

The 1895 Diglake Colliery Disaster

The way coal was mined from underground can be very difficult to understand for people who have never been down a mine. So to help you understand what probably went wrong at Diglake, Colliery on that cold winter's morning in 1895, take a look first at these two pictures.



Picture 1 shows how coal (coloured black) has been formed, by rotting vegetation millions of years ago and it is now lying, pressed between bands of rock and shale.

So that they would know which area of a mine was being referred to, the miners gave each different seam a different name. Some of the seams in the North Staffordshire coalfield had names like Great Row, Brights, Cockshead and even a seam called Holly Lane which stretched all over the North Staffs. coal field.

At Diglake there were three seams being worked and the miners there called them the 7 feet the 8 feet and the 10 feet seams. This 10 feet seam was another seam which covered a large part of the North Staffs. coalfield and was worked at many other coal mines, right up until the 1980 period.

If you look at the picture then the top coal seam may have been called the 7 feet seam, the middle coal seam may have been called the 10 feet seam and so the bottom seam may have been called the 8 feet seam We know that the 10feet seam was one of the higher ones because the report of the accident says that the flooding also trapped some men working lower down in the mine.

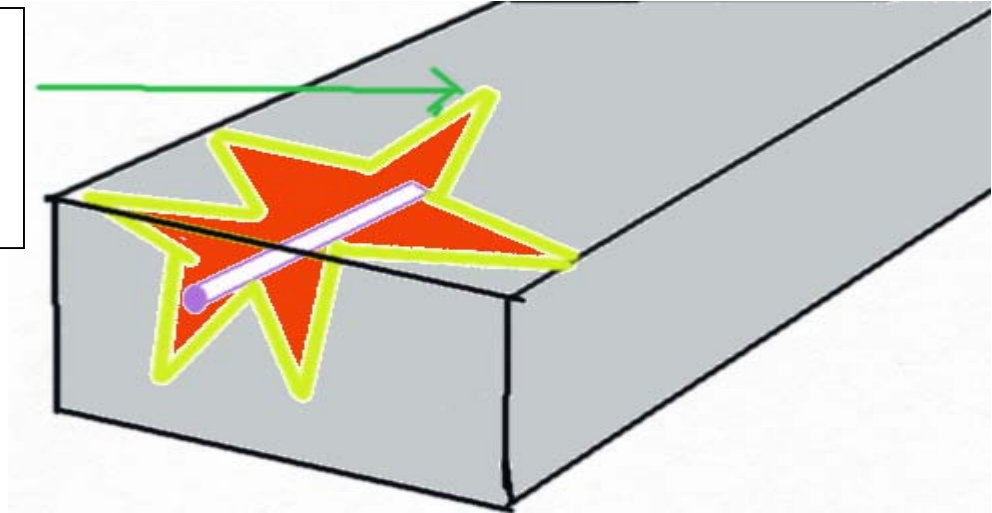
This picture shows a cake with layers of sponge, cream and jam. It may help you to remember what a coal seam is like underground if you think of the sponge of the cake being the rock, the cream layer is the same as a layer of shale and the jam is like a coal seam. A coal seam is pressed between layers of rock; in the same way that the jam is pressed between the layers of sponge cake.



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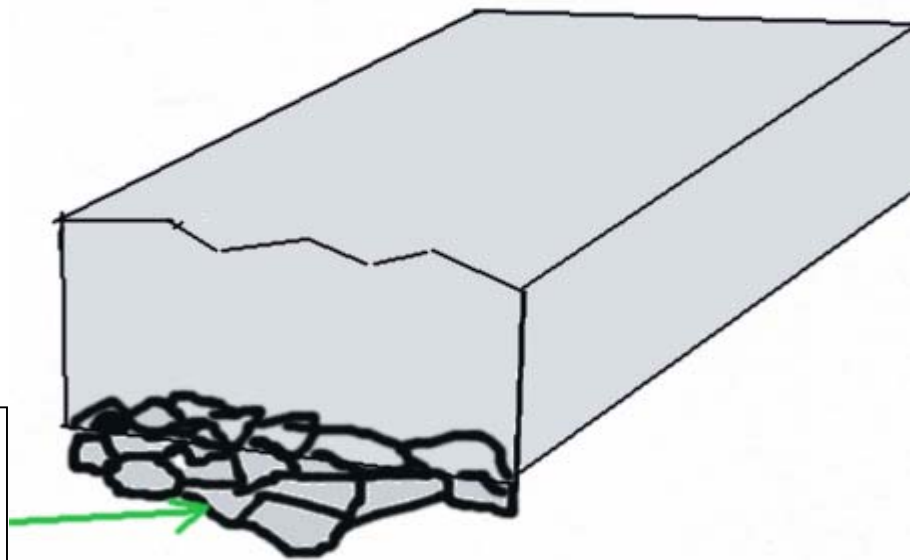
Now you understand how a coal seam is pressed hard between rock, look at these 2 pictures below and see how a colliery shot firer blasts the solid coal with dynamite, so that the miners can shovel it into pit wagons called tubs.

The coal seam reaches a long way underground and is very hard. So the force of the exploding dynamite only reaches back into the seam for a few metres.



This picture shows what usually happens when dynamite is exploded inside a hole, which has been drilled into the coal seam. Because the coal is so hard and the seam reaches for miles underground, the force of the blast can only travel a short way before it dies out.

Coal, shattered by the dynamite exploding, lies in a heap, ready for the miners to come and shovel it into pit 'tubs'.



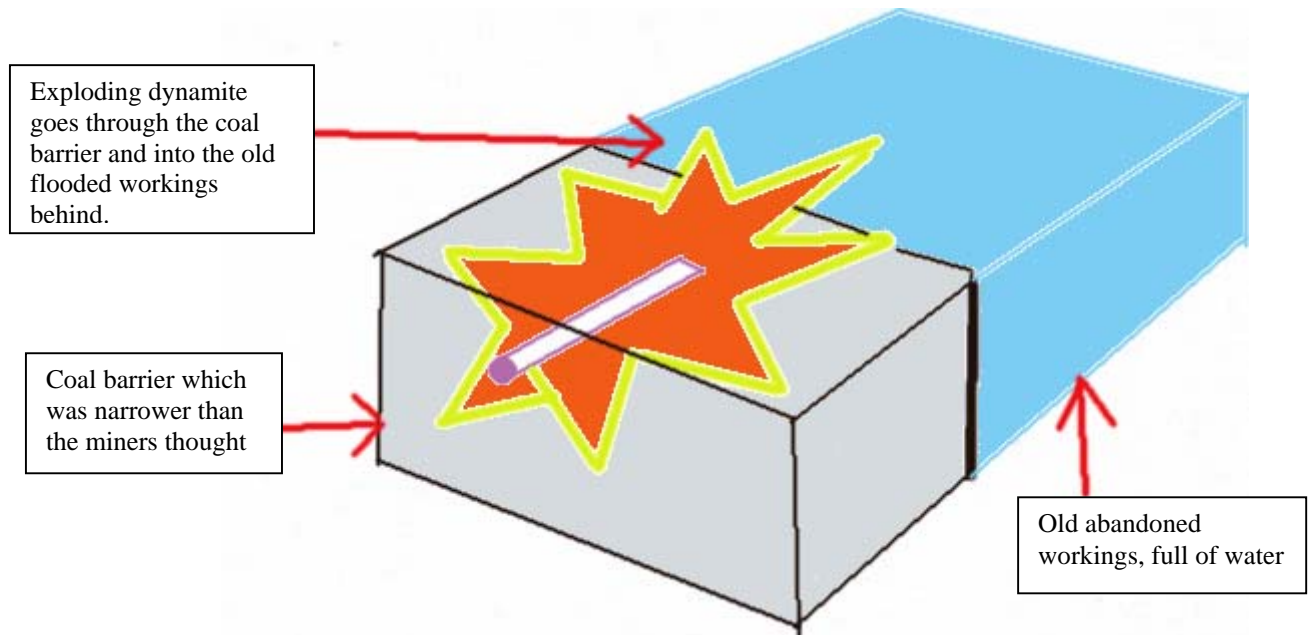
After the dynamite has been exploded by the shot firer by using his electric battery, the coal, which has been blasted by the explosion, lies in a pile ready for the miners to load it into 'tubs' by shovelling it. Notice that the coal seam behind this pile of broken coal is still firm and solid.

On the morning of January 14th 1895, William Sproston the shot firer and his men thought that they had drilled a shot firing hole into a solid seam of coal, in the normal way. They didn't know that they were very close to some very old workings, which had been abandoned in 1850. These old workings were now flooded with water and between them and Diglake Colliery was a barrier of coal which was only a few metres wide.

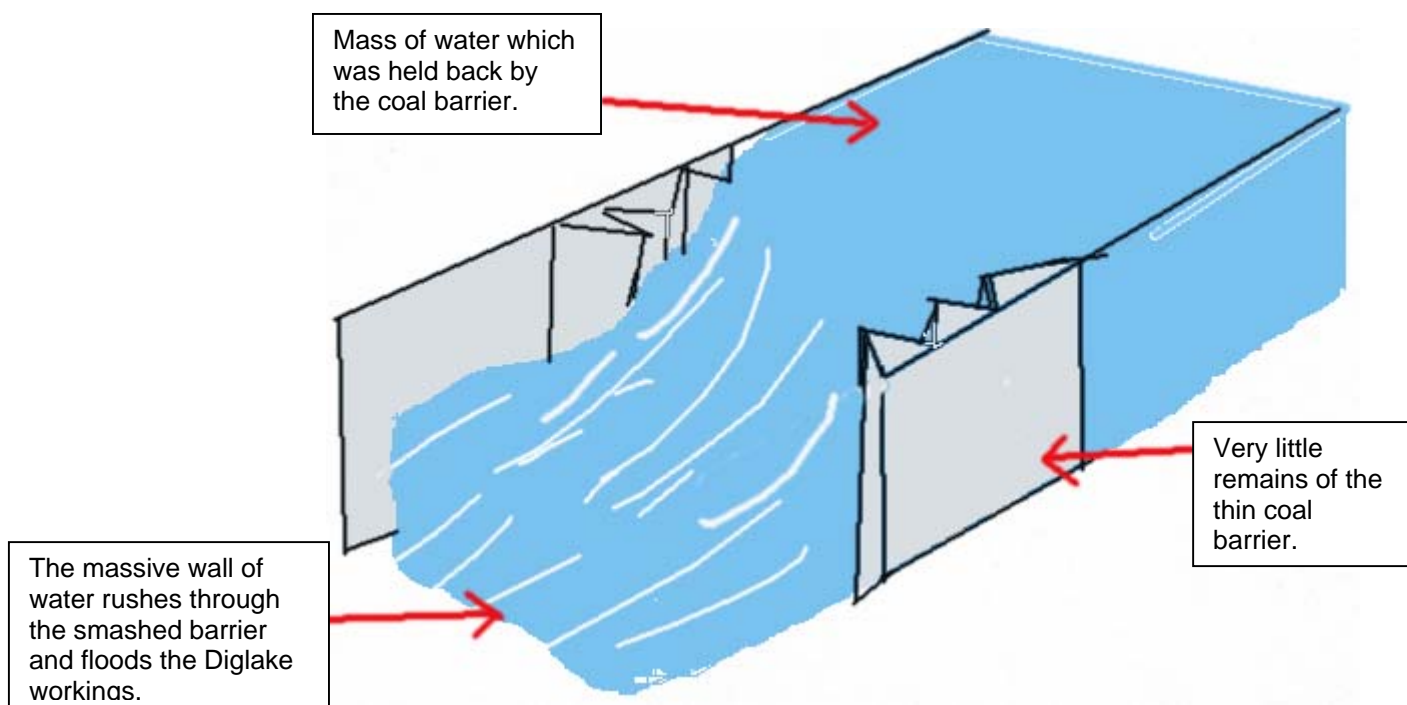
Because the Diglake miners didn't know how close they were to the old flooded workings they carried on doing things in the normal way, as they did every day.

They drilled the holes for the gunpowder, William Sproston would use his oil flame safety lamp to test for dangerous explosive gas and when he didn't find any gas, he set off the dynamite.

That was when the disaster happened because the coal barrier was not thick enough to stop the force of the exploding dynamite travelling all the way through the coal and into the flooded workings beyond it. So because there was nothing to stop the force, it smashed a big hole through into the old workings.



This is what happened next -----



That was when all the deep water from the old workings rushed into Diglake colliery and drowned a lot of the men and young boys who were underground that day.

Some of the men and boys, working near to the place where the shot was fired, would have been hit by a solid wall of water and would have drowned at once but most of the men working farther away in the mine, would not know at once what had happened.

We already know that the weather was really cold and that some of the pumping machines were frozen and because these pumps were not working properly the normal water wasn't being pumped out of the Diglake mine as fast as usual. So when the water, in the Diglake workings started to rise after the accident, these other men, working in other areas of Diglake, would perhaps think at first that another pump had frozen. Only when the water started to rise up to their waist or higher would they know that something serious had happened. Their only light was from oil safety lamps and a lot of these would be put out by the water, so the miners would be groping their way around and panicking in the darkness. The force of the water would be so great and the rush so strong, that the whole of the mine would be very quickly flooded to chest height and only the men who were working near to the shafts would have any chance of escape.

When news of a big accident reached the surface then all the women and children of the village gathered together near the top of the shaft, hoping and praying that their husband, father, son or brother had been one of the lucky ones, to escape with their life.

Some of the women waited at the top of the shaft for up to 5 days in the bitterly cold weather, because they couldn't believe what had happened and they were still hoping for some good news, from the men who had tried to rescue their friends and work mates.

However, because the amount of water and the sudden force with which it had flooded the Diglake mine, had made it impossible to rescue any one, the mine was sealed off with the drowned men and boys still inside.

That is where most of them still lie to this day.

108 years and 7 months later.