bottom of the road, when we met Rose, and he desired to go back to No.8. stall. I turned back with Rose, and we found Bird, Lagar, and the deceased Clements in the stall, packing stones in the hole. The water was then coming in very fast. Rose and I began to saw some trees through for the purpose of propping the coals, and I assisted Bird to set two of them.

At this time Pickering and Lewis came into the stall when Lewis told us fetch some stone from down the road in a tub, and we did so, and Pickering packed it under the hole. Whilst we were doing this, Mr. Lewis sent two others to fetch more stone, and packed that also under the holing. A third tub was sent for, and got it almost to the way head, when the water broke in over the tops of the sprags with a great rush. At this time I was across the way head, about a yard to the right from where it burst in. Pickering and his son, Parkinson, and Bums, were also in the stall at time. Rose was down the road, almost fifteen yards from the lip. I and Pickering started off directly, and he fell, and put out the light. We passed him and Rose in the dark, and saw no one else till I got to the bottom, at which place the water took me up to the chin, and in some parts over my head. Pickering overtook me against the bottom, and I and Lagar went up to the surface, and Rose followed afterwards.

Mr. Lewis had left about quarter of an hour before the water had burst in. William Parkinson, on being sworn, said : I had been at work in the pit that night, and left at half-past five in the morning, and at eight I was sent for and went to the pit for the purpose of trying to stop the water. When I got there I found the water coming in at No.8. stall, through a break of coal. I saw Bird and the deceased there; Bird was putting sprags under the holing, and I assisted him in doing so. After this, Pickering and his son came up. Stone and timber were brought into the stall, and applied as far as could be to keep the coal up. Mr. Lewis was also there. The water still continued to come in about the same rate. An effort to keep the coal up was made by us, but the water burst in and the lights were quickly put out. When I heard the rush I made the best of my way up the road towards the bottom, and passed Bird about sixty yards up, when he said, " What art thou doing there?" Rose was standing by his side, and a horse was across the road. The deceased Clements was on the road, and I took hold of his waistcoat, and tried to pull him along, but he was thrown down twice, and at last I was obliged to leave him, the water at this rime was up my neck.

William Pickering, junr., said : I am miner, and lately have been working on the roads, and left work at six o'clock on the morning of the accident. About half past eight I was sent for to help in assisting to secure the coal in No.8. stall. I went alone, and found the water running in from underneath the coal. Bird was there, and I went to assist him. My father came next, and we pushed the coal up as we thought secure, and then began to pack with stones, so as to make it quite solid. The water then abated, and I said to Bird "I think we shall get the better of it, as I have had worse jobs than these at the California pits." Bird was setting a tree against the coal wall to the stone packing, and I was setting a tree to the root, when the water burst in again. Bird and Parkinson were close to me at the time, and father against the gate door, unloading a tub of stone. Hibbert was taking the stone from father, and Rose was at the stone tub. Parkinson and myself made the best of our way, and having no lights, thought we were lost. I tumbled against some one, but whom I do not know. I proceeded further, and found a horse in the road, and my father fast against a tub. I released him, and pushed him forward, but we never expected to get out alive. I saw some one with a light, and hastened on to get up the road. When we got safe to the bottom, most of them were gone up. There were upwards of sixty persons in the pit at the time of the accident. The two men Bird and Rose have not yet been found. William Bird was also examined, as well as John Stanley, after which the inquiry was adjourned for a month, when Mr. Headley will have made his examination, and it is expected he will give evidence. The two men Rose and Bird were found during the night of Tuesday. Rose was in a sitting posture, with Bird's head resting on his knee. They had evidently died from the effects of the foul air, and were not drowned.