

8. Accident at New Moss Pit, 1873

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A fatal accident happened at New Moss Pit on the morning of Saturday twentieth May 1873. The pit was one of several ironstone mines in the Johnstone/Linwood area owned by the ironmasters, Merry & Cunninghame. That business had been formed in 1843 by James Merry (1805-77) and his partner, Alexander Cunninghame of Craigends. The partnership became a limited company in 1872, with John Cunninghame, nephew of the co-founder as a director.

As mining accidents go, this one at New Moss Pit wasn't a bad one. "Only" five miners were involved and of these "only" two died as a result of their injuries. The five miners involved in the accident were James Stafford, High Street, William Reid, Dimity Street, Alexander Young, New Street, Henry Howard, Collier Street – all in Johnstone – and James Cain from Overton. They had gone down the pit on the morning of Saturday twentieth September, to relieve the previous shift who had taken a 25lb barrel of blasting powder into the pit with them but had not used any of it.

The five men on the morning shift found loose powder near the barrel and, after collecting it up, sat down to have a smoke before starting work. It is thought that one of them, while trimming his lamp, accidentally ignited some of the loose powder remaining and the whole barrel (25lbs) exploded.

James Stafford and William Reid died of their injuries in the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Paisley on Monday 22nd September. James Stafford's wife, Marion Bell, was left a widow with seven children, the youngest being only 4 months old. William Reid's widow Sarah, was only 20 and had no family. The couple had been married just under a year.

According to the summary of the report into this fatal accident by Mr W. Alexander, HM Inspector of Mines for the West of Scotland, three miners, the pit manager, the oversman and the fireman were all charged with contravening the terms of the 8th General Rule of the Coal Mines Regulation Act 1872, which had come into force on 1st January 1873. This Act applied to coal mines and "certain other mines".

Its 8th General Rule related to gunpowder and blasting and decreed that gunpowder or other explosive or inflammable substances "shall not be taken into the mine, except in a case or canister containing not more than 4 pounds". The three miners were each sentenced to be fined £2 or 30 days in prison; the manager was fined £10 pounds or 10 days' imprisonment and the oversman £2 or 10 days' imprisonment. The fireman was dismissed because of the short time he had acted as fireman.

This fatal accident is listed as Accident 10 on Schedule 2 of the List of Fatal Accidents in Ironstone Mines and Loss of Life therefrom, in the Western District of Scotland, during the Year 1873. However, there are two apparent discrepancies in Schedule 2. Firstly, the mine is referred to as Clippens No 3 mine and not New Moss Pit as named in then current newspaper articles. Secondly, the fatalities are listed as William Reid and Samuel Stafford but it was James Stafford, not his brother Samuel, who died on 22nd September 1873 of burns inflicted by the explosion. This is confirmed by James's death certificate, which shows that, on 23rd September 1873, Samuel Stafford notified the Paisley Registrar of his brother James's death. Samuel, my great-great grandfather, did not die until January 1881.