

Leaked oil, fuel fed mine fire, coroner finds

A fire which killed three Cobar mine workers "shows the dangers caused by sending fuel and oil underground by means of pipes in a shaft used for other purposes," the assistant City Coroner, Miss Susanne Schreiner, SM, said yesterday.

She said at the Cobar inquest the fire, in the CSA copper mine on October 12, 1980, started when hot metal, slag or sparks from the men's work on the walls of the 4.2-metre-wide No 1 shaft fell and ignited flammable material below.

This in turn sent flames up the walls of the shaft, fed by hydraulic oil or diesel fuel which had spilt from galvanised iron pipes used to convey it to the various levels of the 1,000-metre-deep shaft.

The fire in the cage carrying the three men was further fuelled by the acetylene they were carrying for their work, but not until the



cage had been raised most of the way to the surface after the men sounded the alarm, she said.

Michael John Botten, 24, boilermaker, Christopher Paul McInerney, 21, miner, and Norman Keith Armstrong, 25, miner,

died of the effects of "gross incineration" when the fire in the shaft engulfed the cage about 75 metres below the surface.

All three were married.

The inquest into their deaths and the fire that caused it is believed to have been the longest in the State.

Miss Schreiner said she would make no recommendations as a result of her findings, but would refer the papers to the relevant minister.

She dismissed one theory, which was that the fire had started in the cage because of the men's negligence and had been fuelled only by their oxy-acetylene equipment.

The three men, suspended in a cage about 27 metres below the mine's No 2 level, were removing old concrete delivery pipes which had deteriorated and become a hazard.

Miss Schreiner said that, according to the system devised by their foreman, the men were supposed to catch hot metal they cut away

in a "catcher" and douse it in a bucket of water kept in the cage. But they were not using the "catcher" when the accident occurred because, they had told the foreman, the cage was too crowded.

Miss Schreiner said some witnesses had said that if the men had used the catcher the fire would not have occurred.

She disagreed, and said that on the evidence, the catcher was impractical.

"In my view the fire was caused when hot metal, be it either slag or sparks or hot nuts or bolts, fell down the shaft and ignited old cement bags."

She said this had vaporised the hydraulic oil or diesel fuel, or both, on the walls of the shaft and caused a large fire which enveloped the cage.

Miss Schreiner said that one of the men, using a walkie-talkie, had called: "Jimmy, up, up, up!" The cage was hauled to the surface.

She said vehicles and mining machinery were refuelled and maintained underground, and for this purpose hydraulic oil and diesel fuel were piped down the shaft.

The galvanised iron pipes used to convey fuel and oil underground had been in the shaft for many years.

"I am of the view that they should have been regularly inspected for leaks. No one seems to have considered this necessary."

Miss Schreiner said a fire had occurred a week earlier in the same shaft and apparently caused in the same way, when a different crew was working on removing the old concrete delivery pipes.

The manager of the Cobar mine, Mr Ian Thompson, had reported that fire to headquarters in Broken Hill as "minor." A safety inspector was to have come from Broken Hill in the week before the fatal fire but did not because of illness.