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KING COAL'S FINAL VICTIM

**A reconstruction of the events surrounding the
last fatal accident in a Bristol colliery – August 1932**

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It often comes as a surprise to people when they first visit Bristol to be told that between the First and Second World Wars coal mining was still being carried out within the city boundary, and that it was not until the early 1960's that the last mine in adjoining South Gloucestershire finally closed. Today little can be seen of these enterprises, but the fact remains that between 1952 and 1963 there was an experimental drift mine operating at Harry Stoke, within a kilometer of the University of the West of England's Coldharbour Lane Campus, while the abandoned shaft of Deep Pit, at 410 yards once reputed to have been the deepest mine in the country, is located at Clay Hill, just 1½ kilometers S.S.E. of the St. Matthias Campus.

Although coal extraction has been undertaken locally since at least 1223, when it is mentioned in the Great Pipe Roll, the area's full potential was not fully realised until the second half of the nineteenth century when Handel Cossham, a local self-taught geologist with considerable business acumen, undertook a systematic investigation of the geological structure of the northern edge of the Kingswood anticline. His discovery of hitherto unknown coal seams, and his subsequent success in reaching them through deep shafts, brought him a personal fortune and extended the life of some of the existing coal mines in inner Bristol well into the twentieth century.

The collieries of North Bristol and South Gloucestershire reached their peak in 1879, when there were 21 at work, but by the turn of the century the national contraction in the demand for coal had caused production in the region to decrease, bringing the number of mines in operation down to 11, while after World War One loss of export markets and competition from fuel oil ensured that by 1920 only five remained. Of these, the underground interconnected Speedwell and Deep Pit, the winding shafts of which were only about 600 metres apart and known collectively as the Kingswood Collieries, were the only ones in North Bristol, the other three being located over the border in South Gloucestershire. By 1950, however, all the deep mines were gone, the first to cease production being Hanham, which closed in 1926, and Deep Pit where winding had stopped by 1930. They were followed in 1936 by Speedwell and the Parkfield colliery, near Pucklechurch, and finally Frog Lane, at Coalpit Heath, which carried on until 1949 when rising water levels caused by the abandonment of Parkfield finally forced the pumps at the last deep mine in the area to give up the unequal struggle.

It was, however, during the final years of working at Speedwell Colliery that an act of bravery took place which at the time touched the hearts of thousands of local people. The drama started at about 8 p.m. on the night of Sunday August 21st 1932, when Jack Emery, a colliery fireman who was the overman of the mine's No.5 District, descended the 380 yard deep shaft to check things over before the men of the night shift came in, this being the first inspection made in the district since the pit had finished work on the Friday. He is then known to have met up with Isaac Kendall and Frank Plummer at the station at about 10.45 p.m., where he instructed them to clear

up any dirt in the district's bottom level, before moving up the coal face to the top level, clearing away anything else they might find as they went.

All proceeded normally for the next four hours, and the two men had completed work in the lower level by 3 a.m., but shortly after the situation began to change dramatically, for as they moved on to a point about 20 yards up the face, which was only about two and a half feet in height, they began to feel the effects of bad air. Unfortunately, unlike the fireman, they normally had no need of a flame safety lamp so were unaware of what was affecting them until they became so impaired by the gas that they in fact proceeded up the face before finally collapsing in the waste against the rib of coal which formed the higher side of the district. Kendall and Plummer were now trapped in a disused working in the west heading, more than a mile from the bottom of the pit shaft.

Jack Emery was next seen at about 4.30 a.m. on the Monday morning going in towards No.5 district to start his inspection prior to the arrival of the day shift, but his movements in the 5½ hour period after about 11 p.m. when he left his two colleagues, remain a mystery to this day. Nevertheless, it was subsequently ascertained that when Emery re-entered the district and found the men collapsed he picked up the unconscious Kendall and carried him several yards to safety, then started back for Plummer, but before reaching the gas laden area again collapsed and died.

The day-shift fireman came down the pit at 6 a.m. that morning, but upon failing to meet his night-shift opposite number, was told by the other night-shift fireman that Emery, Kendall and Plummer were still at their workplace. Alerted to a possible problem, a number of the day-shift workers made straight for the No.5 District, arriving there at about 7 a.m., and upon hearing groaning coming from behind the higher side pack, immediately began pulling stones out of the pack. Fortunately, it was not long before they reached Isaac Kendall, who was quickly dragged out, revived, brought to the surface, and after further treatment, taken to his home nearby in Speedwell.

While the frantic work to revive Kendall was still going on underground, word was sent to the colliery manager, Daniel Jones, who immediately put the emergency plan into operation, and prepared to descend into the pit to lead the search for the two men still missing. Nevertheless, it was the day-shift fireman who was the next person to reach No.5 District, arriving there about 8 a.m., and although by great efforts he succeeded in recovering Jack Emery's body, which was soon brought to the surface, it was quite impossible to reach Frank Plummer who was trapped, but whose groans could clearly be heard.

By 10.45 a.m. the local doctor, the young Cyril Bernard who had answered the emergency call to the mine, Daniel Jones, Alderman Charles Gill, the local Miner's Agent and Mr.F.M.Sidall, His Majesty's Inspector of Mines for the area, had all penetrated deep into the workings, some 2850 feet from the surface. The gas, however, proved to be an almost impassable barrier, the pit's ventilation being too weak to remove it, giving Jones no choice but to send an urgent message to the Somerset Mines Rescue Centre at Midsomer Norton, from where Mr.Senior and his assistant rushed with equipment, including five sets of Siebe-Gorman & Co.'s "Proto" compressed oxygen breathing apparatus, arriving at Speedwell at about 3 p.m.

Three members of the rescue team Wesley Wilcox, Frederick Woodruff and Bert Needs, immediately donned the gas fighting helmets, and although they forced their way far enough into the working to hear Plummer breathing, were still unable to reach him as a fall of coal and rock some six yards long had occurred.

The three of them then worked frantically to dig through the rubble and eventually succeeded in pulling the trapped man clear some ten hours after he had first become entombed. He was then removed to a safe place where Mr.Senior and his assistant, with several others, pumped oxygen into him from a reviving apparatus and as Plummer's body was very cold after his long exposure, his rescuers also rubbed him until his respiration was working properly. The rescue operation finally came to an end at about 4.45 p.m. when Frank Plummer's inert body was brought to the surface and rushed by St.John Ambulance to the Bristol General Hospital, where it was late evening before he regained consciousness. Following an analysis, it was later discovered that there was only 8.1 per cent oxygen in the samples of air taken in the waste, and at the time it was considered a wonder that the man ever recovered.

Alderman Gill subsequently received a large number of congratulatory comments on Jack Emery's bravery, a man who left behind a widow, Eliza Jane, and three children, and when he visited Frank Plummer in hospital the sick man especially asked him to express to the grieving relatives his heartfelt gratitude for the fireman's actions. Plummer, a Bedminster man with a wife and five children, was still seriously ill and Gill reported that he would for some time be dependent on money received under the Workman's Compensation Act, but that would amount to only a half of his normal weekly wage. As for Emery's family, Gill proposed to set up a special fund to cover their needs.



Crowds outside Speedwell Colliery August 22nd 1932

Not surprisingly, Jack Emery's funeral was a magnificent affair and thousands of people gathered for about an hour and a half before the cortege left the family home at 43 Chester Park Road, Fishponds, with crowds lining both sides of Lodge Causeway. The nearby Morley Congregational Chapel, where Emery regularly attended, was full to overflowing and when the funeral procession eventually moved down over the Causeway about 50 miners, in fact most of the night shift with which the man had worked, followed behind. Large crowds were also present at Greenbank Cemetery where the coffin was covered in floral tributes.



Jack Emery's cortege outside his home at 43 Chester Park Road, Fishponds.

At the Inquest, which was held on September 15th before the Mr.A.E.Baker, the Bristol Coroner, it was announced that 43 year old John William Emery had died as a result of the inhalation of gas, probably fire damp, and on behalf of the colliery owners, Mr.F.E. Metcalfe added that "Emery had lost his life through trying to rescue two men whose lives were saved. If he had not gone into a place where he courted death to start to get out one of the men he would probably have been alive today. The management feel his loss very deeply".

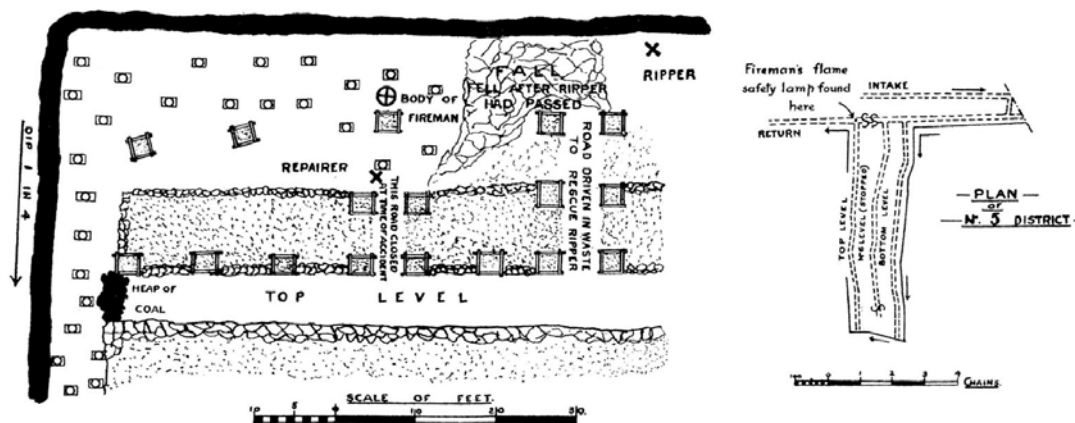
Alderman Gill was also given the opportunity to praise the part played in the rescue by Mr.E.Wherrett, while the official report on the accident published later concluded by saying that great courage and perseverance had been shown by those engaged in the work of rescue, and that the treatment of the survivors had been so well carried out as to earn the commendation from the doctor who attended the men. Nevertheless, it was felt that there were a number of features in the accident which called for comment.

"The deceased fireman passed the men in the district without making any report of his inspection, while the evidence at the inquest made it quite clear that he had not visited the men during the shift, and also that it was a common practice of his not to visit them during the shift. With regard to the first count there is evidence that the fireman

did go into the bottom level of the district before he sent the two men in, but what he did beyond this is not known. For the second, it is quite certain that he made no inspection of the places during the shift. If he had done so any time before about 3.0 a.m., he would have certainly found the gas and saved his own life”.

“The seam is not a gassy one, but gas is found occasionally in small quantities. On the Friday before the accident the men had been short of tubs and had built up their coal at the road head in such a manner as practically to block up the road, which was the airway, so that although the fan was running, steadily over the week-end, the air in the higher side of the district must have been almost dead. This, combined with the fact that the normal air current, was only sufficient to keep the places clear with a little to spare, fully accounts for the presence of the gas and also for the failure of the air current to disperse the gas after the accident”.

“The building up of the coal face so as to block up the airway shows a want of discipline among the face men, and the neglect to send for the rescue apparatus and for the manager immediately the accident was discovered, shows a want of initiative among those actually on the spot at the time. The accident was discovered about 8 a.m., but it was not until the manager arrived in the district about three hours later that he learnt anything about the accident, and at once sent for the apparatus and the rescue men”.



— KINGSWOOD COLLIERY. —
 — PLAN SHOWING PLACE WHERE A FIREMAN —
 — WAS SUFFOCATED BY FIREDAMP. 22nd AUGUST —
 — 1932. —

Although there certainly was evidence of sloppy practice having crept into the operation of the mine, this was probably due to the fact that it was obvious to everybody concerned that the management was considering ending production at Speedwell. It therefore came as no surprise when it was announced that the colliery would close for good on December 24th, Daniel Jones stating the reason being difficulties in penetrating to a new seam, following the discovery of serious faults in the Kingswood Great Vein. It had been hoped that two new tunnels might be driven down to the new seam below the existing workings, but it this was found to be impossible.

In spite of the fact that the mine seemed to be a lost cause, Alderman Charles Gill and the Lord Mayor of Bristol, Alderman J.T.Wise, embarked on an ambitious rescue plan and persuaded the directors of the East Bristol Collieries Ltd. to relent. Consequently, operations were resumed on December 27th and the £3000 subsequently raised by public subscription enabled at least 50 per cent of the miners to return to work. Nevertheless, although a new shaft was driven and a new seam worked, the financial problems continued and the period January 1933 to January 1936 saw a loss of £20,000. This, coupled with a demand by the remaining 310 miners for more wages, was the final nail in Speedwell's coffin and sadly on April 4th 1936 the "Bristol Evening Post" reported that the pit manager, David Sharp, had been in consultation with the Inspector of Mines for the area, and that all production in the last remaining coal mine in Bristol had ceased.

Today little can be seen at the site of the old Speedwell Colliery to indicate that coal was ever mined there, but hopefully the monumental inscriptions to be found on Grave 39, Plot Green RR, in nearby Greenbank Cemetery will remain for many years to remind passers by of the terrible toll in human life that for many years was taken for granted as a price that had to be paid to fuel industry and transport, and to heat the nation's homes.



Sources

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Urn on Jack Emery's grave: "With sympathy from his fellow workers at Speedwell Colliery".