

The Kaitangata Mine Disaster



The Kaitangata Coal Mine Explosion



In Dunedin's Northern Cemetery this grave inscription can be found ...

In loving memory of
Thomas Frew
Accidentally killed 21st Feb 1879
Aged 41 years

So little is said on this simple headstone that it is easy to overlook the fact that Thomas Frew was involved in one of New Zealand's worst mining accidents that happened not far from Dunedin in early 1879.

What is the story that lies behind this headstone?

What happened?

What happened?

Kaitangata residents first noticed a column of smoke coming out of the air-shaft just before 9am on the morning of the 21st February. There had been a tremendous bang and a mass of debris was thrown into the air. A boy entering the mine and leading a horse was blown fifty feet clear of the pit mouth and killed. A horse and six empty trucks were blown out of the pits mouth a similar distance.

A doctor was summoned from nearby Balclutha, a rescue party got together and many women and children assembled on a nearby hillside weeping in anguish. The rescue party worked to the point of exhaustion.

When it was released that the “after-damp” (carbon monoxide and other gases) which follows an explosion was so strong all hope for digging any survivors out was gone.

By 12.25pm bodies were starting to be recovered and by 2pm some eight bodies had been recovered when the air in the mine became too dangerous to work. After a short rest, work resumed and by 7pm, 16 more bodies had been recovered.

Relief rescue parties arrived from the Green Island pits to relieve the rescuers. By Saturday morning all but two of the miners had been found. Virtually all 34 men and boys had died of suffocation.

How did the accident happen?

At the inquest it was revealed that the explosion had been in the old workings of the mine which had not been sealed off or adequately ventilated. Both the miners and inspectors were generally happy with the safety conditions at the mine. Safety lamps were recommended for use with “fire-damp” accumulation. Three dozen had been ordered but had not arrived.



The mine manager's brother Archie Hodge had entered the area of the old workings in which “fire-damp” was known to be collecting. He had rashly entered the area with a naked light rather than a safety light.

The inquest found that Archie Hodge had caused the explosion. The mine manager William Hodge was also found accountable in that he had not set up precautions to prevent an explosion when he knew that “fire-damp” existed in the mine.

In Memoriam – written by Thomas Bracken in sympathy for those that died in the Kaitangata explosion

The touch of God is on the chord which runs
Through all humanity, from heart to heart ;
The Hand Divine, that holds the stars and suns,
Strikes on love's string, and inner voices start,
Proclaiming we are each of each a part.

The Priest of Nature may expound this truth :
Afflictions are but solemn lessons read
To mortals ; Science still is in her youth—
The living gain their knowledge through the dead ;
All human suff'ring points the road ahead.

It may be so ; anon we'll learn that text,
But now the widows' and the orphans' eyes
Are following, from this life to the next,
Loved spirits torn away from dearest ties,
And God to us is speaking through their cries.

He calls on us to succour those in need :
We're bound together in a common bond ;
Faith's purest action is a noble deed,
Hope's truest anchor is a helping hand,
Love is the key that opens the doors beyond.

A few short days ago, and those who rest
Held this poor lease of earth which now we hold ;
The pulse of life beat strongly in each breast—
Ah ! 'tis the same old story oft'n told,
We know not when the spark may leave the mould.

Oh ! brothers, there are weary hearts to-day,
And cheerless homes, where sorrow sits in gloom ;
And lonely weeping ones, who can but pray
"Thy will be done," whilst bowing to their doom,
And longing for the meeting 'yond the tomb.

Not ours to change the mystic second-birth,
Not ours to bring the loved ones back again,
But ours to do our duty upon earth,
By succouring the mourners who remain ;
To them we're linked in sympathetic chain.

To-day Humanity's resistless breath
Sweeps through the credal barriers, and brings
Us all together to the Church of Death—
The common fold of toilers and of kings ;
And Charity broods o'er with outstretched wings.

To-day the pure Christ-Spirit from above,
With warm vibration thrills through every soul ;
To-day we owe a sacred debt to Love,
To-day our Father claims a special toll
At gates which lead to Hope's eternal goal.

THOMAS BRACKEN.

The Old Kaitangata Cemetery



The headstones have been collected into one combined area.



There are many headstones included here commemorating the men and boys killed in the explosion.

The remaining headstones?



This extremely poignant headstone commemorates John Molloy and his two sons who were killed in the explosion.

Notice the ages of the boys recorded on this headstone.

The inscription says...

Erected

To the Memory of

John Molloy,

Aged 36 years.

Also John Thomas Molloy,

Aged 15 years.

Also Edward Molloy,

Aged 13 years.

They were killed in the

Kaitangata Explosion Feb 21st 1873.

The Beardsmore family lost five members of the family all working the same ill fated shift.

The remaining headstones 1?



Above : Memorial to James Spiers, aged 40 years

Below: Memorial to David Buchanan, aged 30 years



Above: Memorial to Samuel Coulter, aged 50 years.

The remaining headstones 2?



Above : Memorial to Andrew Jarvie, aged 40 years.



Above: Memorial to William Watson, aged 36 years.

Other accidents at the mine



While the mine explosion in 1879 is one of the worst disasters on record in New Zealand mining there have been several other accidents to men working at the Kaitangata mine. Another headstone can be found at the old cemetery for sixteen year old Alexander Ramsey who was killed in 1894 when some wooden boxes became uncoupled and rolled on him. Other headstones scan be found at Kaitangata's "new" cemetery.