

# **Coal Mining and the Victorians**

**Lesson Idea: Recreating the Huskar Inquest**



**NATIONAL COAL MINING MUSEUM**

for England

**Inquest verdict given by the coroner, Mr Thomas Badger of Sheffield:**

*'It is now my duty to enquire whether any negligence had been used or any act of criminality committed by the parties, whose duty it was to render every assistance in their power towards rescuing the children from their awful situation. From the enquiries that have been made, I believe that there was no reason to suppose that such was the case, or that any act of criminality has been committed; and if the jury is satisfied, after the hearing the evidence, that such was a fact, they will have no difficulty in returning a verdict of accidental death.'*

(negligence = lack of care)

NATIONAL COAL MINING MUSEUM FOR ENGLAND TRUST LTD. CAPHOUSE COLLIERY, NEW ROAD, OVERTON, WAKEFIELD, WF4 4RH

TEL: 01924 848806 FAX: 01924 840694 [www.ncm.org.uk](http://www.ncm.org.uk)

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## Background Information

Huskar Pit was a coal mine in the village of Silkstone Common near Barnsley. It was owned and managed by a man called Robert C. Clarke. On 4<sup>th</sup> July 1838 a terrible disaster occurred. The day started hot, bright and sunny. But from about 2 o'clock a violent storm raged. Heavy rain fell and nearby streams began to flood.

The rain put out the boiler fire of the steam-powered winding engine, so workers underground could not be lifted out of the pit. This meant that just over 40 children aged between 7 and 17 years old, along with some of the men, were trapped underground. A message was sent for the miners to make their way to the pit bottom, and wait for the boiler to be re-lit, to allow them to be lifted out.

Those working underground were unsure about what was happening. Some thought there was a fire underground or on the pit top. Some people mistook a clap of thunder for an explosion. By this time the children had spent nine hours in darkness and they were desperate to leave.

Fearing for their lives, the children panicked. They ignored advice to stay where they were and attempted to reach the surface by walking out along the drift (a drift is a sloping tunnel leading to the surface; sometimes called a **day hole**) in Nabbs Wood. As the terrified children tried to make their way to safety, a stream swollen by the heavy rain overflowed into the drift. The children were washed off their feet and down to the ventilation door through which they had just passed. The water rose and twenty six children drowned. The majority of those who died were under twelve years old. Fourteen children managed to fight their way through the water and survived.

The inquest into the disaster was held at the Red Lion Inn, Silkstone by the Sheffield Coroner, Mr Badger. The purpose of the inquest was to find out what happened on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1838 and how twenty-six children came to lose their lives. In addition to Mr Badger, the others present included:

- Robert C. Clarke - Mine owner
- Rev. Henry Watkins - Parish vicar and local magistrate
- Those who had been working at the top and bottom of Moorend and Huskar collieries
- Hurriers who had escaped the flooded passageways by hiding in the slit
- Parents of the deceased children

## Evidence at the Inquest

**Joseph Husker, survivor:** 'Eleven of us were together, they all drowned but me, the water swam me down the dayhole and through the slit into another bordergate. William Lamb said we were not to go out there we kept bothering him. We did not know what we were going out for; we thought it was a fire. The water washed the children down the dayhole against the door through which we had all come and they were all drowned.'

**William Lamb, survivor:** 'We did not know what we were going out for. We thought it was a fire. The water washed the children down the dayhole against the door, through which we had just come and they were all drowned. If we had stopped at the pit bottom we should have been saved.'

**Uriah Jubb, survivor:** 'If we had stopped at the bottom of the pit we would have been safe. I was going up the board gate with Elizabeth Taylor and others, we heard the water coming and me and Elizabeth Taylor got into a slit in the dayhole and we stopped there till we got out. The slit is a good way past the door and near the mouth of the dayhole. The water met the others as they were coming up and drove them against the door, where they were drowned.'

**George Mann, a 13-year-old Silkstone hurrier at the Huskar pit:** 'William Batty shouted down the pit and told them they were to stop a bit, they would not stop, and they went and met the water up the day hole gate. Batty did not damn or swear. He seemed to do all he could to get them out. I did not see Batty do anything that was wrong. They did not work the engine because they were without steam. It rained so hard that they could not get to the fire the engine. The hailstones broke the windows of the engine house.'

**Joseph Holling, a hurrier from Silkstone:** 'I was working at Huskar pit yesterday. Elizabeth Holling, my cousin, was working in the same pit, and was drowned. As I was making my way out of Huskar pit up the dayhole, which is a road for people to walk out of the pit and for horses to go down, I was met by a quantity of water running down the day hole, which drowned every one of us there; eleven of us were there together. They were all drowned but me. The water swam me down the day hole and through a slit into another board gate; by that means my life was saved. We never heard anyone say we were to go out at the board gate. William Lamb said we were not to go there. We kept bothering him, and he said we might please ourselves, whether we went or not. We did not know what we were going out for; we thought it was for fire...'

**John Mellor, labourer:** '...We were up to our knees in water to get the engine to fire. We began to draw the men out as soon as we got steam up. When the children were making such a dismal din at the bottom of the pit, I told them to have a little patience and they would be pulled out as soon as ever the steam was got up. We began to pull them out as soon as we could.'

**John Hinchliffe, engine tenter at Moorend Colliery:** 'I was working the water engine at Moorend colliery yesterday, between two and three o'clock, when the

## Recreating the Huskar Inquest

storm took place. The water from out a dyke near the pit began to rise very high, rapidly, until the water ran into the pit. I then went and told the banksman, Francis Garnett, that he had better call the miners out of the pit.

I saw Garnett go immediately to Moorend pit, but I did not see what he did. As soon as I had seen him go I went to my engine again. The storm was so severe I could not work the engine; it damped the steam so much that it could not work. The water was running into the pit mouth. There was plenty of time for the children to have been got out of the pit if they had only come to the bottom of it, and kept the right road... I do not attribute blame to anyone. I do not believe anyone could have prevented the children from being drowned.'

**William Batty, a banksman:** 'We stopped the engine on account of the heavy rain. I never saw so heavy a storm. The storm was so severe that we could not safely stop on the pit hill; it rained and hailed so hard. I was not aware of the water getting into the pit at the day hole, and did not know that any person was in danger. The hailstones were like large pieces of ice. I saw about 20 children taken out of the pit. I did not call down.'

**John Burkinshaw- parent of George and Joseph Burkinshaw:** 'Two of my children were in the pit and were both drowned in the dayhole. I have heard the evidence given before this jury by witnesses and I believe, as far as I can understand, that they have all given true evidence. As a parent, I do not blame any person. I believe this has been an accident.'

**Revd Henry Watkins:** 'I am happy to have an opportunity to testify that Mr Clarke *zealously rendered every assistance* in his power at the pit brow.'

*(zealously rendered every assistance= tried extremely hard to help)*

### **Glossary of Terms**

**Drift:** also known as a **dayhole** or **pit rail**, these were horizontal or sloping tunnels driven into the side of a hill. They were sometimes used for ventilation or to allow pit ponies and/or workers in and out of the mine.

**Pit bottom:** underground area at the bottom of the shaft

**Pit mouth:** area at the top of the shaft

**Boardgate:** tunnel

**Slit:** narrow hole where coal has already been mined; sometimes these narrow slits could provide a short cut to the next passageway

**Banksman:** person in charge of the shaft; responsible for getting men in and out of the shaft

**Engine tender:** person who operated the winding engine, which wound men up and down the shaft

**Underground steward:** somebody who would have been in charge of the colliers

### **Thoughts of Huskar**

How terrible to die, to die in youth  
To die in childhood, a bitter truth.  
Life's breath taken by grasping water  
Lambs trapped and held, then put to the slaughter.  
To die in terror, in true petrifying evil dark  
Cruel smothering of life, washing away every tiny spark.  
To have to wait in screaming knowing  
That death ever nearer was coldly flowing.

Little lives of no value to man or nature  
Where was Earth with her motherly nurture?  
When these babes of toil faced such torment  
Was she the provider of this violent torrent?  
Or did man alone create this untimely tomb  
These infants barely left their mother's womb.  
Another example of man with nature tied  
And still no ones fault that these children died.

Brothers and brother's sisters, playmate and friend  
Stood together in terror awaiting their end.  
The swollen stream swept into that mine  
Lord, twenty-six tiny souls were then made thine.  
Taken from mothers but also from pain  
To face underground hardships never again.  
Children in heaven should at last know the sun  
As miners we pray that this has already been done.

**Daz Beattie.**

**17th November 2002.**

*Daz Beattie is a poet from Barnsley. He is a retired coal miner and has written a variety of poems about coal mining and life in Yorkshire.*