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## THE INUNDATION OF THE SPITALWELL MINE

R.H. Bird

### Introduction

Accidents by the inundation of water from old workings have occurred over the centuries in all parts of the mineral fields of the British Isles. To a student of the subject many of such accidents have become well known, particularly if accompanied by great loss of life. Many will have read the old accounts of the flooding of Wheal Owles in Cornwall or the lesser inundation at Mill Close mine in Derbyshire. Such accidents were usually accompanied by acts of bravery during rescue operations but seldom hit the headlines as would be the case today. Such accidents are now mercifully rare, in part due to the drilling precautions undertaken in dangerous ground, allied to the fact that metal mining in the British Isles has declined greatly.

An account of such an accident, now long forgotten, at a Chesterfield ironstone mine, appears in the Supplement of the Sheffield & Rotherham Independent, dated Saturday 19th March 1864. The incident is overshadowed by the extensive reportage of the 'Sheffield Flood' which occurred when the Bradfield reservoir burst causing havoc to the city in its path. The two incidents are in no way interconnected. An edited version of this account is reproduced.

### 'Alarming Pit Accident at Chesterfield'

On Tuesday a very serious inundation occurred in a pit belonging to the Staveley Coal & Iron Company, near the Chesterfield railway station. The pit, which is called the Spitalwell Pit, is an ironstone mine and was recently purchased with the extensive works of R. Barrow Esq., of Staveley. It is worked by two principal shafts 92 yards deep, one of which is the engine shaft and the other the winding shaft. At a distance of about 500 yards from these shafts, the workings communicate with another shaft at Upper Hady, called Wagstaff's Pit. The workings from the bottom of the two shafts at Spitalwell divide themselves into two different levels, one called the top rake and the other, the bottom rake.

There are usually employed in the mine from 60 to 70 men but on Tuesday, owing to the terrible inundation at Sheffield, only about 28 men were at work, the rest having gone to gratify their curiosity in seeing the destruction wrought in the neighbouring

town. Of this number, nine were in the middle district of the bottom rake, four in the north district of the top rake and the remainder in the north and south districts of the bottom rake.

About 3.30 pm on Tuesday afternoon, the old heading that enters the engine shaft 4 yards from the bottom, suddenly began to pour into the pit a tremendous volume of water which, rushing to the lowest workings, quickly cut off their communication with the shaft at Spitalwell. The men in the south district of the bottom rake, finding themselves in this position at once made their way along the board gate to the shaft at Upper Hady and were drawn up. The overman; John Turton, and one or two deputies who were in the north district of the same rake, were able to wade through the water to the, ordinary drawing shaft and were got out. The nine men in the middle district, as soon as they became aware of the disaster, rushed towards the shaft and found the water within 18 inches of the roof. Turton, who heard them at the other side of the water, urged them to come on but, only one of them made the attempt and he succeeded in reaching the bottom safely and was drawn out. His 8 companions who would not follow him, remained in the pit and their fate caused much apprehension.

Escape from the top rake was cut off, by the water at the bottom of the shaft and four persons remained there on dry ground, but whether they had enough, air was doubtful. As soon as the accident was discovered Mr Martyn Seymour, the Viewer of the Staveley pits, was sent for and under his direction steps were taken at once to pump out the water. The pit is fortunately provided with powerful pumping machinery although it has not made more water than could be easily kept under. The engine was at, once set to work and most satisfactory progress was made.

The cause of the accident is no doubt an accumulation of water in some adjoining working belonging to other owners. The plans of the mine show many old headings and boardgates that have been met with in prosecuting the search after ironstone. One of these, as mentioned, runs into the engine shaft and down this channel the water poured. This old boardgate runs for some distance towards Ingmanwell Colliery, the property of Mr Thomas Wales, which is at a higher level than Spitalwell mine, and has been troubled by a great quantity of water. The pumping engine at this, colliery had been 'set down', that is, had not been working for several days and it was supposed that the accumulation of the water had burst into the old workings and committed the lamentable havoc. The man in charge at Ingmanwell on Wednesday afternoon suddenly found that his float bumped and the colliery had been rapidly cleared of water. Ever since the accident, Mr Martyn Seymour the viewer, Mr Heward the surveyor and Mr Hall the surgeon, have been inconstant attendance.

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All Wednesday the pumping engine made very steady progress in drawing out the water. At 5 o'clock a man was sent down to the bottom and found a depth of rather more than six feet of water. A portion of the mine was by that time unroofed but no sounds could be heard. The engineers did not expect to have mastered the water so that they could get into the workings until after midnight and whether the poor fellows within would be able to survive until that time was more than they ventured to say. The pumping was continued without any intermission until 12 o'clock on Wednesday night when Mr Coke, the engineer, and a party of volunteers went down and spoke to the eight men nearest the shaft. The water was too deep and pumping continued until 4 o'clock on Thursday morning when Mr Coke and some men again descended. The water was then so low that a man swam through the level until he arrived at the eight men whom he brought out swimming with them one by one. The pumping was then steadily continued until 12 o'clock midnight When the remaining four men were rescued.

### **Surface Remains**

The mine site lies to the east of Chesterfield on a line of coal and ironstone outcrop which is traceable from Eckington in the north to Heanor in the south. The River Rother flows through a shallow valley below Chesterfield, on this eastern side. The valley is, and has been, the scene of considerable industrial activity and in consequence historical remains stand little chance of being undisturbed. The site was investigated early in 1974, the results being disappointing.

The area known as Hady is immediately east of the railway and river and can be reached via Piccadilly road running between the A632 Chesterfield-Bolsover road and the golf course. The only feature which can be identified with certainty is a large shaft situated in a private car park at the side of Piccadilly road at NGR SK 390710. It is apparently a circular shaft of about 8 feet in diameter which has been capped by a large concrete dome, the whole resembling a railway tunnel ventilation shaft. Its position relative to the newspaper account indicates that this is the Spitalwell engine shaft. Access to the shaft was not possible, the car park having a high barbed-wire fence around its perimeter.

Further along and on the opposite side of the road towards the golf course, there is a tract of disturbed ground stretching some 250 yards up the hillside. This is probably the early ironstone workings noted by Nixon (in *Industrial Archaeology of Derbyshire* page 236).

Continuing in an easterly direction, the ground rises to a maximum of 450 feet OD and comprises open fields and woodlands to the south of which, a new housing estate has been built and is mown as Hadyhill. The ground here consists of small shale and coal waste suggesting subsequent levelling and reclamation of the ground on which once stood the Ingmanwell colliery. The number two shaft of the Spitalwell mine was probably in the area now occupied by the estate.

It must be stressed that the latter information is purely conjectural but in such an area, close to a large town, much change will have taken place over the years. If the present terrain is examined with the newspaper report in mind, the appearance of the locality one hundred years ago, can quite easily be imagined.

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