

Burns Colliery, West Stanley.

The pit was sunk in 1832 by Burns and Clark. The coal produced was suitable for coking and so the owners built themselves coke ovens. The town's first gas works was built on the site in 1871 providing lighting first for the pithead and then Front Street and other businesses in town. By the 1880's output was around 6000 tons of which about 2000 tons was turned to coke on site.

There was an explosion in November 1865 killing two men. In April 1882 there was another this time killing 13.

In 1891 the heapstead took fire and was completely destroyed, shortly after Clark sold out his share to Burns who was then sole proprietor.

There were two shafts Busty [upcast] shaft and Lamp [downcast] shaft. Seams from top to bottom, Shield Row, Five Quarter, Brass Thill, Low Main, and Hutton all exhausted and Towneley. Tilly, Busty and Brockwell, all of which were worked.

February 16th, 1909 at 3.45 pm a sheet of flame burst up from the shaft tops as Burns Colliery exploded killing 168 men.

Both shafts were choked with debris after the explosion and as crowds of worried families, friends and neighbours gathered, seeking news of the miners underground, rescuers set to on the long job of clearing the debris in the shafts.

The Manager, Mr J P Hall was looking over the plant at the nearby Birtley Colliery where he was due to start work the following week. He was immediately sent for and returned in haste.

Colonel W C Blackett a leading mine engineer with experience in rescue and establishing the cause of explosions, was called for and arrived on the scene around 8pm. He found both of the pits shafts still blocked with wreckage and uncertainty over exactly how many men were actually in the mine and whether any of them might still be alive.

As news spread miners and managers from nearby pits flocked to the scene to assist with the rescue. As they set to work, amazingly, the telephone at the shaft top rang, 26 men from the Tilley seam had survived the explosion and following gas and one of them had made it to the shaft to call for help. It took them 14 hours to clear their way back into the pit.

A few other survivors were found bringing the total to 30 but it soon became clear that most of the miners had perished, some killed by the force of the explosion and burned, others had fallen victim to the carbon monoxide gas produced by the burning. As bodies were brought out it became clear that 168 men had lost their lives. The bodies of two men were not recovered as it was decided that they could not possibly have survived and it was too dangerous to attempt to access where they had been working.

The inquest never established the exact cause of the explosions, there appeared to have been one small explosion, likely in the Brockwell seam, which had then triggered a much larger explosion of dust, but the cause of the initial explosion was elusive.

They used Saxonite explosive for bringing down rock and Monabel for coal, both permitted explosives and stored above ground in the magazine however no shots were fired the day of the explosion. No naked flames were allowed below ground, Marso lamps were used for the hewers and shifters and Donald lamps for the drivers and putters and no evidence of contraband was found.

Some of the seams were dusty but they had a systematic watering of the airways by a water wagon with a hand pump operated by two master shifters.

Lamps were issued to the men as they went underground and then, as lamps went out and were sent out for relighting, spares were sent down, this meant that the lamp man was unable to say for sure how many men were actually underground. This caused confusion and some considerable distress to families and Graham, the coroner suggested that in future it should be possible for the men to be issued numbered discs in exchange for their lamps.

After this disaster Burns closed down the colliery which remained shut until taken over by the South Derwent Coal Company.

In 1933 there began trouble with subsidence and the office had to be demolished as it was sinking.

March 1933 The bodies of two men William Chaytor and John Rogers were found when the pit broke through into old workings in the Busty Seam.

Some years after the 1909 disaster J P Hall presented a Howart's patent deflector safety lamp, recovered from the Brockwell seam, to the Mining Institute in Newcastle. This lamp had not been mentioned at the original inquest and was an unusually large lamp of a type which had been demonstrated to be unsafe. The large size of the flame chamber made it possible in certain circumstances for the flame to ignite gas outside the chamber. A retired mines inspector, J B Atkinson recognised the significance of the presence of this lamp and attempted to give evidence at the inquest of the two men but although the coroner allowed him to read his statement he directed the jury to disregard it in their deliberation so that again no direct cause was officially established for their deaths.

The Burns Pit finally closed in 1936.

Ref

The Death Pit, by Eric Forster Published: Frank Graham

