

The Tavistock Gazette

February 24 1882

POSTBRIDGE.

A LIFE THROWN AWAY THROUGH CARELESSNESS.

An inquest was held on Monday at the New Inn touching the death of Richard Henry Stephens, a miner. It appeared from the evidence of John Webb that on Saturday he and the deceased were working underground in the Golden Dagger Mine, which belongs to Mr. Moses Bawden, and is situate about a mile from Postbridge. They had blasted one hole, and the deceased bored another, and then attempted to ram the powder with an iron tamping bar. Witness cautioned him as to the danger he was incurring, when he replied that it would not matter. Deceased took up a handful of "tamping," and put it into the hole. He used the iron tamping bar again, and after remarking what good tamping it was, struck the bar with a mallet, and an explosion resulted. The deceased received the full force of the explosion, and his brain was perceptible through a hole in his forehead, while his eyes were shockingly injured. The printed instructions suspended on the mine were read, which said that an iron or steel-tamping rod or stemmer should not be used for ramming. Mr. Bawden explained that the men were working on tribute, and the use of the iron rod would enable the deceased to get through his work more expeditiously. The Coroner said gritty decomposed granite was not suitable for "wadding," but Mr. Bawden told him such tamping was the only sort used in the Cornish mining district. Wm. White stated that he went for a doctor. Mr. Collings, of Moretonhampstead told him he had two cases of confinement, and could not come. A message was sent to Mr. Hunt of Chagford, but as he did not arrive, the witness went and saw Mr. May of Moretonhampstead, who said he could not come unless he received his fee beforehand, and that he was expecting a confinement. The Coroner, in summing up, expressed a hope that the poor man's fate would deter others from using such an iron bar with gritty material. He said he thought a gentleman who objected to attend such a case unless he received a fee was an exception to the grand rule of the medical profession, to attend cases of need regardless of fees. The jury returned a verdict of "Accidental death," and expressed regret at the conduct of Mr. May.

The Western Weekly News

February 25 1882

FATALITY IN A DEVONSHIRE MINE

STRANGE CONDUCT OF A MEDICAL MAN

Mr. Fulford, coroner, on Monday held an enquiry into the cause of death of a miner, named Richard Henry Stephens. Just after noon he, with another, was at work underground in the Golden Dagger Mine, about a mile from Postbridge, and whilst charging a hole the powder exploded in the face of the deceased, and he sustained frightful injuries. He was at once conveyed to the surface, and after lying many hours in great agony he expired. Much interest was taken in the result of the enquiry, not only, as will be seen, because the deceased literally "threw away his life," but there was a report that although a doctor at Moretonhampstead was sent for he refused to attend because the messenger had no money. Mr. W. Rowe was elected foreman of the jury.

In opening the enquiry, the Coroner explained that it was compulsory for the managers of mines to have certain regulations for the prevention of accidents posted in a conspicuous place, and he called attention to one is (sic.) order that it might be brought before miners, and be the means of making them take greater precautions, for it would appear that the deceased neglected to follow the instructions laid down in the regulations, for he used an iron pricker to ram in the powder, instead of one of copper or wood. The clause read: - " In charging holes for blasting, except in mines exempted from the operation of this section by the Secretary of State, an iron or steel pricker shall not be used, and a person shall not have in his possession in the mine underground any iron or steel pricker, and an iron or steel tamping rod or stemming shaft not be used for ramming either the wadding or the first part of the tamping or stemming on the powder." He was pleased to find that the results of an investigation by the Inspector of Mines was that the regulations were posted in a proper manner, and that as far as those who had the control and management of the mine were concerned everything was done to give intimation to the miners as to the duties devolving on them, and to see that they were carried out in such a way as to prevent accidents. The coroner proceeded to inform the jury that they would not have on that occasion the assistance of medical evidence to tell them the cause of death, and the circumstances of the injuries it would appear the deceased received. It had been reported to him as a fact, but he could scarcely credit it until it was said in evidence, that a medical man was sent for from Moretonhampstead, but although he did not appear to have any other urgent engagements, before he would come to attend on the poor man he insisted on the payment of his fee, and would not leave his residence to do what was the duty of every medical man to render to everyone, and one which, in the interests of common humanity, should have been rendered to the poor man suffering from the effects of such an accident. (Hear, hear.)

John Webb said on the day in question he and the deceased were working in the adit end of the mine, driving west. They had blasted one hole, and deceased had bored a second 13in. deep. Deceased had a portion of the powder, and was about to ram it in with an iron tamping bar when witness cautioned him, and he replied, " That won't matter, Jack." Deceased had by him a wooden swap stick, which had been used in swabbing the hole before, and he should have used that for the purpose of ramming. Witness then returned to where deceased was and handed him the tamping. He had the hole fully charged. Deceased took a handful of tamping which had been prepared of soft stone, from the witness and poured it into the hole. Witness then saw him use the iron tamping bar, before swabbing out the hole, and immediately after observing what good tamping it was, he struck the bar with a mallet and there was an explosion. Deceased received the full force of the blow and was thrown back some distance.

Witness ran to his assistance, and afterwards procured help to get him to the surface, deceased being able to use his feet on the ladder of the shaft. They could see the brain through a hole in his forehead, and his eyes were fearfully injured.

Mr. Moses Bawden, the proprietor of the mine, explained the means necessary to be taken in charging a hole to prevent the possibility of an accident. The men were working on tribute, and the use of an iron tamping bar would enable the deceased to get through his work more expeditiously.

A discussion then ensued as to what was "wadding" within the meaning of the section, the coroner arguing that gritty decomposed granite was not suitable, while Mr. Bawden contended that such "tamping" was the only sort used in the Cornish mining district.

Evidence was next called with respect to the refusal of the doctor to visit the deceased. But it was found that other doctors had previously been sent for, but they were unable through other engagements to attend. William White, however, gave evidence that as no doctor came at eight o'clock he went for one. He reached Moretonhampstead at a quarter to nine. He saw Mr. Collings who said he had two cases of confinement he was compelled to attend; he had sent a former messenger to Mr. Hunt at Chagford, but as he did not appear to have come, Mr. Collings referred him to Mr. May. Witness explained to that gentleman the nature of the accident, and Mr. May replied that he had made up his mind not to go beyond the turnpike-gate unless he received his fee beforehand. Witness told him he had no money, but that it would be all right. Mr. May added that he was expecting a confinement case every hour. Witness then left Mr. May and returned to Mr. Collings, that gentleman having promised to go the first thing next morning if Mr. May could not go. Mr. Collings was out, but witness received instructions to bathe the wound.

The Coroner, in summing up at some length, expressed his sorrow that such an accident should have occurred through the neglect by a miner to follow instructions laid down by the Government for his own safety. It was a miracle that accidents did not more frequently occur, for the tamping used ought not to contain a particle of gritty matter; if it were the work of blasting must be fraught with considerable danger. There was no doubt such a substitute of "wadding" was more frequently used than they were aware of, and, therefore, it was a mystery accidents did not more frequently occur. He hoped this poor man's death would be the means of inducing miners to act with greater caution, and that the loss of that poor man's life would be the means of means of preventing others from using such an iron bar with that gritty material. He again expressed sorrow that no medical man would attend; for although the man was so injured that no medical aid could save him, his agony might have been alleviated. He praised Mr. Colling's action, believing he did all he could, for he would have been blameworthy had he neglected the cases for which he had been previously retained. But it was a matter of great regret to hear of any gentleman practising the honourable profession of medicine acting as they were told one had, for his great experience of the members of that profession was that they attended people wholly regardless of their being paid, and from a sense of moral duty and a feeling of right doing. He did feel, therefore, that a gentleman who objected to come west of Moreton to attend an injured man unless he received a fee was an exception to the grand rule of the medical profession, whose members were always ready to tender their assistance in cases of need regardless of fee.

The jury found that the deceased met with his death accidentally; they exonerated the managers of the mine from all blame, but they thought that the conduct of Mr. May, of Moretonhampstead, in refusing to come without being paid, unprofessional and much to be regretted.