

## PLOD ESSAY: 20-Shaft Mine Disaster



*Nola Thorpe read this account of the 1937 mine disaster to a large audience at the Library Summer Readings on Wednesday night 1<sup>st</sup> February. At first, before they remembered to clap, the response to her reading was deep silence. Some in the audience had never heard of the disaster and were shocked. Many were moved to tears.*

### **Powlett Express, 17 February 1937:**

Tragedy, swift and terrible, descended like a thunderbolt on Wonthaggi on Monday [15<sup>th</sup> February], the blackest day in the town's history.

Overwhelmed by an explosion of gas as terrific in its force as has ever been experienced in a coal mine in Australia, 13 men – 10 deputies and three pumpers – perished less than an hour after they had entered the pit to do maintenance work.

Roaring like a tornado along the drive and splitting to race in two opposite directions, giving none of the men a chance, the ignited gas wrought great havoc in the mine workings.

At that tragic moment – 10:15 a.m. on Monday – Wonthaggi heard the awful news that 13 men were trapped behind thousands of tons of fallen rock, loose coal and 12-inch pit props which had been ripped out from position and hurled along the drives with incredible force.

The news evoked a demonstration of courage, tenacity and sacrifice, which will live forever as the epic of Wonthaggi. Hundreds of miners volunteered to descend into the gas-filled pit from which fumes and a black pillar of coal dust rose as some terrible Nemesis.

Miners and management officials working side by side and led and inspired by the courage, calm balance and technical knowledge of the General Manager (Mr John McLeish) they faced a task, which might well have appalled Hercules. And every man who faced the chaotic black abyss into which the pit had been converted carried his life in his hands. Reeking with gas and choked in places up to the roof with a bewildering tangle of great rocks, some weighing up to three tons, the main eastern drive was a forbidding place that would have overawed the most stone-hearted. Yet nobody flinched. Calm and selfless, shift after shift of rescue men and miners attacked the chaos of stone in the hope of liberating alive men whom they all knew well. Nobody, mine official or miner, thought of himself. The one consuming desire that drove men to prodigies of toil and sheer valor was the thought of those trapped men with whom the rescuers had shared pleasures in less tragic hours...

...Work in the shaft had ceased for six days owing to a dispute between the union and the mine management about the transfer of a miner. The victims, being deputies, were not members of the union. The party of 15 men went below to ensure that the mine was safe. Ventilation fans [*which had been off while the miners were striking*] had been [*turned on in anticipation of an end to the strike*] and were forcing air through the shaft. The mine was regarded as safe for the men to descend. After having read a deputy's report the party went down the shaft at 9:30 am. The men did not say along

which lead they would work. They took canaries and safety lamps to guard against the presence of gases, which frequently generate in coalmines.

When the three-ton iron cage in which they descended reached the bottom of the shaft it was found necessary to oil the cage rope. Two members of the party – Arthur Gidney and Horace Rilan – signaled for the cage to be drawn to the surface again and they ascended to the pithead to carry out the work.

They had hardly walked away from the cage on the surface when the explosion shook the district. With a deafening roar the compressed coal dust and gas belched up the shaft. It is believed the force of the explosion must have travelled nearly a mile from where it took place before it reached the pithead, but it hurled the heavy cage 50 feet up to the poppet head from the surface, damaging the skids on which it ran and buckling the thick steel hawser on which it was suspended. A mile away, the concussion broke every article of crockery in the home of Mr Keith Hollole.

Although they were shaken by the concussion and the narrowness of their escapes, Gidney and Rilan immediately spread an alarm. They telephoned the mine management and then leaped into the motorbus in which the party had driven to the mine and sped toward Wonthaggi two and a half miles away.

#### **From 20-Shaft's Blown Up by Simon Longstaff:**

The disaster devastated the people of Wonthaggi. Everyone was affected by the loss of thirteen highly respected members of the community. It was not only sorrow the thirteen widows of the lost men were forced to endure, but also the fear and anxiety in the time immediately after the explosion. They knew not if their husbands were alive and had to wait in agony for news to emerge from below.

Over the week following the disaster, as the bodies reached the surface, each widow realised her husband would not be coming home. For one, however, Mrs Harper and her family of four young children, the wait was a long one, as the body of overman, H. Harper, was the last to be found. Much later, Harper's son described the anxiety felt by his family:

“For my mother this was a traumatic experience not knowing if her husband was alive or dead. The funerals of some of the victims were already taking place, which reinforced in our minds that hope of finding my Father alive were indeed forlorn. On the week following the accident as I passed the Miner's

Union Theatre, I noted a small blackboard in the Foyer, with a chalk-written terse message on it: ‘Harper's body found.’ This was a shattering experience.

The funeral took place on the Wednesday of the week and I can still see the crowds milling around our house in Merrin Crescent. The cortege was preceded by about 300 miners walking in front of the Brass Band... It was a day I will never forget as tears ran down my face.”

Financial help for the families was swiftly provided. As quickly as the Melbourne papers reported the disaster, they launched appeals for the widows and families of those killed. *The Herald*, *The Sun*, and *The Argus* were leaders in raising funds.

Even the movie theatres contributed. The Metro Theatre screened a preview of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production of “Romeo and Juliet” on Sunday February 28<sup>th</sup> with entry by donation to the fund. The Regent Theatre also contributed holding a preview screening of the Fox production, “Girl in a Million,” again with entry by donation.

With funds coming from so many sources, some form of co-ordination needed to take place. A meeting organised by the Mayor of Melbourne on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February was convened to address the problem. It was attended by important dignitaries such as the Acting Premier Old, and Mr MacKenzie, MLA for Wonthaggi. The metropolitan newspapers that collected funds agreed to pool their funds and the large fund would be called the Lord Mayor's Coal Mining Relief Fund with the Lord Mayor as Chairman and treasurer of a 20-person committee to control it.

This fund hence became the key collector of money for the bereaved families. It amounted to £15,589 on March 19 and £27,031 by April 2. *The Powlett Express*, on May 14 reported that a self-appointed five-man committee had taken charge of the funds from the Lord Mayor and his committee. The trustees were the Minister for Mines, the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, the Mayor of Wonthaggi and Clerks of both Councils. They had in their control £29,000.

So, although the widows had lost a husband and breadwinner, they did not suffer financially. The generosity of the people of Victoria shone through and placed them in secure financial situations. This, however, did little to compensate of the loss of a loved one.

**(Oil painting of 20-Shaft by Heather Tobias)**