

Anderton 2.164 *CLARKE 1853*
SECOND THOUSAND.

A LETTER

Scarcely
FROM THE

DEAD TO THE LIVING;

OR THE

COLLIER BOY AND HIS MOTHER:

BEING AN

ACCOUNT OF THE DREADFUL INUNDATION OF HEATON
COLLIERY, ON MAY 3RD, 1815,

BY WHICH

FORTY-ONE MEN AND THIRTY-FOUR BOYS LOST THEIR LIVES.

“ He being dead, yet speaketh.”—HEB. xi., 4.

Newcastle-upon-Tyne :

PRINTED AT THE OFFICE OF THE GREAT NORTHERN ADVERTISER, 89, SIDE,
AND SOLD BY ALL THE BOOKSELLERS.

1841.

INUNDATION OF HEATON COLLIERY.

MAY 3rd, 1815, a dreadful accident took place in Heaton Main Colliery, near Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The workings of the colliery at this time were in the Main coal seam, at a very great depth, having a considerable dip, or inclination, from one side to the other, the shafts being on the lower side. This seam had formerly been wrought as a colliery, under the name of Heaton Banks, by shafts distinct from the present workings, and which shafts, when the colliery was given up, were covered over with planks and earth. In the course of time these old workings had become entirely filled with water, which, at about half-past four o'clock on the morning of the above day (Wednesday) broke through the coal in the north-west part of the present colliery, at a point where the strata are disturbed by a dyke, and inundated the workings. Some of the men who were working near the spot where the water forced its entrance, ran immediately to the shaft, and happily escaped out of the pit. On their way they met Mr. Miller, the under-viewer, and informed him of what had happened, when he ran to give the alarm to the other men, who were working in the higher part of the pit, in the hope that they might be able to effect their escape also ; but this, alas ! was not accomplished. The water rushed in with dreadful rapidity, and flowing naturally to the lower parts of the workings, soon cut off the only means of escape, by closing the bottom of the shaft, in which the water soon rose to the depth of nineteen fathoms.

Exertions were immediately made to reach the spot where the men were supposed to be, from some other workings, but without success, as the shafts of the old workings were choked up by the earth, &c., which covered their mouths, and which, when deprived of the support of the water, having fallen in, dragged after it many trees which had been planted in their vicinity. Attempts were made in front of Heaton Hall to endeavour to reach the old workings, through a shaft which had not fallen in ; but these, also, were unavailing, on account of the shaft being filled with foul air. Three large engines (one of one hundred and thirty horse power) were instantly employed in endeavouring to draw the water from the pit, but without the desired effect, as the water in the shaft, which was at first nineteen fathoms in depth, subsequently gained upon them, from which it appeared that the water was coming out of some old waste into the pit. During Thursday night the water gained upon the engines, notwithstanding they discharged one thousand two hundred gallons per minute ; and when the lowest shaft was plumbed early on the Friday morning, it was found to be thirty-three fathoms.

By this catastrophe seventy-five persons (forty-one men and thirty-four boys) lost their lives, together with the whole stock of horses, which were down at the time.

In the distance, between the back of Heaton and Benton Bridge, seven of the shafts belonging to the workings of an old colliery on Heaton Banks fell in, presenting frightful chasms, of many of these, the surface exhibited not the least vestige, nor was the existence of them known in the neighbourhood.

The old colliery is said to have been discontinued on account of the influx of water, which was so great, that seven engines, of the construction of that day, could not get the better of it. There is a tradition that the first steam engine used in this

part of the country was at, or near Heaton, and most probably it was on the colliery,* in the year 1714.

From various difficulties, the bodies of these unfortunate men were not arrived at until upwards of nine months from the time of the accident. The sufferers who thus found a living grave, left twenty-four widows and seventy-seven orphans, besides Mrs. Miller and her eight children, to deplore their untimely fate.

On the 6th of January, 1816, the first human body of the sufferers was brought to bank, in a state of great decay; but ascertained by the neckcloth to be that of William Scott, between seventy and eighty years of age, who attended one of the furnaces. Of a knife, which the deceased had in his pocket, the haft only (of bone) was entire, the blade being entirely corroded by the mixtures of the pyrites in the mire with water. His watch was also nearly destroyed by the same cause. It may, however, afford some speculation to the curious, that the articles of linen on the deceased were quite fresh and uninjured, but those of woollen fabric were entirely destroyed. In a few weeks afterwards, the remains of the rest of these unfortunate persons were found in different situations, in the workings of the pit.

There was one part of the workings very much on the rise, where several men and boys had been employed at the time of the inundation. At a crane adjoining the place, there were ten human bodies, and the carcasses of two horses found. The water had never risen so high as the above workings, by eighty or a hundred yards. On proceeding up the rolley-way to within about fifty yards of the crane, there were found two bodies lying near each other; and every ten or fifteen yards other

* The engineer was the reputed son of a Swedish nobleman, who taught Mathematics at Newcastle.

two bodies, from which it was conjectured, that these men had gone, by two at a time, to the tail of the water; and their strength failing them through suffocation, they had fallen down and died.

Some bodies were also found among the water in the crane hole; and in a nail-chest was discovered the body of one of the lesser boys. Most of the bodies were found in a lying posture; but some were found sitting, particularly the body of George Dawson, which was sitting with the arms folded, resting his back against a brick stopping; and his features were so entire, that he was recognized at five or six yards distance. Diligent search was made to discover any writing with chalk upon the trap-doors or brattices, but nothing of the kind was found, with the exception of a tin candle-box, in the pocket of one of the boys, William Thew, on which was scratched a very touching letter to his widowed mother, an account of which is contained in the subjoined narrative or memoir.

On the 29th of February, 1816, thirty-nine of the bodies, forming a melancholy procession, were interred in trenches in the south-east corner of Wallsend Church.

MÉMOIR OF WILLIAM THEW,

ONE OF THE SUFFERERS IN THE INUNDATION OF HEATON
COLLIERY, 1815.

WILLIAM THEW was the second son of John and Elizabeth Thew, and was seventeen years of age at the time of the catastrophe. His father, and an elder brother, aged twenty, named George, perished with him. A younger brother, John, was

one of those who, on the alarm of the bursting in of the water being made, escaped with others by the shaft. William and John were scholars in the Byker Sunday School at the time, and were steady and well-disposed boys. George and William met in class among the Wesleyan Methodists at the time; and the latter also attended Mr. Swallow's evening school at Catterick Buildings, where he learnt to write and cypher; but neither his father or eldest brother could write. His mother relates that her sons were very affectionate and steady; that after returning from their work, and when cleaned, and refreshed by their meals, they were in the habit of reading the Bible to her; and never retired to rest without prayer. Many pleasing anecdotes are related by their mother, particularly of William who seems to have been her favorite son. On one occasion he said to her, "Mother, when I'm a man I'll work hard for you, and keep you like a lady;" and the mother observes that his wishes and intentions have been in a manner realized in the support she has received through the letter he wrote to her in the pit. Imagination cannot pourtray the scene that would take place after the breaking in of the water, and when all hope of escape was cut off. To contemplate seventy-five human beings all at once incarcerated in a living tomb, with the appalling prospect of a lingering, though certain death. They had not died from hunger, as they had killed one of the horses and had cut slices off its hind quarter, some of which were found in the caps and wallets of the men, unconsumed. They had likewise an abundant supply of spring water. The exhaustion of the atmospheric air by the influx of water bringing with it foul air, was no doubt the cause of death, probably in a day or two at the most. Many of the men, and some of the boys, were pious, and were members of the Methodist Society, and most of the boys attended the adjoining Sunday Schools. It is probable

that the pious men would employ their time in exhorting those who were irreligious to repentance and faith in Christ; and however simple these addresses may have been, they were no doubt listened to with intense interest and attention. Prayer and even singing were also offered up. A striking distinction appeared in the positions and manner of those who were known to be wicked men from those who feared God; and while the former seemed to have struggled hard in death, the latter appeared to have sweetly fallen asleep in Christ Jesus! The person spoken of in the former narrative, George Dawson, was an instance among others of the apparent composure with which he met the last enemy. A placid smile rested upon his countenance; and even the arms had not altered their position, being folded across his breast, after remaining nine months under ground.

After the bodies were confined, the relatives were permitted to go down the pit for the purpose of recognizing their husbands or children; and Elizabeth Thew, the widow, was among the foremost. She readily recognized William's body by his fine auburn hair; but what must have been her transported, yet agonized feelings, when in one of his pockets was found his tin candle-box, on which, in the darkness of the suffocating pit, or only with the dim light of his Davy lamp, the dear boy had, with a nail, engraved on his candle-box, the following touching and consolatory epistle:—

"Fret not, dear mother, for we were singing while we had time, and praising God. Mother, follow God more than ever I did;" and then on the other side, which, it is supposed, must have been dictated by his father, as it bears his signature, though he could not write: *"If Johnny is saved, be a good lad to God, and thy mother."*

JOHN THEW.

(The annexed is a fac-simile of the box and writing.)