

# Oaks Colliery Disaster

**1866 saw England's worst ever mining disaster at the Oaks Colliery, Barnsley.**

At 1:20pm, on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> December 1866, an explosion rocked the town of Stairfoot, Barnsley. The explosion was so loud that it could be heard up to 3 miles away.

Smoke and dust clouds billowed out of the shafts and soot covered the ground at Cudworth, 5 miles away. The explosion had broken the cage. Around **361 men and boys** were killed by the explosion. It is estimated that around 20 survivors were pulled from the bottom of the shaft by rescuers and were immediately taken to the surface. Sadly, only 6 survived due to severe burns.

Rescuers worked throughout the night but at 8.30am most of them were evacuated for fear of another explosion.

A second explosion shook the mine at 9:00am taking the lives of 27 rescue volunteers. One of the volunteers that lost his life was Parkin Jeffcock, a 'viewer,' or engineer, who came up from Derby.

Despite knowing that there could be further explosions, he insisted on going further into the mine. His notebook was later discovered in the mine. A third explosion went off at around 7.40pm, which blasted the broken cage into the headgear.

On **Friday 14th December**, the signal bell rang on shaft No2. Rescuers began shouting down the shaft, but heard no response. As a last resort, a water bottle filled with brandy was tied to a rope and sent down. When the rope was lifted back to the top, they discovered the bottle had been removed. Clearly someone was still alive at the bottom of the shaft.

Instantly, two men went down in a kibble and found Samuel Brown, one of the rescuers from the previous day. Samuel had taken a rest inside a lamp hole and managed to survive the explosion.

Between **Saturday 15 December and Tuesday 18 December** there were 14 more explosions and the shafts had to be filled in to smother the fire.

The cause of the explosion is not clear although the enquiry blamed it on shot firing. The pit was well-managed with two furnace shafts for ventilation and strict safety lamps rules. Blasting was not normally allowed as the mine was known to have had a problem with 'firedamp' (a flammable gas found in coal mines) There had previously been an accident in 1847 causing 78 deaths.

## Key Facts



- 12<sup>th</sup> December 1866
- 1:20pm First Explosion
- 13<sup>th</sup> December 1866
- 9:00am Second Explosion
- 13<sup>th</sup> December 1866
- 7:40pm Third Explosion
- 14<sup>th</sup> December 1866
- 4:30am Signal Bell heard
- 15<sup>th</sup> December 1866 4:45am
- Series of explosions heard
- Shafts were blocked

### What happened next?

As a result of the Oaks Colliery Disaster, the Government passed a new act, the 1872 Coal Mine's Act. This meant the colliery managers had to have a 'certificate of competence'. The miners' representatives were allowed to inspect the mines at any time and there were new regulations put into place about ventilation.

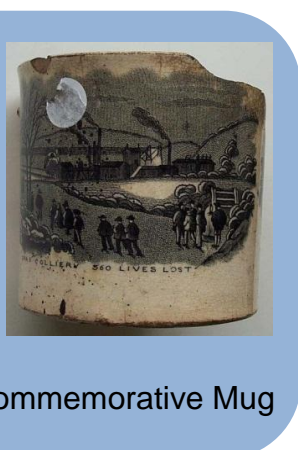
A fund was set up in order to support the widows and orphans of the Oaks Colliery Disaster. Queen Victoria gave the large sum of £200, followed by £10,000 from the Lord Mayor of London. Various people from all over England sent money to assist the affected families. The Miner's Union agreed to pay the widows 5 shillings a week 1 shilling per orphaned child from the fund.



### Did you know?

It is believed that the fund set up to support the widows and orphans still has money in it to this day!

### Objects on display at the Museum



### Further Reading

[www.oaks1866.com](http://www.oaks1866.com)

[www.healeyhero.co.uk/rescue/pits/Oak.htm](http://www.healeyhero.co.uk/rescue/pits/Oak.htm)

[www.yorkshirefolksong.net/song.cfm?songID=130](http://www.yorkshirefolksong.net/song.cfm?songID=130) Listen to the song

Duckham, Helen and Baron Frederick, 1973. *Great Pit Disasters, Great Britain: 1700 to the present day* (David and Charles)