

MEMOIRS 1965

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## THE FLOODING OF WHEAL OWLES

By W. Herbert Thomas

Tellee about Wheal Owles, Sir, - the flooded, Cornish mine?  
'Ow the waters chuck'd the levels where the sun don't never shine?  
'Ow the twenty men are lyin' - stark, lifeless, lumps of clay,  
Where the rushin' torrent wash'd thum when the rock-wall brawk away?

Tellee about the blastin', and the frantic climb to 3grass3?(a)  
Iss, sure, I'll try to tellee 'ow the whole thing cum to pass;  
Tho' you know I aren't a scholard, cause my school was Wheal Owles Bal(b),  
An' my pen was a three-poun' hammer, an' my books some stones to spal.

Ef you look across the valley, past the crafts an' hedges there,  
You can see the 'count-house standin' top the hillside brown an' bare,  
An' the shaft es by the cliff, sir, where the restless ocean rolls,  
An' under the sea some levels was drove from old Wheal Owles.

Ef you went down at Botallack, or Levant, p'r'aps you've heard tell,  
'Ow above your head the boulders would haive with the billows' swell;  
An' you'd hear thum gratin', rumblin', 'bove the forty-fathom end,  
An' you'd clemb the ladders quicker than you managed to descend.

But I'm mixin'-up my story, as I fear'd I shud 'ave done,  
For my head is mizzy-maazy (c) sence this whistness (d) 'ave begun,  
An' you wudden feel quite fitty (e) ef you met Death faace to faace,  
An' weth roarin' drownin' waters you'ad a fearful chaise!

Aw, sir, I caan't set quiet, fur the gashly thing do stir  
Every drop of blood within me, an' I'll tellee plainly, sir,  
Tho' they said my nerve was steady an' head level through et all,  
I dream of a Hell of water, which in thunderin' floods do fall!

It happen'd a Tuesday mornen, this awful accident,  
We were all ave us forenoon core, sir, an' w'en from home I went  
I took my crowst (f) from the missus an' gov her a parten kiss,  
An' we know'd no more than the dead, Sir, 'ow things wud 'ave gone amiss.

I was haaf way down the valley w'en I found I'd come away  
Thouse (g) my under-groun' clothes - for Monday, at St. Just, es washin-day;  
So I started back in a hurry, an' got to the cottage-door,  
An' said ef I stay'd more'n a minute I'd be late fur forenoon core.

My under-groun' suit was ready, but my wife looked fine un queer;  
 An' I says, "W'y, wass the matter: an' says she, "I've took a fear"  
 For you know tes allus unlucky to come back when goin' to work",  
 An' she looked sa white as a witch, Sir, an' cold as that blacken'd churk.

It gave me a bit of a twingle, but I laugh'd to aise her mind,  
 An' I aren't so superstitious as some men you may find,  
 But the fear come back, she told me, sa soon as I was gone,  
 An' the fearful thing that happen'd was worse than she thought upon.

At the bal we met the cappen - I main Cappen Tom Tregear -  
 Aa straight a man as a mother cud ever have an' rear;  
 An' we got our strings ave candles, an' fuse, an' dynamite,  
 For to blast the ground down under, an' to have a bit of light.

Then we all clemb'd down the ladders, about forty men, all told,  
 An' up through the shaft to daylight we sung, an' the sound uproll'd,  
 For we had some brae fine (h) singers from the Bible Christian choir  
 An' we like to tuney below, sir, or around a blacksmith's fire.

We sung "In the Sweet By-an-Bye, "Sir, 'bout the beautiful golden shore,  
 Where we hope we shall some day gather, an' never to part any more;  
 But we never thought Death was waitin' to beckon us over the tide,  
 An' that mornen haaf ave our number wud cross to the other side!

So we clembed to the lower levels of the damp an' slimy ground,  
 Where the candles smoked an' sputtered, an' the tin an' copper es found;  
 An' we went to the stopes an' winzes an' ends where the lodes' ave ore  
 Es blasted an' rulled in the waggons by miners every core.

I 'ad shut one hole an' was usin' the hammer an' pickers there,  
 When a sound like ten thousand thunders broke out through the heated air,  
 An' I heard the rush an' the roarin', like the burstin' of a tide,  
 An' "Water! The mine is flooded! Run for your lives!" I cried.

My cumrades were stunned with the horror, an' I might lave stood there too,  
 Like a lump of lead or a statue, an' not know'd what to do,  
 But I well remember'd the floodin' of the next bal, Old Wheal Drea,  
 W'en the water of East Boscean broke through an' wash'd me away.

As quick as a flash of lightnin' I hurried the men an' boys  
 Into the empty waggon; an', urged on by the noise  
 Of the roorin', risin' water that swamped the works below,  
 I pushed the load through the level so fast as my legs would go.

One lad fell out of the waggon, down eighteen feet to a plot,  
 But Jim bent down as he clemb'd up, an' the boy's hand quickly caught,  
 An' haaled (1) him up so aisy, did that fear'd excited man,  
 As ef but a pound of candles, or awnly a onion stran.

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Then on to the shaft we rumbled, while a lad who run'd before,  
Shriek'd lest the waggon should crush him, as it onward madly tore,  
An 'dodgin' the rocks out-juttin' by one candle that kept alight  
In the rush of the wind, we managed to reach the shaft all right.

Up through the shaft came wailin' the cries of the drownin' men,  
Strugglin' in darkness with torrents that roll'd down again an' again,  
Till the gashly an' helpless bodies sunk down like lifeless stones,  
An' the roar of the hungry water swallowed their dyin' groans.

By the skin of their teeth some escaped, sir, by climben chains hand over hand,  
An' some, who took the wrong turnings, near went to the sperrit-land,  
Some were haaled up by the winches, an I some who fell off the way  
Were helped again on the ladders or would not be living to-day.

Down below is a rever of water, a mile an' half long, for sure,  
Through three mines' deep under-ground workin's, an' p'r'aps a good many more,  
For a pare(k) of our men was driving an' cut into old Wheal Drea,  
Where the thousand-tons water was pressin', an' burst through Cargodna that day.

A blunder? Ah, yes, 'twas a blunder, for our plans shawed solid ground  
Where the men at the sixty-five level a hollowed-out place must have found:  
You see, sir, they worked for metals in our bals in days of old,  
When Solomon decked out es temple with tin an' with jewels an' gold;

So we're hedged in with scals(l) of dangers, an', tes little enough we get  
To keep body and soul together, but we aren't the sort to fret  
W'en we come up to the sunlight an' can in our homes abide,  
But 'tes hard when homes are waitin' for bodies beneath the tide.

So that es the awful story of the floodin' of Wheal Owles,  
Thas 'ow the blinds are lowered an' the church-bell sadly tolls;  
The mine is now a grave-yard, an' the levels are the graves,  
An' the miners' dust there slumbers near the wild Atlantic waves.

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|--------------|------------------|-------------------|
| (a) surface  | (e) clear-headed | (i) pulled        |
| (b) mine     | (f) lunch        | (k) a gang of men |
| (c) confused | (g) without      | (l) lots of       |
| (d) trouble  | (h) very         |                   |

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On Tuesday, January 10th, 1893, nineteen men and a lad were drowned in the Cargodna part of Wheal Owles Mine, St. Just, Cornwall, by a pare of the forty miners having, it is believed, blasted and tapped the accumulated and connected water in the abandoned workings of Wheal Drea (in Wheal Owles sett) and East Boscean; the pool of water now extending a mile and a half from St. Just Churchtown to thirty fathoms under the Atlantic Ocean. This was the most terrible mining accident in Cornwall since the waterspout, or tremendous waterfall, which burst over East and North Wheal Rose Mine, in the Newlyn East district, on the 9th of July, 1846, when fifty-three men were drowned and others injured by the flood carrying a portion of a burrow, or waste-heap, into the shaft.

The miners drowned in Wheal Owles were - James Williams, Richard Williams, M. Taylor, William Roberts, Louis Wilkins, W.J. Thomas, John Grose, Thomas Grose, Peter Dale, James Rowe, J. Taylor, T. Ellis, J. Olds, Edward White, Charles H. Thomas, James E. Trembath, Thomas Allen, William Eddy, James Thomas and W.J. Davey.

Twenty other miners, who were working in shallower levels or nearer the shaft, had an exciting race to the ladders and climbed up before the waters could overtake them. Some would have been drowned but for the heroism of James Hall (popularly known as "Farmer" Hall), who pushed some of his comrades in front of him in a tram-waggon, and afterwards went back to guide others who were going in the wrong direction; and of James Bottrell, who stopped and pulled up Michael Harvey and Thomas Angwin by a winch from a winze in the 45 fathom level, after clearing the rope which had become jammed in the timber, and by the light of one candle that was not extinguished by the rushing wind, reached the shaft and hurried to the surface. These intrepid miners, by waiting several minutes to save their comrades, were closely pursued by the uprising flood of water, which nearly reached the 30 fathom level by the time they had climbed out of danger.

But for the bursting of a pump in another part of the mine, causing a little delay, Captains Tom Tregear and John Leggo would have been in the lower levels measuring the ground, and would, doubtless, have shared the fate of the submerged miners.

A strong endeavour will be made to form a Limited Liability Company with a capital of £20,000, to work the three connected and flooded mines, which would revive the declining industry in St. Just parish.

A Relief Fund in aid of the widows, orphans, and other bereaved and dependent relatives, was promptly opened, and the responses have been so generous that the £3,500 which the Committee estimate they will want to meet these particular cases have already been subscribed. In some instances a lump sum of £50 will terminate the liability; but in most cases widows will receive 6s. per week, and 2s. per week

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for each child until it reaches the age of fourteen. There will be an annual revision of allowances. If widows re-marry or misconduct themselves, only their children will receive relief. About £350 will be expended the first year, and, in addition, the miners thrown out of work by the disaster receive £100 from the County Miners' Distress Fund.

Mr. Joseph Martin, Her Majesty's Inspector of Mines for this district, saw that this was an appropriate time for organizing a County Miners Benevolent Fund. His suggestion was first published and approved by "The Cornishman", and was sympathetically received in the Camborne and Redruth district, as it will provide for the sufferers in single accidents, which happen only too frequently in our mines, and which occasion as intense individual distress as a calamity involving a larger number of persons.

Committees were formed at Camborne and Redruth and met the St. Just Committee at Penzance on February 2nd, when it was resolved that any sum received in excess of the £3,500, be transferred to the County Fund, and if experience proves that the £3,500 will not be exhausted in relieving the Wheal Owles sufferers, any surplus will also be added to the County Fund.

It is to be hoped, therefore, that friends of the miners, - especially the landlords in receipt of mine dues, other wealthy persons, and Cornish miners who are receiving higher wages in foreign countries than the meagre earnings of their comrades in Cornwall, - will continue to forward whatever assistance they can afford, knowing that it will be judiciously expended in relieving suffering occasioned by the hazardous nature of our mining industry.

The following appeared in the "Cornish Telegraph" on April 27th, 1893.

**WHEAL OWLES AND BOSCEAN UNITED MINING COMPANY,  
LIMITED  
ST. JUST, PENZANCE  
CORNWALL.**

Incorporated under the Companies Act, 1862 and 1890, whereby  
the liability of the Shareholders is limited to the extent  
of their holdings.

Capital, £3,000, in shares of £1 each.

Payable:- 2s.6d. per share on application, 2s.6d. on allotment, and such amount as may be required of the balance in easy instalments at intervals.

This mine is about to be worked as a Limited Liability Company, as above, and the Promoters and Directors, who are large holders, and all of

St. Just, have every confidence in the value of the mine and invite subscriptions in good faith.

Evidences of its bona fides are that over 5,000 shares are already taken up in the parish, and that the Messrs. Thomas Bolitho and Sons, after carefully going over the prospectus, immediately subscribed 5,000 shares.

This will be a compact and cheaply worked mine, one set of plant covering the extensive setts of Wheal Owles and Boscean, the former of which paid regular dividends from September, 1889, to the time of its being suspended, in January last, through the unfortunate flooding, and the latter (Boscean) is spoken very highly of by Captain White, of Carn Brea Mines (for four years agent there), and other mine agents and miners.

It is estimated that less than two-thirds of the capital will put the mine in a position to pay regular and continuous dividends, but it is not proposed to allot shares until 23,000 are subscribed.

There is no promotion money, the cost of forming the Company being confined to out of pocket expenses.

Exceptionally liberal terms have been obtained from the Lords, viz, one fiftieth dues on all tin and copper, with the first two years free.

Full prospectus, with forms of applications for shares, may be obtained from all branches of Consolidated Bank of Cornwall, and other Banks; from Mr. Barnes Richards, Pehzance; or from Mr. Herbert Boyns, Boswedden, St. Just, R.S.O., Sec. pro tem.

The Home Share-List will be closed for application on the 31st May, and for abroad on the 30th June.

I should be interested to learn whether this Company was actually formed, and with what results. There was a great deal of local enthusiasm, as evidenced by the long after-dinner speeches at the Levant Account Dinner. Local opinion was that the mine was needed to relieve unemployment in the St. Just district. It was intended to employ 400 men on the mine. I would be grateful if any member can supply me with information on Wheal Owles, particularly with regard to the post 1893 period.

R.S. Harker.

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