

## **Whitfield Fire 1948**

### **Researched by John Lumsdon**

Three men were trapped following an underground fire which broke out in the Hesketh pit of the NCB's Whitfield colliery near Tunstall, early this morning and appear to have lost their lives. They are:- Samuel Richard Hughes age 38 fireman, of 89 Biddulph Rd. Chell Green; Harry Cooke, age 30, collier, of 48 Stringer .St Biddulph and P Shearer age 62, haulage hand, of Hill Top, Brown Edge.

Fire broke out near the coal face about 2.30 this morning (9th Dec 1948) and an official statement this afternoon said a small affected district was being sealed off. Rescue teams worked without avail all the morning to locate the trapped men.

At 1.30 this afternoon the following statement was issued; that as a result of a fire early this morning, underground at Whitfield, it is stated that three men have lost their lives and a small affected district is to be sealed off by stoppings.

#### **No Explosion**

Work was temporarily suspended, not only in the Hesketh Pit, but which adjoins it but also in the Institute Pit, work continued normally in the Middle Pit. It is understood that no explosion occurred. Eight rescue teams including those from Sneyd and Norton collieries, worked in relays all morning trying to locate the trapped men. Members of a rescue team returned to the surface about 12.30 said they encounter dense smoke, were unable to get nearer than within about a hundred yards to a point at which they believe the men to be. The fire is 640 yards below ground and is a mile from the bottom of ----- shafts. It is understood that there were only a few men working in the district concerned last night, and they were withdrawn as soon as the outbreak was discovered. No coal drawing takes place at the pit ---- nightshift.

**Mr Samuel, Richard, Hughes** a fireman, age 38 of 89 Biddulph Rd. , Chell Green, had worked at the colliery since he left school He was, until 12 months ago – when he had an illness – a member of No1 rescue team at the pit.

Mr Hughes was married and had a son and daughter, Derek and Maureen. Wednesday was Maureen's fifth birthday, the son was eight.

**Mr Percy, Shearer**, haulage hand age 62 of Hill Top, Brown Edge had worked at the colliery, ever since he left Smallthorne School at the age of 13. He served in the Army throughout the First World War. He has a wife and two daughters, one of them married. The family received first news of the accident from a neighbour returning from the same shift at the colliery. Later, the morning, officials of the colliery visited Mr Shearer's home. They told the family that rescue teams had found his tools, but there was no trace of him. Mr Shearer's younger daughter told the Sentinel; "We are living in hope that he will be found safe."

**Mr Harry Cooke** age 30 of 48 Stringer St, had been a collier all his working life, he was a rescue man and has assisted in saving lives in many colliery accidents – including the disaster at Sneyd Colliery in January 1942. He has five children, whose ages range from two

and a half months to nine years. A native of Tunstall, he was the only collier member of his family.

### The Whitfield Unit

Formally Chatterley Whitfield Collieries, Ltd. – is one of the biggest producers in the area, with an average weekly output of 20,000 tons. More than 2,000 men are employed there underground and 700 on the surface. Highly mechanised methods have been introduced there in recent years, and just over 12 months ago the NCB announced important long-term development plans for the future. Those long – term plans include horizon mining and haulage by diesel locomotives. They are worked out in detail to the year 1967, when a weekly out-put of 26,000 tons is scheduled.

Although the announcements about them were made after nationalisation, they were developed and consolidated by Mr M.H.J. Crofts; C.B.E., formally Managing Director at the collieries. Mr Crofts is now, of course Production Director to the West Midlands Division of the NCB.

#### Coal Face was Like a Bonfire, (Survivor's Statement)



Mr. W. Brough

Mr William Brough, age 39, a fireman, of Front-Lane, Gillow Heath, Near Biddulph, who was injured has worked in the pit since he was 15, until two years ago, when he became fireman., he was a member of the rescue team. He was born at Norton.

Lying in bed at home today, Mr Brough described the occurrence to a Sentinel reporter. When I got to the face (he said) it was all aflame, like a huge bonfire. I went up the face and across the top, where smoke was coming from. I tried to get at the fire from there, but the space behind me filled with more smoke and I was caught between the two. Mr Brough said

that he then managed to make his way out. His Doctor has ordered him complete rest and quiet.

#### Dense Smoke

In an interview with a Sentinel reporter this afternoon, Mr E. Whitmore, of 18 South View, Biddulph, a member of the second rescue team which went down at 5.20 am, said he and his colleagues could see no sign whatever of the three missing men.

We went down six at a time and the smoke was so thick that we could not see the apparatus in front of our faces. We used life lines, or we would have lost each other.

#### Tools found

After we had gone some way, we found some tools. They must have been Mr Shearer's, but there was no sign of him. Mr Whitmore, who has been a miner for 12 years, said he estimated that the fire occurred at about 600 to 700 years below the surface.

#### 1,000 Workers Idle After Pit Fire (10<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1948)

About 1,500 underground workers at the Hesketh and Institute Pits of the Whitefield Unit. NCB, were idle today as a



BEGRIMED AND WEARY. after working underground in efforts to reach the trapped men, this rescue team was pictured by a "Sentinel" photographer as its members returned to the surface, reporting that they could not penetrate the dense smoke.

resultant of the underground fire which broke out yesterday in the Hesketh Pit, and caused the death of three men.

Rescue teams went down the pits today to make investigations, and reported that the smoke had cleared considerable. It is understood that the work of dealing off the affected area has not yet been completed. It is hoped that the body of Mr Shearer, who was trapped by smoke and fumes in the re-turn air-way, will be recovered soon, but there is little likelihood of the bodies of the other two men being found for a considerable time.

It may be several days before work at the two pits can be resumed. Hundreds of miners reported for duty at the colliery this morning, but were informed that the pits would not be opening today. Work was in progress as usual at the Middle Pit – the third pit of the unit. Sir Ben Smith, Chairman of the West Midlands Division of the NCB, paid a visit to the colliery late yesterday afternoon.

The Stoke-on-Trent Coroner Mr G.W. Huntbach has applied to the Home Office for permission to hold an inquest under the Coroner's Act 1926, which provides for cases of this nature.

### **Brown Edge Funeral (Dec 15<sup>th</sup> 1948)**

Fellow workers at the Whitfield Unit were bearers at the funeral, at Brown Edge Parish Church yesterday, of Mr Percy Shearer, one of the three men who lost their lives in the underground fire last Thursday.

The service which was followed by internment in the churchyard was conducted by the Rev. F.S. L. Ramsden, (Vicar)

Family Mourners were Mrs Shearer, (widow) Miss Shearer, (daughter) Mr & Mrs J. Dragun, Mrs Wheeler, Mr & Mrs J. Adams, Mr & Mrs T. Adams, Mr A Adams Mr & Mrs H.

Lythgoe. ; Mr & Mrs H. Adams, Mrs G. Adams, Mrs Sheldon and Mrs Worthington. The NCB was represented by Mr T. Collier, (area Labour Officer)

Those from the colliery included Mr S. Bourne, Mr G. Nutt. Mr R. Hill, Mr A. Holford, Mr W. Hodgkinson and Mr A. Morris, (bearers); Mr A Holdcroft, (Institute Pit Over-man) and Mr C. Whalley (fireman)

### **Graphic Evidence at the Inquest**

When in Hanley today, the inquest was held on the three men who lost their lives in an underground fire at the Hesketh Pit of Chatterley Whitfield Unit, NCB, on December 9<sup>th</sup> 1948, a witness described how, after being met by "a mass of flames." He went, without a respirator, in search of two of the men. After a vain effort to get through, he said, he "passed out" and was carried from the scene on a stretcher.

An earlier witness had described how a conveyor stopped while he was working with two of the victims. He knew he said that the compressed air must have stopped. He said to one of the men "we'll go down and see what's up." He did not see if the others followed before he ran into dense smoke.

The inquest was on P.Shearer, haulage hand and on S.R. Hughes and H. Cooke whose bodies have not so far been recovered.

A number of legal representatives and officials were present. The inquest was opened before a jury, by the Stoke-on-Trent Coroner Mr G.W. Huntbach.

### **The Relatives**

Mrs Shearer, the widow, was not fit enough to attend and her daughter Margaret Dragon, of Hill Top, Brown Edge, gave evidence of her father leaving home on December 8<sup>th</sup> 1948 to go to work on the evening shift. Evidence to the same effect was given by the widows of the other two victims of the accident, Mrs Millicent Hughes and Mrs Elsie Cooke.

Dr A.J. McCall, pathologist at the North Staffordshire Royal Infirmary, who conducted a post-mortem examination on the body of Mr Shearer, said that in his opinion the cause of death was carbon monoxide poisoning together with burns and injuries to the skull. Mr S. Hay, Manager of the Unit, explained the pit workings by means of plans.

### **Conveyor Stopped**

James Baldwin, a collier of 5 Bridge St. Brindley Ford, said he was working with Hughes, who was the fireman, and Cooke, the contractor, in the old Whitfield seam at 2.20 am on the shift. They were re-opening a new face at a point above Pool's heading. Four holes had been bored and the cartridges inserted and duly fired and they had been sending coal down on the conveyor for about 40 minutes, when the conveyor stopped. He knew the compressed air must have stopped. The ventilation went a little lower as the injector air ceased, but it was still good ventilation. Witness went on; "I said to Harry Cooke: the wind's gone, there must be something the matter somewhere. We'll go down and see what's up.

The only lights we had witness said, were cap lights. I never looked back to see if the others were following. I ran into smoke but I did not turn round to shout to the others what was happening.

**When I was 20 yards down, dense smoke met me, I held my breath and made a dash through the smoke on my hands and knees and when I got to the bottom of the face I was exhausted and crawled into Pool's Heading.**

### **"Knock the Trips"**

Witness said he met some men there, told them something was wrong and told them to knock the trips circuit switches out. The Coroner asked, did you tell them anything about Cooke and Hughes? He replied, I don't remember. Witness said he met Mr Wilfred Brough, a fireman, and went down with him along the main level. He saw there was a fire in the belt dip, then started to throw stone dust in the belt dip to try to put the fire out, they were unable to.

Witness added; Fireman Brough asked where Cooke and Hughes were and I said I did not know they had not landed in the heading. He said I'm going back for them and started off. I felt ill and came out of the pit. In reply to the coroner, witness said he was the bottom man and the other two were two yards above him when the conveyor stopped.

The coroner said they would have the same opportunity of know it had stopped as you would? He replied, yes sir. Did you shout to these men to say there is smoke? – I don't remember doing so.

Questioning witness Mr Jenkins: asked did you see the fireman testing for gas before firing shots? Witness: Yes sir: So that the ventilation was satisfactory for the firing of shots? – Yes.

### **Very Good Hold**

In reply to questions by Mr Holdsworth, witness said the beginning of the fire was about two or three yards from the door, in the vicinity of the motor, the fire seemed to have a very good hold. The electric cables did not seem to be broken and appeared to be in their proper place. Mr J.W, Sumnall asked witness: Did Mr Brough tell you to get all the men out? Witness: I don't remember sir. Cannot you remember it? Your memory must be bad. – I was in rather an agitated state. I was exhausted for quite a time. Witness also replied that he could not remember whether he met a trainee at the top end of the face and informed him that Mr Brown had told him to ask the trainee to go and fetch the men off.

The coroner: When you reached the smoke and entered it, you told us you did not look back to see if you were being followed. Did you, at the time, believe that Hughes and Cooke were following you? Yes. **Mr Holdsworth pointed out that, in fairness to the witness, it should be made clear that he had undergone a severe strain,**

Wilfred Brough, Shot-fireman of Mow Lane, Gillow Heath, Biddulph, said that about 2am on December 9<sup>th</sup> there was smoke coming from the belt drift and he told the last witness they had better go and see what the matter was. They went down the face, along the main level to the bottom of the belt dip.

### **Mass of Flames**

“When I opened the ventilating door at the bottom of the belt dip, I saw a mass of flames,” witness said. He told Baldwin to call the men off the face and the witness believed that he had gone to do so. The coroner: Was there any reason, from his appearance at the time, why he should not have called the men off? Witness, replied No sir.

After mentioning safety measures which he put into operation, witness said he went to see where Hughes and Cooke were, as he was feeling anxious about them. As he was unprotected and had no respirator, he was unable to get through. He began to return and made a dash through the smoke which was accumulating.

**The Coroner: Later you passed out and were brought out of the pit on a stretcher? – Yes sir.**

Later witness said that before he went to look for Cooke and Hughes the men were fighting the fire with sacks of stone-dust.

### **Mine Unsealing Operation**

In the hope of recovering the bodies of two men who lost their lives in the underground fire, a start has now been in what is officially described as a “difficult and hazardous” operation.

A plan of action has been drawn up in great detail, and a highly technical operation is expected to take several weeks to complete. A Technical Advisory Committee has been formed, comprising men of wide and practical experience in dealing with underground fire

and recovery work. Progress so far made indicates that there will be every chance of the recovery work being successful.

The operation has only one object in view – the re-opening of the Old Whitfield Seam which was sealed off at the time of the fire, to recover the bodies of Samuel Richard Hughes and Harry Cooke. The body of Percy Shearer was recovered on December 11<sup>th</sup>. 1948.

### **Official Statement**

The following statement was made today 21<sup>st</sup> February 1949 by Mr I.W. Cumberbatch, Area General Manager: - A start has been made to re-open the old Whitfield seam, where the fire occurred on December 9<sup>th</sup> 1948, and the sole object being to recover the bodies of S. R. Hughes, fireman, and H. Cooke, collier.

The operation is a difficult and important one, said to help the Manager and Sub-Area Agent, a Technical Advisory Committee has been formed comprising of persons of wide experience in dealing with underground fire and recovery work.

A plan of action has been drawn up in great detail and this being a highly technical job has taken some time to complete. A copy of this plan has been to Mr Lockett, secretary to the North Staffordshire Branch of the National Union of Mineworkers and Mr J. Sumnall, secretary to the local Overmen's, Firemen's and Shot lighter's Association, in fact the plan of action as drawn up has been discussed with them, by the Sub Area Agent and Manager.

As previously stated a start has been made by using what is known as the Air-lock system and by a system of advanced stone-dust and finally concrete stoppings. The progress so far made indicates that there will be every chance of the recovery work being successful. It will of course be a difficult and hazardous job and great care is to be taken from every angle and every aspect of safety has to be reviewed. It therefore follows that it must be a slow job and it may be several weeks before we are in the vicinity where we expect to find Mr Hughes and Mr Cooke. Continuous sampling of the air and its consequent analyses is in operation daily and it is on the interpretation of these that each stage of recovery is drawn up.

The operation of recovery work necessitates the use of rescue men using self-contained breathing apparatus to examine the roadways and out in the advanced stoppings, and every credit so far is due to these workers for the way the job is being tackled.

### **Rescuers Complete Quarter-Mile Advance**

The first two stages of the operation have been completed and it is estimated that a further advance of 220 yards will be made in the third stage.

**Stage 1**, Consisted of the opening of the main intake airway seal and the creation of another seal some 180 yards further inbye by rescue brigades working in an irrespirable atmosphere using self-contained breathing apparatus, the idea being to isolate a compartment of roadway 180 yards long.

After the rescue brigades had completed their task, the gas in the compartment was drawn off, and fresh air was admitted to permit the re-enforcement with concrete of the temporary

seal which had been built by the rescuer workers, and to construct a second steel door air-lock. Thus first day was commenced on Feb. 13<sup>th</sup> and completed on Feb. 23<sup>rd</sup>.

**Stage 2**, consisted of cutting through the second seal. The rescue brigades then erected a temporary stopping in the Old Whitfield level, and in the main crut beyond the inter section of the Old Whitfield seam, thus forming a second compartment. This compartment has since been de-gassed and the temporary seals have been re-enforced with concrete in preparation for the third stage of recovery throughout the whole of these operations H.M. Inspector of Mines has been in regular attendance, and the Area Workmen's Inspector has made frequent visits as the work has been in progress.

**Up to the present an advance of approximately one quarter of a mile has been made, and the conditions, so far have been maintained very satisfactorily. The work out in by the Rescue Brigades, Officials and men deserves the highest commendation.**

On Tuesday March 10<sup>th</sup> 1949 the Technical Advisory Committee met to discuss the procedure to be adopted in Stage 3

### **Reducing Hazards**

They have decided to adhere to the present successful policy of recovery in short stages, by using advance stoppings built in the irrespirable atmosphere by rescue workers and there after consolidating their gain. By this means all hazards are reduced to a minimum. Continuous sampling of the air and analysis form part of the daily routine. It is upon the interpretation of the analysis of the mine air that the programme of recovery for each stage is drawn up.

The committee will meet again when stage 3 operations are nearing completion, but are holding themselves available should their services be required at any time. During the next few days, the details of stage 3 will be discussed with the representative of the Overmen's, Firemen's and Shot lighter's' Union and the National Union of Mineworker

### **Last Two Bodies Recovered**

The bodies of the two men, Samuel Richard Hughes and Harry Cooke, located today and brought to the surface. After the fire, the affected area was sealed off, but work has proceeded since in an effort to locate the missing men.

Mr I.W. Cumberbatch, North staffs Area General Manager, told the sentinel today: The area which was sealed off after the fire will now be re-opened for normal working. The two bodies were found on the coal face almost in the place where they were working by Mr S Hay, the colliery manager, Mr W. Wilcox, sub area agent, Dr A Mott area medical officer and Dr A, Forrester, divisional medical officer, who went down this morning and supervised the removal to the surface.

**Mr Hughes** was a fireman and had worked at the colliery since he left school and was, until about 12 months before the accident, a member of the No1 rescue team at the pit. He was married and had two children.

**Mr Cooke** had been a collier all his working life. He was a rescue man and had assisted in saving lives in many colliery accidents. He too was married and had 5 children.

### **Funerals**

**R Hughes** service was at Fegg Hayes Wesleyan on Sat 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1949 at 2.30pm prior to internment at Newchapple churchyard.

**H Cooke** service and internment at Biddulph church on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1949 at 3 pm.