1841 Quarter Mining Disaster

On 16 March 1841 an explosion at the Avon Braes coal mine claimed the lives of eleven men, or to be accurate ten men and a 10 year old boy. Seven men were killed directly by the explosion, the other four fatalities occurred when another seven went to their assistance. They were overcome by fumes and only three were able to be revived.

Avon Braes was a drift mine, that is, it was driven horizontally from the steep sloping bank of the Avon Water. The location is not known, however the Ordnance Survey Six Inch First Series shows an old coal pit approximately two miles south of Hamilton (grid reference NS738528). This ties in well with the location given in a personal account of the disaster, reproduced below.



Location of old coal pit near Quarter. OS Six Inch 1st Series, c.1864.

The Glasgow Herald of 19 March 1841 contained the following article:

On Tuesday last, the town of Hamilton and neighbourhood were thrown into great consternation on hearing of an extensive explosion of fire damp in the coal mine near Quarter, accompanied with the loss of 11 lives. It appears that about 8 o'clock that morning (the breakfast hour) there were six men and a boy in the mine, all of whom, it was too plain, must have perished instantly by the explosion.

On the alarm being given, the overseer of the mine not being at hand, seven men who were on the outside of the mouth of the mine spontaneously, and under the impulse of humanity, and vainly hoping to aid their fellow creatures in the midst of this dreadful calamity, rushed thoughtlessly into the pestiferous atmosphere of the newly exploded mine; three of whom were dragged out alive and four dead, by a third party who, becoming alarmed for their safety, went to their assistance. Unceasing exertions were made to relieve the mine of the noxious vapour, but it was not till Wednesday morning that the bodies of the seven first sufferers were recovered, some of whom were shockingly mangled by the explosion, in a way that evidently showed that the death of the whole must have been instantaneous. Of the 11 sufferers, nine were married, who have left widows and families behind them to deplore their loss. The noble proprietor of the mine, the Duke of Hamilton, who is now at the Palace, was in the greatest distress on obtaining intelligence of the sad event, and immediately himself sent pecuniary assistance to the families of sufferers, and has caused every exertion to be made on their behalf, and arrangements to be made, at his own expense, as to their funerals and otherwise, suitable to the melancholy occasion.

The terrible accident, it appears, was in no degree owing to the negligence or want of skill of his Grace's overseers or engineers. The mine, where the explosion occurred, was completely ventilated, being open at both ends to the day, with a current of air constantly passing through it; and, on the morning when the accident occurred, had been carefully examined by two oversmen, and reported to be free of danger. It appears that the carbonated hydrogen had been instantly generated from certain fissures connected with a rise in the metals, the sad effects of which no human foresight could prevent.

For the satisfaction of those at a distance, who may have friends employed at the Quarter Coal works, we subjoin a list of the sufferers. The seven first were in the mine at the time of the explosion – the remaining four went in to their rescue: – William Brounlie and his son, a boy of 10 years of age; James Duffie; John Duffie; Hugh McLean; John Smith; William Wotherspoon; James Fleming; George Pate; James Fisher; James Fyfe.

By this most painful catastrophe about 60 individuals have been deprived of their bread winners, and it is hoped that their bereavement and consequent destitution will not be overlooked by the benevolent.

James Fleming, one of the four who went to the rescue of those caught in the explosion, was my great-great-great-great grandfather. He was not yet 25 years of age at the time of his death and left a widow and four daughters, the youngest of which, Christina Fleming, was only two months old and would eventually become my great-great-great grandmother. Her name would be carried forward, in the Scottish convention, to my grandmother, Christina Fleming McWilliam.

The 10 year old boy is not named but he was possibly Thomas Weir Brounlie (or Brownlie), son of William Brownlie and Janet Weir. There is a Janet Brownlie, widowed, in Low Quarter on the 1841 and 1851 census.

Many years later the following article, credited only to 'A Hamiltonian', appeared in the Hamilton Advertiser of 2 October 1886, giving a more personal recollection of the tragedy:

A Great calamity which occurred in the west of Scotland last week brought vividly to my mind an accident which has left an impression that will be irremovable. It is forty-five years since the catastrophe happened.

We have had more disastrous affairs of the kind since then, but the peculiar circumstances of this one made the occurrence more striking. I refer, of course, to the explosion in the Duke's mine in Avon Braes. The development of the coal industry in our locality then was yet in the future. The consumpt of the mineral was purely local, and the men who wrought in the mines were our relatives and neighbours. There were scarcely any but whom we had known from infancy. The villagers at Quarter were church members, going out and in with our fathers from very early times. The managers were people with whom we were on the most intimate terms. Well, on a fine spring morning in the year 1841, we, young weaver lads, were taking our breakfast meal hour walk, and in rounding the end of Miller Street, as you see before you the road to Covan Burn, a mounted horseman is seen by us.

His speed is beyond the common. It is our old friend Ord Adams, who had always a kind or jocular word for us. One look at his face that morning, as he rode past, conveyed intelligence of disaster. There was no greeting. He saw us but heeded not. His mission was one of mercy. All this we read and more. One look at each other and we ran. There was no use in asking what was the matter. The two miles to the mine mouth (for it was not a pit in the ordinary sense) we soon passed over.

My companions and I were the first of the town's people who were at the spot. Speedily we learned that the mine had exploded, with seven or eight men and boys inside.

No great number it may be thought; but worse than that, a rescuing party of four brave fellows had entered the mine before we arrived at the scene, and there, issuing from the dismal hole was seen the noxious vapour. Could anyone live in that poison, was the question we put to each other. The men must have succumbed long ere this. Who are the four adventurers? Their names were soon made known to us, and we found them to be neighbours, whom we had known from infancy. James Fyfe, George Peat, James Fisher and a lad from Quarter, named Fleming. The wailing of the mothers and sisters was not loud, but deep. In a few minutes Mr Adams appeared, bringing with him the doctors of the town. Among them I well remember Dr Alex. King, a townsman of great promise.

Volunteers were offering their services, nay, urging their immediate acceptance. But as I stood near the doctors, I saw they were stoutly opposed to any further effort, so long as the gasses issuing from the mine. Mr Adams, himself, I saw became impatient at the restraint and ventured onto the fatal mouth. He and his party speedily returned, sickly and staggering; one or two had to be assisted as they came out of the mine. Still a return to the rescue was insisted on by the men, and still the medical men convinced that it was dangerous—that the hope of saving the lives of all the volunteers was futile. As the vapour cleared away, a party of stout miners entered. Then after a little a move was made to clear the mouth and the last party in came out carrying a body. I see his face and know him. The doctors at once pronounced him dead. Then all hope vanishes. As the mine cleared, the search, though still dangerous, is steadily pursued. One after another is brought out, and the medical men's opinion is confirmed—there is no hope for one of them.

Strange to say, I had grown up to manhood nearly, and never had looked at death in any form. One of the lads, who fell in attempting rescue, had been laid upon a soft grassy bank, a little distance from the mine. I was told he was lying alone. I timidly approached the spot. I did get a surprise, and one that did me good, for there lay the young man cut down in the prime of life. A smile! Yes, a smile on his handsome face. He belonged to a rather good featured family. Henceforth I thought the grim king of terrors would have no scare over me.

I was the better of that night. We waited till all the rescuing party were brought to bank, and we learned that the search for the bodies of those who were in the pit before the explosion would not be brought out till the next day, if they were recovered. It began to be whispered that the bodies of the unfortunate victims would not be a pleasant sight to see. The town, when we arrived home, was in great excitement. I do not think such another day Hamilton had seen since the day of Bothwell Bridge.

People could not settle to work. The good people of the town were busy offering consolation to the widows and orphans. Each one felt the calamity to be affecting themselves. Next day I was up at the mine at an early hour. All was hushed. The bodies were being got out. They were tenderly and delicately handled; respectfully and mournfully laid in their last resting place.

It was an eventful day. It brought out the better part of some we met in ordinary life. I was personally a great friend of Mr Adams, and it affords me pleasure to add that his tenderness, kindly sympathy, and gently consideration to the bereaved ones, during the trying ordeal enhanced, if that were possible, the high opinion in which he was held.