

Report
to the
Right Honourable The Secretary Of State For
The Home Department
on the
Causes of and Circumstances attending the
Explosion which occurred at the Minnie Pit
of the Podmore Hall Colliery on Saturday,
the 12th January, 1918.

Home Office,
Whitehall, S.W.1.
31st May, 1920.

Sir,

On January 18th, 1918, your predecessor, Sir George (now Lord) Cave, appointed me to hold an Inquiry into the causes and circumstances of the explosion which occurred on the 12th January, 1918, at the Minnie Pit of the Podmore Hall Colliery, near Halmerend, North Staffordshire, which is one of the mines belonging to the Midland Coal, Coke and Iron Co., Ltd. The explosion resulted in a terrible disaster involving the loss of 155 lives.

The Warrant of Appointment was in the following terms :—

"In pursuance of Section 83 of the Coal Mines Act, 1911, I hereby appoint Mr. William Walker, Acting Chief Inspector of Mines, to hold a formal investigation of the causes and circumstances of the disaster which occurred at the Podmore Hall Colliery, near Halmerend, Staffordshire, on 12th January, 1918.

Mr. H. K. Beale, of Messrs. Beale and Co., Birmingham, was appointed to render me legal assistance.

A Formal Inquiry was accordingly held and I now have the honour to submit my report.

At the inquest held on October 1st, 2nd, 7th, 8th, 15th and 17th, 1919, by Mr. H. W. Adams, H.M. Coroner, the accident was very thoroughly inquired into and, after hearing the evidence of 40 witnesses, the Jury returned the following verdict :—

"(1) We consider that the deceased persons met their deaths from a medical point of view as follows :—

"(a) 144 from carbon mon-oxide poisoning.

"(b) 11 from violence plus carbon mon-oxide poisoning.

"(2) The cause of death was an explosion of gas and coal dust in the Bullhurst and Banbury Seams of the Minnie Pit.

"(3) That there is not sufficient evidence to show what caused the initial flame.

"(4) We consider that the pit has been carried on in accordance with the Coal Mines Act, 1911, and the General Regulations, so far as they have been issued, but we are of opinion that, if the dust had been systematically removed, the explosion would not have been so extensive

"(5) We do not consider that any particular person is to blame for the explosion.

"(6) As a result of the Inquiry we consider that further regulations should be issued at once for the treatment of coal dust, but we agree with the miners' representatives that nothing whatever should be introduced which will injure the miners or the young life employed in the mine, and that there is great scope for inquiry by Government experts on this point, particularly, making coal dust itself inert.

"(7) The Jury consider that any shot lighter should report in writing anything he considers unsafe in the mine.

"(8) It appears that the workmen have not taken advantage of Section 16 of the Coal Mines Act relative to the, periodical inspection of mines by workmen and we consider that they should do so."

The elapse of so long a period between the accident and the holding of the Coroner's Inquest and the Formal Inquiry is due to the fact that the Bullhurst Seam gives off firedamp freely and is also liable to spontaneous combustion. Hence, the persons carrying out the exploration work after the accident, were forced to wear self-contained breathing apparatus, and progress was necessarily very slow. The steps taken to guard against any further explosion and loss of life will be described fully later.

The explosion occurred at about 9.45 a.m. on Saturday, the 12th January, 1918, and, accompanied by the Right Honourable W. Brace, M.P., who was then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office, I arrived at the colliery early on the morning of Sunday and went underground. I also made underground inspections on the 8th March, 1918, and attended several conferences and meetings at the colliery, at Stoke-on-Trent, and at the Home Office, in connection with the exploration of the parts of the mine involved in the explosion. On the 5th November, 1919, after the whole of the workings had been recovered, I made a further underground inspection, with a view of determining, if possible, the cause of the explosion.

Mr. W. Saint, H.M. Senior Inspector of Mines, who retired from his official duties on reaching the age of 65 years on April 16th, 1919, was in charge of the part of the Midland and Southern Inspection Division in which the colliery is situated, and of the exploration of the mine until that date, when he was succeeded by Mr. Granville Poole, H.M. Senior Inspector of Mines. Captain L. Clive, Junior Inspector, on recovering from serious wounds received when on military service in France, returned to his duties as an Inspector and carried them out until his health again broke down, when Mr. C. D. Mottram, Junior Inspector, succeeded him. Mr. W. Bull, Sub-Inspector of Mines, was, and is, actively engaged in inspecting the mines in that part of the Division.

The number of persons killed by the explosion was 155, 144 of them by the effects of the afterdamp, and 11 by violence (2 at bottom of upcast shaft, 4 at top of Banbury Cruets, 2 half way down, 9 about the bottom, 42 in the Seven Feet Seam, 4 in the Bullhurst Crut, and 92 in the Bullhurst Seam). One member of a rescue brigade (Hugh Doorbar) lost his life on the 14th January, 1918, whilst engaged in exploration work with self-contained breathing apparatus in the Banbury Seven Feet Seam.

The name, age, and occupation of each of the dead is given in Appendix A. and the position in which each body was found is shown on Plates III. to VII. inclusive.