

Terrible Disasters 1

Two Major Disasters in County Durham

Working in mines is still dangerous today, but in the past it was even more hazardous. Many adults and children were badly hurt or killed in accidents. But sometimes something dreadful happened and many people were killed at the same time. When this happens people call it a 'mining disaster'. Since the year 1900, 373 people have died in eleven such disasters in mines in County Durham alone. Almost half of those died as a result of a single accident.

There are many causes of mine disasters. Sometimes the roof fell down on the miners. One or two disasters have happened when something went wrong with 'the cage', the lift which takes the miners down into the mine and brings the coal up to the surface. However, the most frequent cause of disasters has been explosions and fires caused by gasses in mines.

The worst coal mine disaster in County Durham, the disaster in which most lives were lost, happened about a hundred years ago. On Thursday, 16th February, 1909, an explosive gas which the miners call 'fire damp' started to build up in the mine at West Stanley Colliery. Something caused it to explode. 168 miners died.

A similar terrible disaster caused by exploding gas is still remembered by many older Durham people today. It happened at Easington Colliery on 29th May, 1951. Easington was one of the most modern and most productive mines in the country - one of the best mines in Europe. But gas is always a danger in any mine, however well run. At about twenty

past four in the morning the coal cutting machine ran into a type of stone in the coal (called pyrites) which made sparks when cut. These sparks caused gas in the air to explode. 81 miners lost their lives.

The explosive gas which the miners call 'fire damp' is often found in coal seams. It remains a serious threat to coal miners everywhere and anyone going underground is forbidden to take with them anything that could accidentally ignite any gas present and cause a fire or an explosion. Miners used to carry with them special lamps, called safety lamps, which alerted them to gas in the air and indicated how much gas there was. Today safety lamps have largely been replaced by electronic detectors.