



Oaks Explosions,  
1866.

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A Reminder,

5th February, 1914.

*[A Copy of the Inscription on the Tablet.]*

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## OAKS EXPLOSIONS, 1866.

“This Monument was erected by SAMUEL JOSHUA COOPER, A.D. 1913, as a tribute to the memory of PARKIN JEFFCOCK and other heroes of the rescue party, who lost their lives owing to further explosions on December 13th, 1866; also to commemorate the signal bravery of JOHN EDWARD MAMMATT and THOMAS WILLIAM EMBLETON in descending the pit and rescuing the sole survivor on December 14th, 1866.

THE Cadeby Disaster in the Summer of 1912 reminded the late Mr. SAMUEL JOSHUA COOPER, of Mount Vernon, most vividly of the great bravery of the rescue parties who assisted in the Oaks Explosions of 1866. Particularly he had regard to Mr. Parkin Jeffcock, Mr. John Edward Mammatt, and Mr. Thomas William Embleton, all of whom, the writer believes, were personally known to him.

Mr. Jeffcock, the head of the first rescue party, was, as the public well know, killed with his brave companions. Mr. Mammatt who, accompanied by Mr. T. W. Embleton, rescued the last survivor, died at Scarborough on the 24th December, 1911. Mr. T. W. Embleton happily is still with us.

Unfortunately for the district Mr. SAMUEL JOSHUA COOPER died on the 11th of July last year. Before his death, he was afraid that the present generation would forget the innumerable heroic acts which were performed by the rescue parties. Consequently he

decided to erect the Memorial which is to be unveiled by Mr. CHARLES JOSEPH TYAS, the Chairman of the Oaks Explosions Committee, on Thursday, the 5th instant.

The land upon which the Memorial is erected is part of the Estate of the late R. K. Micklethwait, Esq., and was presented to Mr. Cooper by the Trustees so soon as they knew the object for which he required it.

The Bronze, "Gloria Victis" (Glory to the Conquered) (Honour to the Victims) was purchased by Mr. Cooper himself.

The Monument has been erected by Mr. Peter Dalby, of Barnsley, after a design by Mr. Henry Wade.

The letter which follows is a reprint of one written by the Lord Bishop of Ripon to a friend at the time of the disaster.

R. F. P.

*February, 1914.*

You have asked me to tell you of any incidents within my own knowledge, which have occurred in connection with the dreadful accident which took place at the Oaks Colliery, near Barnsley, on the 12th of December last. I will try and gratify your wish, although I have little to relate beyond what is generally known. You are aware that the Oaks Colliery was one of the largest of the South Yorkshire collieries, situate near to a little village called Hoyle Mill, and close to the railway from Doncaster to Barnsley. The number of hands employed in this colliery was about 450; and these principally resided in Barnsley, Hoyle Mill, and the little village of Ardsley. The pit was 285 yards deep, and its ramifications extended over an underground area of nearly three miles in extent. About 320 hands went down to work in this pit on the morning of Wednesday, December 12th; some others followed a few hours later; so that at the time when the explosion first took place, which was about one o'clock in the afternoon, it is computed there were about 330 men in the pit. The first sign of what had taken place, to those who were in the neighbourhood of the colliery, was a tremulous motion of the earth, like the effect of an earthquake, followed immediately by a dull heavy sound, which was audible at a considerable distance. Immediately afterwards dense volumes of smoke and debris rose into the air from each of the two descending shafts, and then a thick black cloud seemed to hover and rest over the whole surface of the pit. The shock of the explosion was felt far and near; and in an incredible short

space of time hundreds of women and children were hurrying to the scene, filled with eager anxiety to ascertain what had occurred.

It was soon too evident that a fearful explosion had taken place within the pit; and that if those who were down at the time were not destroyed already, they must be in the most imminent peril of their lives. The effect of the explosion had rendered one of the descending shafts useless, and the machinery of the other was so much injured, that some little time elapsed before the preparations could be completed for enabling anyone to descend.

At length, however, a number of men (under the direction of Mr. Dymond, one of the principal managers of the pit) descended cautiously, and at the bottom of the shaft they found some 18 or 20 men and boys seriously burnt, and many of them nearly stupified by the gas which had escaped after the first explosion. These were as carefully and quickly as possible drawn up to the surface, and then removed to their several homes.

The party of men who had gone down on this errand then proceeded to examine the workings (as they are termed) of the pit. They did so with great difficulty, in consequence of the foul air which had now filled the pit. At every turn they came upon dead bodies; within a space of 50 yards they counted 38. Some of these explorers then returned to the surface, and sought for others to accompany them in their fearful task of searching the pit. Numbers readily volunteered to descend, and in the course of a few hours more than 50 bodies had been recovered.

It was early the following morning (Thursday) when some of those who were engaged searching for the dead perceived that a portion of the pit was on fire, and that there were signs which denoted that another explosion might be expected. Some sixteen of them accordingly retreated, and were drawn up to the mouth of the pit. There they met another band of volunteers just about to descend. It was in vain they told of the danger: these brave men had no fear for themselves, so long as there was the smallest hope of saving the lives of others.

They accordingly went down the terrible chasm, alas! never again (with one exception only) to leave it alive. Scarcely had they reached the bottom of the shaft and commenced their labours when another explosion took place, and the lives of all, saving one (whose escape is one of the most miraculous on record), were sacrificed. Amongst those who perished on this noble errand were Mr. Jeffcock, mining engineer, and Mr. Tewart, the steward of the colliery. From this time it was concluded that all who were left in the pit must have died. In vain did those who were at the mouth of the pit shout at the loudest pitch of their voice to learn if there were any still alive: no answer returned. The cage was lowered with a lingering hope that possibly someone might still be living; but it returned empty; and then not a doubt remained respecting the death of those who were left in the pit.

One of the most remarkable incidents ever put on record, in connection with accidents of this description, took place on Friday morning. It was about

five o'clock on that cold, dark, and winterly morning, when Mr. Mammatt, C.E., and some others who were about the place, fancied they heard from the bottom of the shaft a low moaning as of some one in pain. They could scarcely believe their own ears. Presently the bell, which is connected by a wire with the bottom of the shaft, rang violently. Upon this they lowered a bottle containing some brandy: the bottle was eagerly caught, and it was therefore clear that there was still some one alive. The question was how to reach him? There were only a few persons about. The engine-man was in Barnsley. The fires were out and no steam on. The machinery for lowering the cage into the pit was out of gear, and the cage itself rendered useless. Every difficulty was, however, overcome. With almost incredible speed they contrived to light a fire. Sufficient steam power was obtained. In the absence of a proper cage, a contrivance was made by fastening a bucket to a chain, and Mr. Mammatt having provided himself with some ropes, accompanied by Mr. Embleton, commenced their perilous descent. You must bear in mind they had to descend a shaft nearly 900 feet in depth,—up which smoke was escaping,—into a pit where already more than one explosion had taken place, which was known to be on fire, where more than 300 lives had already been sacrificed; and where any moment a fresh explosion might take place. If ever there was an instance of heroic courage and disinterested bravery for the sake of rescuing the life of a fellow-creature, it was in the case of these noble-hearted men. The descent was indeed a perilous one. It occupied at least fifteen

minutes to reach the bottom of the shaft. The time seemed (as one of them told me himself) almost like a week. When about half way down (that is at a distance of nearly 400 feet from the surface) they encountered a rush of water, which was issuing from the side of the shaft, in a volume thicker than an ordinary man's body. They were of course in a moment drenched to the skin, and the lower they descended the more violent was the shock of this stream of water descending upon them. However their intrepidity was nobly rewarded. They reached the bottom of the pit in safety, succeeded in rescuing the man, and brought him safely to the bank. I have never known any act requiring greater courage and presence of mind, and if ever there were men deserving of the highest tribute that could be bestowed in recompense for genuine daring and self-sacrifice, I do not hesitate to say they are these gallant men, Mr. Mammatt and Mr. Embleton.

But I must now endeavour to tell you of some of the scenes which I witnessed within a day or two after the accident took place. My duties led me to Barnsley to visit the homes where some of the sufferers were lingering in sad torture from the effects of the fire, and where many more were enduring the anguish of bereavement.

In the first house which I visited I found a poor woman in great distress, mourning over the lifeless body of her only son, and having to bewail the loss of her husband still in the pit. In another house there was lying on a bed on the ground-floor, a poor man so wretchedly burnt and disfigured by the

effects of the flames, that it was scarcely possible to discern the features of a human face. He was the husband and father of the family. I passed up the stairs, and on the landing were two coffins containing the remains of two fine young men, whose bodies had been recovered from the pit. In the next room I found the mother, who only a few days before had given birth to an infant. In another house I found a poor widow woman in a state of almost indescribable grief, having lost by the accident five sons, on whose labour she depended for support. In another house I spoke to a young woman who was to have been married on the following Tuesday, but her intended husband is among the slain who are still in the pit. House after house which I visited presented similar scenes, only varying in the degree of sorrow and distress produced by this unexampled disaster.

It is very remarkable, however, to notice the patience and resignation which, without any exception, the sufferers displayed. Whether from those who were lying in misery, the effect of their burns, or from the bereaved who were mourning for lost husbands or children, or amongst the crowds who flocked to the funerals on the following Sunday, I heard not a word of repining. The sorrow seemed too deep for loud lamentation, and every sufferer to whom I spoke readily responded to the sentiment—“It is the Lord, we must humble ourselves before His mighty Hand.” The scene on the Sunday afternoon at the cemetery, when twenty-six of the bodies which had been recovered were buried, was deeply affecting. Thousands were present, but there was no noise or confusion; every countenance

betokened either seriousness or sorrow. Tracts were distributed amongst the crowd, and were, generally speaking, received thankfully.

This calamity stands unparalleled amongst accidents of a similar kind, for the sacrifice which it has entailed of human life. Seventy-three lives were lost by a similar accident which occurred in the Oaks Colliery, in 1846; 189 perished by the explosion at the Lundhill Colliery in 1857; 209 died by the effects of the Hartley Colliery explosion in 1862; but it is ascertained that at least 350 perished by the first and second explosions at the Oaks Colliery, and the total number of persons who are thrown for support upon the charity of the public is not less than 628. It is encouraging to see how promptly all classes have responded to the call for the exercise of Christian benevolence. Our gracious Queen set the example; for as soon as ever the calamity became known, Her Majesty, in the spirit of Christian sympathy which is one of her many claims to the devotion of her subjects, immediately telegraphed to ascertain the extent of the calamity, and to intimate her intention to head a subscription list for the relief of the sufferers. Indeed, such an accident appeals to us all. There is no one, from the highest to the lowest, who is not dependent for his fireside comforts on the toil of those who win coals from the bowels of the earth. Their occupation is necessarily, at all times, one of peril; and when a great disaster like this occurs (through no fault of their own), involving many hundreds in distress and privation, it is the duty of every one, according to his ability, to contribute for the succour of the bereaved and afflicted. Such

calamities teach an impressive lesson as to the uncertainty of life, and the frailty of the tenure by which we hold all our earthly blessings. It is a great comfort to *know* that amongst those that were called so suddenly into eternity by this Oaks Colliery explosion, there were some (we trust there were very many) who were God-fearing men,—men of prayer and faith, who were in reality as well as by profession disciples of Christ. I trust that the warning which such a calamity gives, may be largely blest in leading multitudes to attend more seriously than they have ever done before to their eternal interests, and in bringing them to seek and find salvation through faith in our Blessed Redeemer. What an unspeakable blessing it is to know Him as an All-sufficient Saviour, able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him, and so willing to save that He has assured us, “Him that cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out.”

