

THE INUNDATION OF THE SPITALWELL IRONSTONE PIT, CHESTERFIELD, ON THE 15TH. MARCH 1864.

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Abstract. In March 1864, due to an encroachment into a barrier at the Ingmanwell Colliery, water broke into the shaft of the Spitalwell Ironstone Pit belonging to the Staveley Company. Twelve workmen were trapped by the floodwaters and after much anxiety all were rescued. Eight of the men were underground for 36 hours and the other four for 40 hours. Ten days later a dinner was held to celebrate the opening of the Staveley Dining Hall and the rescue of the twelve men.

COAL MEASURE IRONSTONE MINING NEAR CHESTERFIELD.

During the nineteenth century a major mineral resource of Derbyshire was the Coal Measure ironstones. These were nodules and lenticular bands of clay-ironstone, some of which were shelly, and which occurred in the lower parts of the sedimentary cycles. These nodules and bands were often referred to as "rakes", and most of them occurred in the measures between the Blackshale and the Top Hard seams. There were thirteen sets of these bands, each related to a particular coal seam. By far the most important was the Blackshale Rake which occurred above the Yard, Blackshale or Silkstone seam. (These three seams are part of the same structure but alter both by name and by sequence from north to south in the Derbyshire coalfield). The Rake was originally worked by open-cast and bell-pit along the outcrop which lies to the west of Chesterfield. During the third quarter of the nineteenth century production reached its peak but fell away rapidly thereafter and had ceased by the end of the century. During this peak the Blackshale Rake was actively worked to the east of Chesterfield on the easterly rising side of the Brimington anticline. One such mine was the Spitalwell Ironstone Pit. A section quoted by Gibson and Wedd shows that the ironstone bands, which contained up to 40 percent iron, alternated with mudstones over a thickness of about 54ft. The base of the Blackshale Rake sequence lies about 2ft. 6ins. above the roof coal of the Silkstone seam. This thickness was divided into two halves by a central shale band 12ft. thick. The section above this band was called the Top Rake and that below was the Bottom Rake. Within these two Rakes there were twenty ironstone bands varying from half an inch to three inches in thickness of which ten were worked. No description of how these ironstone bands within the Top and Bottom Rakes were worked has yet come to light. The Blackshale Rake, as a whole, apparently yielded between 4000 and 7000 tons of ironstone to the acre.

SPITALWELL PIT AND ITS INUNDATION.

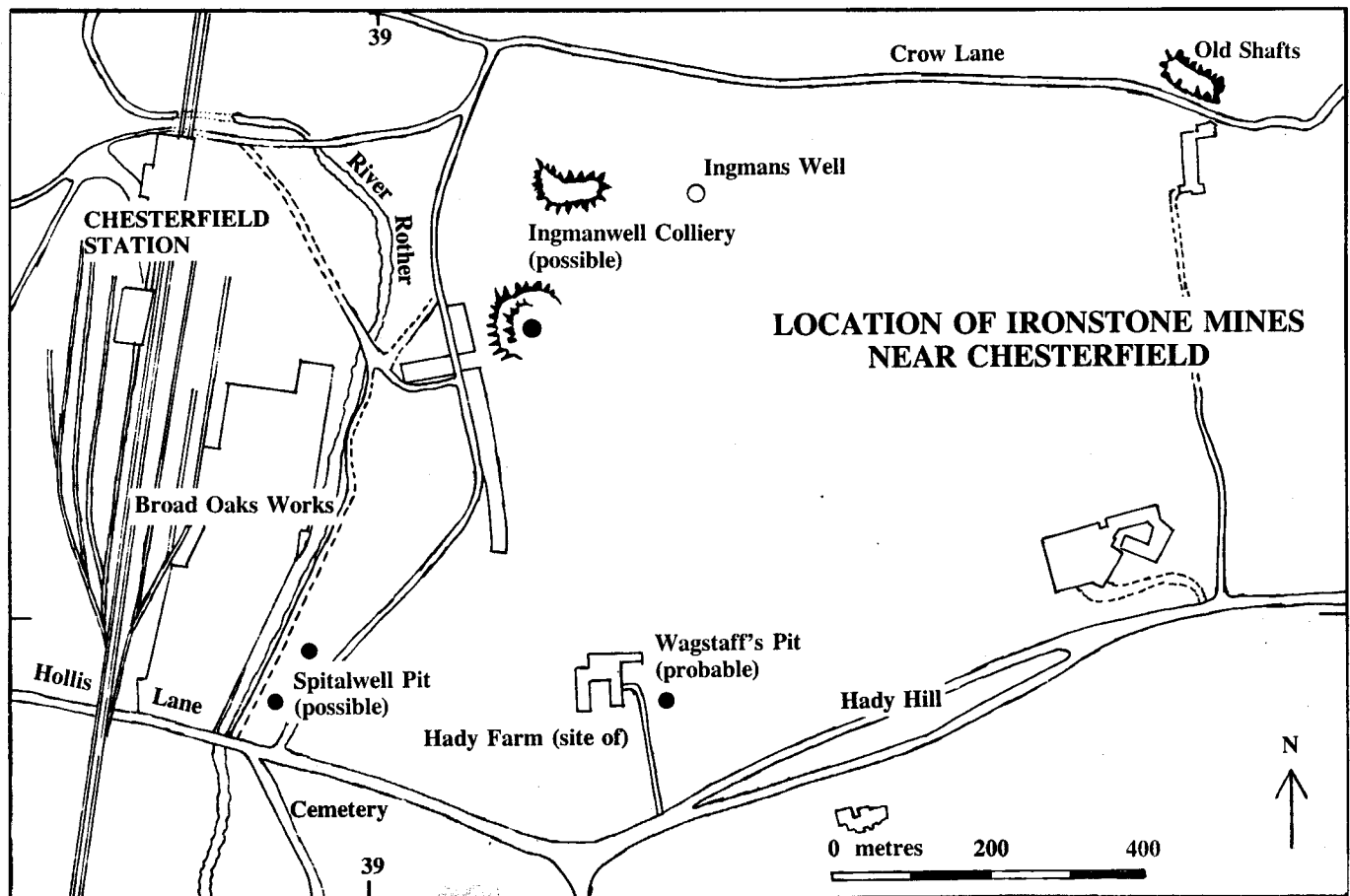
The Spitalwell Pit was worked by a pair of shafts some 92 yards deep. These were described as lying near the Chesterfield Cemetery which has been in its present situation since that time. One shaft was an engine shaft and the other a winding shaft and both were equipped with engines. About 500 yards away in Upper Hady there was another shaft called Wagstaff's Pit. This may be the shaft near Hady House shown on the 6in. Ordnance Survey map. This was connected through the workings to the Spitalwell. Also shown on the 1922 6in. O.S. map are two shafts which lie on the north side of Hady Hill and in the confines of the present Markham's works. I believe these to be the shafts of the Ingmanwell Colliery. Ingman's Well is situated near to them and is also

shown on the 6in. map.

The Spitalwell Pit was the property of the Staveley Coal and Iron Company which had recently been formed as a limited liability company from the business empire of Mr. Richard Barrow. It was described as being worked exclusively for ironstone and was considered to be remarkably dry. The coal which lay below the ironstone had been worked years earlier by the late Mr. Gillett.

From the bottom of the shafts the workings were divided into the Top and Bottom Rake and rose to the east up the Brimington anticline. It appears that the two rakes were worked separately. There was also a north and south district on the Bottom Rake. At about half past three on the Tuesday afternoon an old heading that entered the engine shaft some four yards above the bottom suddenly started to pour a large amount of water into the pit. The water flowed through into the winding shaft and started to rise.

There were usually some sixty or seventy men employed in the pit but on this occasion absenteeism was high and there was only twenty-eight at work. The absenteeism was due to the fact that on the previous day the Bradway Dam Disaster had occurred and most of the workmen had "gone to gratify their curiosity in seeing the destruction wrought". The largest number of men were in the south district of the Bottom Rake and these made their way to the shaft in Upper Hady and were drawn to safety. In the north district of the Bottom Rake was John Turton, the overman, and one or two deputies. They were able to wade through the water to the drawing shaft and were got out. There were nine men in the east district of the Bottom Rake and they, as soon as they were aware of the rising water, rushed towards the pit-bottom. They found the water was within eighteen inches of the roof and Turton, who had heard them coming, urged them to swim out. Only one man, William Taylor, followed this advice. He undressed himself, gave his watch to his son, Daniel Taylor, and promising to make sure that help would be forthcoming, floated through clutching a piece of wood. The other eight retreated back up the level. They were James Fidler, who had a wife and two children, Herbert Fidler, wife and four children, Matthew Fidler, unmarried, Benjamin Sharman, single, George Wilson, Dennis Cutts, Daniel Taylor, and Albert Wilcockson, all youths. In the east district of the Top Rake the water also rose cutting off four men, William Belfit, who had a wife and one child, Charles Mosley, who had a wife but no children, Luke Slack, unmarried, and George Shaw, another youth. They retreated to try and sit out the flood and hope that rescue would come. Turton and Taylor were drawn up to day. Both sets of men were now stranded, albeit in the dry, as the water rose above the crown or soffit of the arch.



ORGANISING THE RESCUE

Mr. Seymour, who was the resident viewer of all the Staveley Company pits, was telegraphed for and soon arrived to direct operations. The water had by now risen in the drawing shaft above the arch of the levels and it soon became apparent that the water would have to be bailed out using tubs slung from the winding engine. It was also necessary to build a launder to take the water away from the shaft. By the time the tub and launder had been manufactured it was late in the evening of the Tuesday.

Crowds of on-lookers had appeared from Chesterfield and had congregated about Hollis Lane and the pit-bank. Superintendent Wheeldon and a body of police had arrived to ensure that public order was kept and that the crowds did not impede the rescuers. A large coal fire had been lit which "threw its horrid glare over the pit-top, and showed the boundless machinery by which the ironstone was wrought to the surface". By midnight the water stood 24½ inches above the soffit of the arch. Whilst the men were not in any great danger of drowning, having retreated up the inclines, a much greater threat was that of being gassed. The water had cut off the ventilation and it was feared that a build-up of blackdamp would eventually suffocate the men.

As the night wore on and the bailing and pumping continued unabated, the water level in the shaft started to fall slowly. On the surface the various officials and overmen of the Staveley Company, such as W.F. Howard, the Company surveyor, Richard Applethwaite, George Ord, Thomas Emmerson, who "though deprived of a leg was as active as any on the place", John Ord and John Turton pushed forward the pumping operations as hard as they could. Mr. Hale, the Staveley Company surgeon, and his assistant were also present throughout the emergency. Some time after mid-day

on the Wednesday the water finally dropped below the roof of the arch and by three o'clock it was seven inches below. At this point John Ord, the pit overman, descended the shaft armed with a safety lamp to test the atmosphere. The lamp continued to burn correctly but when he rapped with an iron bar on the shaft brattice he received no answer. At this time it was feared that the fate of the men underground was sealed and the police had great difficulty keeping order on the surface. By nine o'clock in the evening there was said to be at least a thousand onlookers about the pit-bank.

At half past nine Mr. Barrow and John Hedley, the Inspector of Mines, arrived having been previously telegraphed for. At ten o'clock Richard Coke, a mining engineer, together with Ord and Turton, the overmen, again descended the pit and measured the depth of the water. The crowds were silenced and John Turton shouted up the level. To everyone's great relief a voice shouted back. Turton ascertained that he was talking to one of the Fidler's, that there were eight in the party and that all were alright. He then told Fidler that a rescue would be attempted in about one hour. The rescue party were wound to the surface where several ringing cheers were given by those on the surface.

THE RESCUE OF THE MEN

It was decided to pump as much water out of the pit as possible before a rescue was attempted, and so it was left till about three o'clock in the morning before the rescue party descended. The party consisted of Richard Coke, John Ford, an overman, Thomas Marshall, George Wright and a man named Bridget. All except Ford were described as tall men and indeed Thomas Marshall, at 6 ft. 3 ins., must have been a giant for a nineteenth century collier. At the bottom of the shaft Richard Coke was the first out and promptly

disappeared up to his neck in the water. There was nothing to be seen of him but "his yed and a pair of whiskers". Thomas Marshall then jumped into the water and pushed his way forward. He had scarcely gone eight or nine yards before he came upon the trapped men huddled together for warmth. He took the youngest lad, Daniel Taylor aged 14, on his back and waded back to the pit-bottom. Bridget then took George Wilson and repeated the operation. These two lads were then wound to the surface where several rounds of cheers awaited them. Taylor was reunited with his father, who had swum out. He had been convinced that his father had drowned. The two lads were then taken to the joiner's shop where a large fire and a hot bath awaited them. They were examined by the surgeon, Mr. Hale, who administered "some arrow-root gruel, stimulated with a little brandy" and then left in the shop to be re-united with their relatives. At the pit-bottom the operation was repeated until, two at a time, the remaining six miners were rescued and taken to the surface. After all had been examined by Mr. Hale and attended to by their relatives, they were put in cabs and dispatched home. At half past four o'clock in the morning the pit-bank was quiet again but for the workmen and officials conducting the pumping operations and the policemen on duty. The fate of the other four men was still unknown.

By eleven o'clock on the Thursday morning it had been decided that a party should attempt to explore the mine to find the other four men. The three overmen, George and John Ord and John Turton, led the party comprising of Samuel Wagstaffe, Tom. Marshall, Eli Fletcher, Joseph Burgin, Charles and George Wright, Thomas Chapel, William Scott and William Roper. They left the pit-bottom along the main level but soon met a roof fall which not only stopped their exploration but had also stopped the four victims getting out. The explorers managed to work their way through a small bord-gate into an air-course where they met the four men at a point about 120 yards from the pit-bottom. Whilst they had been waiting they had had plenty of candles and had been watching the water rising and then falling. They had used the candles to estimate the passing of time. One of the four, George Shaw, a lad, was tramping a wagon at the time of the flood, and had been forced to sit on top of a heap of roof-bind on his own for twelve hours. He had then been found by the other three as they attempted to find a way to the pit-bottom. The four were then escorted over various falls back to the bottom of the shaft and were then hauled, two at a time, back to the surface. Again there was much calling of cheers and throwing of caps into the air as the men appeared and were then led off to the joiner's shop where they were examined, bathed, fed and then sent home in cabs.

The cause of the accident was attributed to the owner of the Ingmanwell Colliery having encroached on the barriers left by the Staveley Company, which allowed the water, having accumulated, to flow through to the Spitalwell. Whilst the pumping engine at the Ingmanwell had been stopped in order to save expense, it was stated that the excellence of the Staveley machinery was the main thing that saved the twelve miners of Spitalwell.

THE CELEBRATORY DINNER

Some ten days later, on Easter Monday, a gala dinner was held to inaugurate the Staveley Dining Hall and to celebrate the rescue of the Spitalwell miners. Richard Barrow, the Chairman of the Staveley Company, was a paternalist without equal. Amongst his other good works was the provision of a workman's dining hall "after the system now so generally adopted in Scotland". The building was described as

exceedingly neat and unostentatious and had cost him a large sum of money. The dinner, which was served by the contract caterers, was attended by about 250 persons. The guest list was long and included many mine-owners, engineers, magistrates, clergymen, the town clerk of Chesterfield, the proprietor of the Derbyshire Times and many members of the Barrow family. The report in the Derbyshire Times gives the list of toasts that were proposed and a precis of the speeches given. The paternalism of the period is very noticeable in several of these speeches. Mr. E.G. Maynard, the chief magistrate of Chesterfield, warned the miners that a good deal of the business of the Bench was caused by over-frequent visits to public houses. He also told the managers that it was their duty to deter miners from these visits. Mr. Coke, the mining engineer who led the first rescue team, asked the rescued men to remember that, "in the words of my excellent friend, the Archdeacon (Hill), you have to thank for your rescue the Giver of all Good". Mr. Seymour, the viewer, gave a lecture on "Duty".

However the most heavily portentous and political speeches were given by Richard Barrow, of the Staveley Company, and Charles Binns of the Clay Cross Company. In 1863 the Miner's National Union had been formed and by February 1864 strikes and lock-outs were breaking out in South Yorkshire, particularly at the Oaks and High Royd Collieries near Barnsley. Agitation had crossed the county boundary and union activity had started at Staveley. Richard Barrow stated that "We want no unions here, except the union of good feelings between man and master". He also wished "my people to understand if they will stick by me I will stick by them, and this is the sort of union we will have at Staveley". Charles Binns "deprecated the system of delegates going amongst the colliers to disturb that quiet calm and repose happiness which now prevails amongst the colliers of Derbyshire". The union activity in Derbyshire reached a peak in 1866 when the union men of Staveley were sacked and evicted from their houses before they even asked for a pay rise. Indeed tenants were evicted for sheltering union men and their families. A free labour society was formed from the non-union men and this phase of union activity ended in Derbyshire by Easter 1867.

At the end of the evening, having drunk some 12 or 15 toasts, the guests from Chesterfield were escorted to a special train and conveyed back to the town, under the charge of Mr. Rice, the stationmaster. They were safely landed at Chesterfield within twenty minutes of the last toast being given in the dining hall.

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