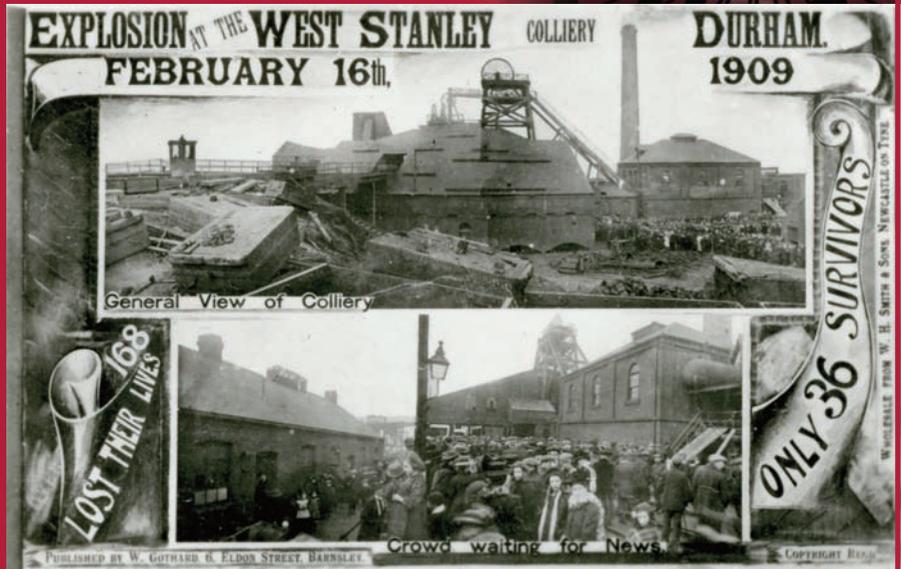


Disasters



'FAREWELL, FAREWELL,
NO TONGUE CAN TELL
HOW BRAVE, HOW
TRUE, WERE THOSE
WHO FELL
WE KNOW YOU DID
YOUR DUTY WELL
YOU HEROES OF THE
MINE'

West Stanley Memorial



Postcard commemorating the West Stanley Disaster, 16 February 1909 (DCRO D/MRP 31/2)



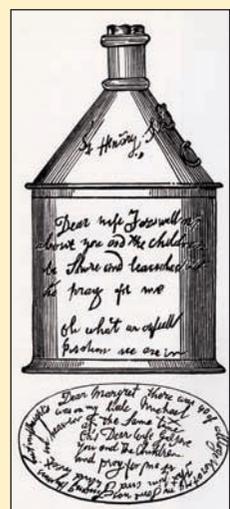
Bringing up the first body at Seaham, The Illustrated London News, 18 September 1880 (DCRO D/CL 22/1)

Seaham Colliery Disaster, 1880

On 8 September 164 men and boys lost their lives in an explosion, leaving behind 382 dependents. However, 67 men were rescued from the explosion. The shafts had to be cleared of debris before the exploration teams could gain access and begin rescue. George Thompson was trapped with seventeen other men. Whilst they were fortunate to be mostly uninjured, there was gas in the air. He said afterwards: 'I cannot express to you the joy we all felt when the exploring party brought us assurances of our safety and rescued us from our terrifying position.'

Teams of up to 70 men worked day and night to clear the mine and recover the bodies of those who died. Hampered by further rock falls and a severe fire in the Maudlin seam, the recovery effort extended into October. Messages were found in the pit, including this from victim Michael Smith:

'Dear wife, Farewell. My last thoughts are about you and the children. Be sure to learn the children to pray for me. Oh what an awful position we are in!'



Michael Smith's message on his tin bottle (John E. McCutcheon, Troubled Seams, the Story of a Pit and its People, 1955, opposite page 129)

West Stanley Disaster, 1909

West Stanley had two colliery disasters. The first on 19 April 1882 was an explosion killing 13 men. At about 3:30pm on 16 February 1909, the pit was struck by a much larger disaster as two explosions occurred in quick succession. The miners had been due to finish their shift soon after the accident occurred. The next shift, already on site, was immediately ready to help. The rescue effort was reinvigorated when rapping was heard about 9:00pm. As explorations extended into the night, a crowd of thousands gathered, anxiously awaiting news of friends and family. The disaster resulted in the death of 168 men and boys but there were over 30 survivors.



"I think I am the luckiest lad to be alive," said Leslie Kears (centre) 21-year-old miner at Easington Colliery. Leslie was hurled 60 yards when he caught the full blast of the explosion.

Extract from the Durham Chronicle, 1 June 1951 (DCRO D/MP 2/88)

Easington Colliery Disaster, 1951

On 29 May 1951 an underground explosion killed 81 men and boys at Easington. Two members of the rescue team, H. Burdess of Brancepeth Colliery and J. Wallace (colliery uncertain) also died. The Easington Lodge banner has an image of the disaster memorial and the Yugoslav flag is attached. A delegation from Yugoslavia was in Durham at the time of the disaster. They attended one of the funerals and, in an act of solidarity, a delegate threw a flag into the grave. A second flag was donated to the lodge and it remains with the banner to this day.

In the week following the Easington Disaster, nearly £16500 was donated to the relief fund. One anonymous donor sent a gold ring with the request that it be sold for the fund. A Sunderland youth club offered four free places on their trip to the Festival of Britain to boys who had lost their fathers.



Easington Lodge banner being carried off the Racecourse, Durham, 1988 (DCRO D/CL 27/277/796)

Seaham Colliery 1880 Disaster Memorial, image courtesy of Carolyn Ball