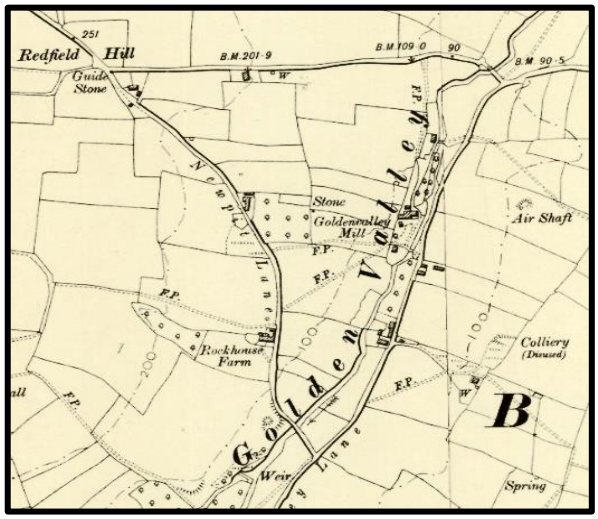
The Fire-Party

Tragedy at Golden Valley



Geoff Flook

To the memory of Abraham Cook

Abe Cook Junior and Alfred Walter

Also for Elijah Edwards, my great-grandfather,

who features in the story

Contents

The Coroner summed up the case at some length for the jurors and asked them to retire to consider their verdict.

'All rise' prompted a shuffling from the assembled public of relatives of the deceased, journalists and just the idle curious pressed into the assembly room of the Crown and Horseshoe at Oldland Common which had been requisitioned for the inquest.

Some of those present took the opportunity to stretch their legs; the majority chose to stay and retain their seats, evidently believing they would not have a long wait to hear the verdict.

Their wait was not a long one – in less than half an hour, word was passed to the Coroner that the jury had reached a decision. The inquest reconvened and the Coroner asked for the jury to be brought in.

In a suitably grave tone, he asked the Foreman of the Jury if they had reached a verdict. The Foreman slowly rose from his seat and replied: 'We have sir'.

'What is the verdict of the jury as to the cause of death?'

There was an expectant hush in the room awaiting the next words.

The Foreman solemnly pronounced: 'We find the cause of death to be……

PART ONE

SATURDAY 25 MARCH 1882

Elijah Edwards

He knew he must be nearing the end of his shift. He recognized the signs. Growing fatigue in the shoulders and arms, slight stiffness in his lower back all told their tale. Hewing the coal in semi-darkness from a working sometimes only four feet high was testing. Not that he had ever known any other labour, having started out as a collier when he finished school. Now aged thirty-two, nearly 20 years later, his body was fit and honed, well able to wield the short pick-axe in the confined spaces of the Golden Valley New Pit for an eight-hour shift. His single candle, as carried by each miner to illuminate their workspace, had burned down nearly to the bottom. Along with Elijah's aching limbs, that too signified the end of the shift and the end of the working week.

'Elijah!' cried a voice from behind him. 'Did you not hear the whistle?'

His workmate in the adjacent working was calling him to join the files of men making for the pit bottom. He gathered his pick and his candle-holder, stepped out into the main roadway where he was able to stretch his back fully. He started to trudge the 500 yards with the growing posse of workers making their way to the bottom of the shaft that would ultimately take them to daylight.

The forty or so men and boys who had worked the Saturday shift were in good spirits. Finishing work at around midday, they had a day and a half to enjoy themselves. They would see their families properly and rest their weary bodies, before returning to work early on Monday morning. Sunday the pit would be silent and empty.

As they walked, talk turned to families, sweethearts, and the joy of the warm bath they would have when they finally made it home. Light banter and a few laughing voices testified to the 'end of week' feeling. Elijah knew most of the crew well, some lived near him in Oldland Common, while none lived more than three to four miles' walk away at the top of the hill overlooking the Golden Valley. This was a close group, linked by a strong sense of friendship and comradeship, unique to those who daily shared harsh and unremitting toil in a difficult and at times dangerous work environment. They looked out for one another, one man's safety often depended on his mate. Collieries were dangerous places – roof-falls, fires, explosions, machinery accidents were commonplace (though thankfully not at Golden Valley). When accidents did happen miners would come together, united in saving lives or retrieving dead or broken bodies. And together mining communities would grieve and mourn. Golden Valley was no exception.

As the men made their way out from the main roadway of the pit, the space opened into a wider area closer to the shaft, where they changed from their work clothes, a loose shirt and short breeches, into the clothes they would walk home in. Still some 900 feet below the surface this was nevertheless when most felt a mild euphoria, no matter how many times they had entered the pit. Only a short journey in the cart and they could breathe fresh air once again. The space being tight there was a fair bit of jostling. Pick axes were stowed and old candle stubs thrown away from the candle holders each man carried. Most were keen to be near the front of the queue to take them up to the surface. It

would take at least four journeys to get everyone up today. Elijah hated the crush and was happy to hang back and be one of the final group of colliers leaving the pit that day.

Stephen Adams was the rapper, responsible for signalling to the Engine Man on the surface that the cage was full and ready to be lifted.

'Can we all make it up on this journey, Stephen?' queried Elijah.

'Aye, we are only 8, and I can fit in ten if needed.'

Adams, an experienced man of more than forty years' experience, was trusted with the responsibility for rapping. He knew the strict limit for the cart according to the colliery rules was five people but the foreman Abraham Cook had often told him he could carry nine or ten people at a time. The last contingent boarded the carriage, and as Adams joined them he rapped to give the signal to ascend and the cage slowly started its 900 feet ascent to the surface leaving the New Pit workings silent and dark. Two and half minutes later the clanking of the machinery winching them to the surface ceased, they stepped out, handing in their tallies to the banksman and emerging into the half-light of a grey March day. Exiting from the Engine House, past other pit buildings, most miners joined Newpit Lane going north towards Oldland Common, North Common and Cadbury Heath.

Despite the crowd going in his direction, Elijah was content as usual to keep his own company for the two-mile walk home towards Oldland Common. The crisp air was refreshing after the stale dank air of the pit. The snow that had fallen earlier in March had melted but it was still cold, even at this hour as he climbed up the road. It felt good to be upright again, striding up the lane after hours below ground spent crouched or, worse still, lying on his side hacking at the narrow seam of coal. He drew the chilled air widely into his broad chest and life felt good.

Elijah let his thoughts take care of themselves and he found himself musing on his many blessings. He had a lovely wife Julia and he would often call to mind their wedding nine years ago just before Christmas in 1873, down the hill in St Mary's Church in Bitton. Julia had since borne him three handsome children, Emily, Samuel and George aged six, four and two, thriving and growing up fast. They all lived in a tied colliery house in Oldland Common, which was big enough for their current needs. Quite how they would manage as the family grew further, which he and Julia wanted, was a question for another day. As far as Elijah saw it, as long as he remained in work, in good health and therefore able to provide for his family, all would be well in his world. At least insofar as one could ever foretell the future. The world was an uncertain place; after all, it was only in early March that a madman carrying a gun had tried to kill the Queen in Windsor.

But there was no denying that mining was a hazardous business, he thought. You did well to put your faith in God that you would reach the end of your shift and walk home safely in one piece to your family. True, the Golden Valley pit had suffered only three accidents in twenty years that he could remember. It was by any reckoning one of the safest in the Kingswood and Bristol area. Only last year in February, George Greene had been killed, caught under a fall of coal; but previous to that people talked about the accident in '63 which killed two and injured another when the cage was overwound, tipping the two men from the top of the shaft to the bottom. One of the victims was the brother of Samuel Fudge, engine-man at the new Pit. Sam was at his post back then when a failure of the signals meant he failed to stop the cart on its ascent, resulting in the death of his brother John. Though Sam was exonerated of blame at the subsequent inquest, Elijah often wondered how difficult it must be for him to continue to work the engine where his brother had lost his life.

Aside from rockfalls and machinery accidents, there was the danger of fire and suffocation, but Golden Valley had no history of deaths or accidents related to either. Some of the colliers talked about the spontaneous fires caused by coal in other mines, but no one had ever heard of that happening here. This meant suffocation through breathing white damp or carbon monoxide wasn't a danger anyone thought much about.

As he reached the brow of the hill and within sight of home, he banished these thoughts, his mind returning once more to home and family. The stone-faced terraced house where he lived was, like dozens of others, owned by the pit owners and rented to their workers. He opened his front door to be assailed by the beguiling aroma of the mutton stew left over from last night's tea, reheating on the stove. Hearing his entrance, his wife was busying herself ladling it from the saucepan to a plate where it now sat alongside a thick slice of bread and a mug of tea.

'All right at the pit?' she asked, with her back to Elijah.

'Aye' came the curt reply.

When he arrived back from work, few words were spoken until he had eaten. Julia knew not to waste words on pleasantries when hunger was calling. Only after eating would they share news and small talk, indulging in idle husband and wife chatter. Elijah was updated on the children's activities, whilst the little ones played around his feet. When Elijah's plate was cleared:

'George is talking so much now' Julia said of their two-year-old son, 'and I can understand most of what he says, especially when it's to do with food and drink!'.

'Well, suppose he's got a good appetite like his father' replied Elijah rubbing his belly.

They laughed easily together.

Before he went and had a wash, he felt the urge to do something he hadn't done for a good while. His earlier thoughts about family had brought to mind the Family Bible. He went to the sideboard where it lay, a large tome the size of three house bricks, proudly acquired when they were married. Inscribed on the inside page were the family events of significance as they happened, the important landmarks of family life. Elijah opened it and slowly read the list, carefully written in his own copperplate handwriting, which started with details of his and Julia's marriage. It was the next two entries which always pained him: the first a line showing the birth of Samuel on 14 July 1874, the second, Samuel's death only six days later. When, almost three years later to the day Julia had produced another boy, they named him for his dead brother. Another reminder if one was needed, he thought, that you never knew what was around the next corner. He closed the book and turned away, focussing on the rest of his day and less morose thoughts.

SUNDAY 26 MARCH 1882, morning

Aaron Brain

As he sat in his study in his large comfortable house in Bitton that Sunday morning, Aaron surveyed the ledgers and accounts for Golden Valley Colliery, wondering how much longer the pit would continue to provide a profit for him as the owner, and a living for the seventy or so men and boys employed there. The problem faced by Aaron was to establish how much more coal was in the ground, and more importantly whether it could be mined profitably. He knew the current yields and had studied plans of the workings until they were as familiar as the lines on his hand. But at the end of the day, it was a difficult judgment.

Now, in his late forties and comfortably off, he enjoyed the undoubted benefit of the wealth the pit had generated for his family over two generations. His father had been Clerk at the pit when Aaron joined as Assistant Clerk back in the 1850s. When his father had the opportunity to become the owner in the late 1850s he had grasped it, making Aaron a joint owner. Aaron learnt the ropes of running a colliery business but relied on his father, even as his father withdrew from Golden Valley in his retirement. They had buried his father ten years ago and he still missed his knowledge and advice. Now more than ever, as difficult decisions loomed. He sucked on his pipe, the first of the day, as he contemplated what to do.

Golden Valley Old Pit was effectively worked out, had been so for several decades. All the current activity was centred on the New Pit which had been sunk in 1830 around a quarter of a mile away. The coal they continued to extract, particularly from the Cuckoo seam, was of the highest quality, as demanded by blacksmiths. It could fetch a high price when hewn and brought to ground. But the costs of doing so had always been considerable. The seams were narrow, sometimes no more than eighteen inches in dimension. Working such seams was difficult, slow and costly. Furthermore, could Aaron rely on finding further coal? He looked at the plan, the spider's web of tunnels and wondered where the next working might be driven.

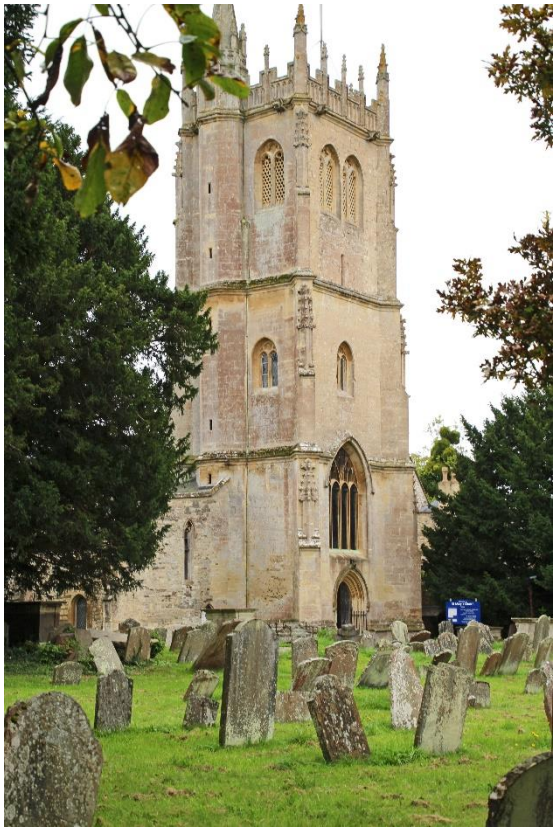
Playing on his mind was the historic and current reliance on his workforce. Drawn from men and boys living mostly up the hill in Oldland and Cadbury Heath, their families were dependent on the pit to put food on the table. Many had worked there for decades, being taken on by his father in the early days. He already had an eye on his own future in the eventuality of the pit having to close– he had part-time employment and financial interest in the paper mill down the valley. But as the life drained away from the Golden Valley pit over the next decade or so, what would become of the families whose men and boys were toiling underground? What would be their future?

'Father, father, it's time to ready ourselves for church. Or else we will be late'.

This was Mary Louisa, his eighteen-year-old daughter, knocking on the study door, interrupting his thoughts.

'I'll come directly' he replied.

He emptied the remains of his pipe into the ashtray and ascended the stair to change clothes for church. Ten minutes later he headed off with Alice his wife, and Mary Louisa down the lane to St Mary's Church in Bitton, leaving Emma their servant in charge of preparing luncheon for their return.



St Mary's was a focus of the Bitton village, a church having stood on its current spot for more than a thousand years. The building's long history and permanence were mirrored by the longevity of service of the parish incumbents, with Rev Ellacombe presiding from 1817 to 1850, followed by his son Canon Ellacombe who had taken over from his father and was still serving the parish. Thus, the large congregation that filled the church that morning, despite the chilly March weather, sought comfort and succour from worshipping there, a spiritual peace dispensed by Canon Ellacombe. As for Aaron Brain, the service provided no specific answers to his earlier internal questions; but for a brief time at least he experienced a momentary calm from the pressures of managing a coal mine. *At least*, he thought, *I don't need to give my mind properly to Golden Valley until tomorrow.* Abraham Cook was a reliable and experienced bailiff who could be depended upon to ensure the pit ran smoothly, even if today, being a Sunday, the pit was closed and it was Abe's day off.

Abraham Cook

Abraham rose early that Sunday morning and, following his usual custom, took a short walk from his house in Cadbury Heath to blow the cobwebs away. Not required at the pit, he had time for himself and his family and he was determined as far as possible to enjoy his day off and follow his normal Sunday routine – a morning walk, leisurely breakfast, chapel and then Sunday meal, where he hoped he'd see Abe Junior and Abe's young family. The house was still silent except for his wife Sarah who was up and about, lighting a fire against the chill March morning and preparing the porridge that was the normal Sunday family breakfast. He lit his pipe in the garden outside their small cottage, breathing March air that hinted at warmer days to come and then proceeded to take his normal route though the lanes of Cadbury Heath and Oldland Common. There was a hint of a late frost, disappearing fast, but enough to make Abraham hasten his step along his usual route. If anyone had asked why he took the walk this Sunday morning, along his customary path, he would be hard-pressed to answer - other than to acknowledge the familiarity of a weekly routine and the desire for exercise, solitude and to enjoy an early smoke.

The Cook family, circa 1870 : Abraham (centre), Abe Junior to his right

But in reality there was more to Abraham's walk than he would have been prepared to admit or was even aware of. Passing through Oldland Common, the lanes were mostly deserted at this hour and he enjoyed the peace and isolation. He arrived presently at Redfield Hill. Here at the furthest extent of the morning ramble he stood and surveyed the Golden Valley below. The view in front of him always drew him back time and again. A fold in the land from both his left and right allowed the River Boyd to meander gently from its source in Doddington to the River Avon a mile or two south of Bitton. The village of Bitton itself was clearly visible at the bottom of the valley, marked by the prominent tower of St Mary's Church, where no doubt the worthies of Bitton, including his boss Mr Brain, the pit owner, would be heading later. He noted the large bulk of the Paper Mill which since 1845 had taken water and power from the river. A large concern, it gave employment to many local folk including girls and women as rag cutters and sorters. The rags were then boiled with bleach and lime, before being shredded into pulp, pressed and rolled to be made into the finest paper, or so it was said. *Bleach and lime - dangerous work*, he thought, *dealing with such substances*. Then he laughed out loud, remembering that for the last twenty years he had ventured 150 fathoms underground in this valley to bring out coal, with all the risks that entailed to life and limb. By the time the mill had opened he was already a miner, as was his father before him. When his two sons Mark and Abe Junior had wanted to join him at the pit, he raised no objections. It seemed part of the natural order for them to

follow Abraham into colliery work, as he had done his father. *Besides*, he thought as he stood surveying Golden Valley, *the colliery in the valley has one of the safest records for accidents of the scores of mines in the Kingswood and South Bristol coalfield.*

As his eyes swept the lush green fields of the valley in front of him on that fine, crisp morning, it seemed almost impossible to imagine that seventy men and boys descended daily into the darkness beneath those same fields, to hew coal and bring it to ground, as had been done for the last eighty years or so. It was the contrast of the beautiful landscape above and the weird other-world of the colliery below which meant he loved this blessed corner of Gloucestershire.

As bailiff at the pit Abraham was conscious of his standing in the eyes of his employer. Now nearing the end of his working life, aged fifty-eight, he was proud of both his record and his experience which had been recognized by Mr Brain. But along with the additional responsibility the title conferred, came a duty to look out for the safety of all colliery hands and when necessary to act as go-between for the men with Mr Brain.

He looked at his pocket watch and realised he should be heading home. He turned on his heel and started to make his way homeward, to the warmth of his cottage and a hearty breakfast. Perhaps it was the lure of the porridge which made the return always seem shorter than the outward journey. Before he knew it he had reached the cottage, to find his wife Sarah and son Mark already seated at the table in the parlour with steaming bowls of cereal in front of them.

'You took your time!' said Sarah.

'Same walk as normal', he replied.

She motioned to the pan of porridge on the table and he helped himself while Sarah poured him a mug of tea from the pot recently brewed. Mark, their thirty-year-old eldest son, never the most talkative of souls, was quiet as he swallowed his breakfast in large spoonfuls.

'Hope you will make it to chapel with us this morning' said Abraham, addressing Mark.

Mark's attendance had been erratic of late, as he more frequently found reasons to absent himself. Still unmarried, he was a slight source of concern to his parents. They hoped he would meet someone and settle down, as his younger brother Abe Junior had already done three years ago and started a family.

'Reckon I will today' replied Mark.

He knew that his younger brother Abe, with wife Emily would be there, together with little Henry who at two years old was beginning to be a handful. He was fond of them all, especially his younger brother, only three years his junior, with whom he had always been close. After chapel, they were all due to return to Abraham and Sarah's house for Sunday lunch, so there would be an opportunity to catch up with his brother. Though both miners at Golden Valley, Abe Junior and Mark's paths rarely crossed at the pit and, in any event, young Abe spent any free time he had with his young family.

Sarah was pleased she would see them all together at chapel and better still to have them all back at the cottage for dinner. *Bit of a squeeze to all fit round the table, but we'll manage*, she thought. *It's just as well I bought that large side of meat from the butcher.* She was suddenly preoccupied with how she would get everything ready and wondered whether she should miss chapel. *No, no, it's important we are all there.* As a result, the next half hour was occupied with preparing as much as she could – the meat was put on a low heat on a large skillet on the hearth and vegetables prepared. She then put on her Sunday frock and hastily made herself presentable, arriving in the front parlour with

her menfolk. Leaving the cottage, she put on her bonnet whilst Abraham and Mark donned their top hats. The short walk to chapel didn't take long and within ten minutes they arrived at the Wesleyan Methodist chapel where they were regular and long-standing attenders.

Non-conformism had a strong hold on the area of Oldland and the surrounding villages of Bitton and Warmley. Abraham had once counted them all – there were no less than fourteen chapels within a radius of two miles. Among that number, nine were Methodist chapels. Charles Wesley's many visits on horseback to the area nearly a hundred and fifty years ago bringing Methodism to the working classes, had spawned a wave of religious zeal which had seen chapels built all over the outlying areas of Bristol and into the surrounding counties. The chapel the Cook family attended was the first Methodist place of worship to be built in the immediate area in the 1830s; only Bridgeyate's chapel built in 1810 predated it. Abraham was a well-known figure in the church, being a trustee of the chapel, a role carrying a certain respect and prestige. Coupled with his position at the pit, this gave Abraham and therefore his family a slightly elevated social position. But the Cook family were not ones to covet status; for Abraham, Golden Valley Colliery was a job, albeit one he had done for decades and which he would carry out as diligently as he could, in the interests of his employer and the men.

After the service, the two families met outside the church and exchanged the usual greetings and embraces. Young Henry was made a huge fuss of by his Uncle Mark who tossed him around and blew raspberries at him, eliciting high pitched giggles from his little nephew. They meandered back to Abraham and Sarah's house ready to enjoy a Sunday afternoon's good food, company and family news.

The mood over lunch was convivial and the hearty meal was despatched with alacrity. Abraham and his youngest son Abe Junior lit their pipes, normally a prelude to pit-talk, while Sarah and Emily cleared the table and kept an eye on Henry. Meanwhile, Mark was showing signs that he needed to be elsewhere:

'I've just to go and see someone up in the village, Mother. I won't be long.'

Sarah gave him a quizzical look.

'OK, but don't be too long, I've made a nice cake for our tea, the one you like and you don't want to miss it. The others might finish it before you get back!'

Maybe a sweetheart? she thought to herself. *'Well he'd better be back before the others leave*.'

It was 2.30 pm.

PART TWO

SUNDAY 26 MARCH 1882, afternoon

Sunday afternoon was the customary time for William Hancock to visit his sister Jeannie who lived in Bitton. He left his house in Oldland, headed up Redfield Hill and then proceeded down Newpit Lane past the pit towards Bitton, a journey he had made countless times. He knew every field, every tree and he revelled in seeing the changes wrought by the seasons – he noticed the burgeoning leaves on the trees, sprouting from their March buds, welcoming the warmer weather hopefully to come soon. The meadows seemed to have taken on a fresher shade of green. Summer was around the corner.

But today William's observant eye also spotted something else, an alien sight not part of the natural surroundings, which brought him up short. He stopped and looked again. Was he imagining it? No. Without doubt, he could see smoke rising from the shaft of the New Pit. A small but steady blue and grey plume crept upwards from the mouth of the pit. Certain now that this had to signify a fire in the pit he considered what he should do. There was no one working at the pit today, so thankfully that removed the immediate risk to life or injury, but fires could spread quickly. He knew he should raise an alarm, but to whom? *There's one person who should be the first to know and he lives just down the lane,* he thought.

He quickened his pace and made off for the house of Aaron Brain, the pit owner. William had worked for him for many years. Besides, everyone in the area knew the location of the pit owner's large house down the lane next to Boyd Mill. Swinging the large gate open and trotting rather nervously down the gravelled drive, he knocked at the front door. 'I need to speak urgently to Mr Brain' he told the maid who opened the door. After a few short moments, he was ushered, cap in hand, into Aaron's study. Aaron seemed a little surprised and tetchy at this disturbance to his normal post lunch Sunday routine. William rather blurted out his news:

'There's smoke coming from the shaft at the New Pit, Mr Brain. I thought you should be the first to know.'

Aaron's appearance on hearing this changed from irritation at the interruption to immediate concern.

'Thank you for letting me know, Hancock.'

He thought for a moment or two:

'I need you to do something for me. Abraham Cook and Samuel Fudge need to be sent for – they need to come to the pit immediately where I shall meet them. Can you arrange that?'

'Aye sir. I know both and will get messages to them.'

With that William Hancock, turned on his heel, and made off to alert Cook and Fudge. *Seeing Jeanie will have to be put off this week.*

Aaron consulted his pocket watch. It was half-past three. He could foresee a long afternoon and evening stretching ahead of him and one thing was for sure. It wouldn't now be spent in front of his own fireside with a pipe and a brandy.

Abraham Cook, the pit bailiff, received the summons to attend the fire at the pit within the hour of Hancock's visit to the pit-owner. There was no doubt he took the news seriously – fire was always a hazard in pits. But he was also puzzled, as Golden Valley was not a colliery known to be liable to such occurrences. There had been a small fire fifteen or so years ago, but there was little evidence of the spontaneous combustion from coal veins that happened in many pits. All this, he reasoned, pointed to a small fire that could be easily extinguished. Once at the pit he would descend and put it out. He told his wife about the fire and what he planned to do.

'You make sure you don't go down there on your own!' said Sarah, more than a little alarmed.

'I'll help. I'll come down to the pit with you Father,' said Abe Junior.

Sarah and Abe Junior's wife Emily exchanged worried glances. *Was it really safe, and why did their menfolk both have to be there? Sure, Abe had been called as the bailiff and he had no choice but was it wise for young Abe to put himself in danger?*

Do you really need to go too? said Emily plaintively, addressing her husband. 'There's bound to be plenty of other colliers there.'

'Agreed, but if Pa needs help, I should be the one to provide it.'

After this briefest of exchanges, the two Cooks set out for the pit, leaving their far from pacified wives to fret about the fire and the safety of their husbands.

Golden Valley Colliery consisted not of one but two pits, connected with one another underground. The New Pit was the one currently worked, where we earlier witnessed Elijah Edwards emerging at the end of the Saturday shift. By comparison, there were only a handful of men around still who could tell tales of working the Old Pit. Nowadays it was only mined very occasionally to provide sufficient coal to power the steam engine there on the rare occasions when men needed to descend the pit via this route.

No artificial ventilation of the mine had been introduced. Instead, ventilation relied on water falling into the pit to drive out the foul air. Additionally the interconnection between the two pits meant that the workings below ground were ventilated by each other, depending on the direction and force of the wind.

All this information was part of Abraham's fund of knowledge as he and his son met up as directed with Aaron Brain at the New Pit on the fateful night. Already there were a dozen or so men who had heard about the fire and come to see what needed to be done. Also summoned by Brain, Samuel Fudge the engine-man at the New Pit had primed the steam engine to allow the cart to be lowered. Smoke continued to rise from the shaft. Abraham greeted Brain.

'Good evening, Mr Brain'.

'Evening Abe. What's to be done, do you think?'

Abraham had been considering this in the walk from his house and nothing he had seen so far at the New Pit changed his mind. I'll go down the mine from over at the Old Pit and walk through towards the New Pit till I discover the fire, then extinguish it. Don't reckon it's a large one, so it shouldn't take us too long.

Aaron Brian looked dubious. 'Are you sure its safe to go down and look for the fire?

'There's no danger at all.'

'Do you not think it would be better to close off the pit and leave it a day before descending?' persisted Brain.

'No, I will go down at once', insisted Abraham

So it was that Abraham's superior practical experience of the pit and his determination to proceed persuaded Aaron Brain to succumb to his plan, almost certainly against his own view. All those who witnessed this exchange and other miners who had worked with the bailiff for any length of time, attested later to Abraham's strict adherence to the highest safety standards. *'Abraham would never ask a collier to do anything that was unsafe'*, was a typical comment. *'I would trust my life to him'* was another. Nothing suggests he was a foolhardy man, or one prone to taking unnecessary risks.

In fact, so safe did Abraham believe his mission to be that he was happy to allow Abe Junior to accompany him down the mine, together with another young miner Alfred Walter who they both knew and who had appeared at the New Pit to see what might be done.

The pit owner then despatched Peter Gibbs and George Britton immediately in readiness to prepare the Old Pit for the Cooks' and Walter's descent. Now between 5 and 6 o'clock, it would soon be dark above ground, matching the inky gloom of the pit the three men would soon find as they went underground.

The bailiff, his son and Alfred Walter ready themselves at the changing station for their mission. No conversation, no idle talk, no little anxiety. Anxiety at least in the minds of Abe Junior and Alfred, confronted with a potentially hazardous situation. Anxiety that no amount of youthful bravado could overcome. Anxiety that is somewhat allayed by the calm composure of Abraham, who knows the pit inside out and will never take unwarranted risks with safety. They have all made the journey down to pit-bottom hundreds of times, don't think anything of it. But this feels different.

Peter Gibbs is as usual the man who now gets up steam on the engine at Old Pit, an infrequent occurrence due to its relative disuse. George Britton will assist Gibbs as the banksman, liaising with Gibbs in the engine room, despatching the cart and listening for signals from below. George's regular job is as a wheelwright and blacksmith, looking after the horses at the colliery. Everyone likes old George. They know he's losing his hearing and of course make allowances but he's a bright man. Both Gibbs and Britton have been employed at Golden Valley for thirty to forty years – they are trustworthy men who knew the pit well. Together they will aim to ensure the three fire-fighters are despatched and then collected safely in the cart, once they have completed the job of extinguishing the fire.

'All ready?' asks Abraham of his son and Alfred.

Nodding, the two younger men turn, following Abraham towards the cart for their descent. The bailiff speaks a few words privately to both Britton and Gibbs to check the winding machinery is ready. Ensured all is in order, he confirms with them both the all-important procedure for lowering and lifting the cart. Normal pit procedure for Golden Valley is to be followed -to draw the cart back to the surface once it has offloaded the men at the bottom. Then, when the three men at the bottom wish to return they will use the normal signal of several 'raps' for the empty cart to be sent down for their return.

Abraham: Right let's light our candles, and off we go. George, we'll see ourselves into the cart – let Peter know we are ready to go.

The men step inside and the gate of the cart clanks shut behind them with a personal finality they are unaware of. The whirring and grinding of the winding mechanism take over and they begin the descent to the bottom.

Abraham is quiet, running through in his head the possible scenarios they might encounter but confident that they will finish the task before the evening is over and be back home before midnight, maybe sooner. Abe Junior thinks of his young wife and family, wordlessly trusting in his father and his long experience to get them back safe.

Alfred, 23, also with a wife (and four young children) at home, asks himself for a moment quite how it came about that he has ended up in the trio in the cart. He was at the pit to see what help he could give and before he knew it he had volunteered to join the group.

The cart descends steadily at a rate of eight feet every second, until two and a half minutes later it comes to sudden jolt at the bottom of the pit. All noise ceases and they are enveloped by an all-embracing funereal blackness, broken only by the candle lights they are carrying.

They step out of the cage and Abraham rings five times for it to be raised. After a few seconds they watch as their lifeline to the world is hoisted. Abe Junior and Daniel notice the eerie silence; they have never been in a lifeless empty pit before and feel strangely uneasy, as if entering a familiar house at night, without its usual noises, hustle and bustle.

Abraham: 'Right then lads, here's the plan. It's roughly a quarter of a mile's walk along this roadway to the New Pit, where I'm thinking we will find the fire. I can't tell you where we will find it exactly, so be ready for anything. Right, let's go, and remember – stick together.'

The first few minutes of their walk is uneventful. Then their candles start guttering, indicating a change in the air quality. A stale smell of foul air suddenly surrounds them and fills their nostrils and lungs.

'Stop!' comes the instruction from the bailiff. 'This isn't safe - we need to get back to the cart. You follow on, I will run ahead to summon the cart, we need to get out of here quickly.

Abraham runs the short distance back to the shaft and immediately rings three times to alert the banksman to send down the cart. Breathing is getting harder, especially after his run to the cart. He feels himself getting light-headed. *Come on, come on, send the cart.* He rings again with more urgency. He looks up the shaft by the light of his nearly extinguished candle. All is black – deliriously, he wonders if he can hear the winding of the cart arriving. *What about the lads…where have they got to?* He turns back towards the roadway they had just walked along, scanning for silhouettes...tries to call out but then collapses. The candle is extinguished. All is black in this dark lifeless tomb.

Abe Junior and Daniel don't make it back to the shaft. Closer to the foul air in the tunnel, they quickly become overwhelmed by the lack of pure air and the poisonous foul air. The fire further down the tunnel has consumed the oxygen and replaced it with toxic carbon monoxide which has spread rapidly to the Old Pit.

Close to where the motionless Abraham lies, there is a mechanical whirr followed by a judder as the cart arrives to rescue the three men. Too late.

In the Engine Room, Samuel Britton sent the cage down with the bailiff and the two others to the bottom of the shaft. After the cart's short journey, he responded to the signal from the men below to indicate they were safely out of the cart, by immediately raising it according to the normal practice. He then went off to the adjacent boiler room to check there was sufficient heat from the fire to produce enough steam to operate the winding mechanism. The roar of the burning coals powering the boiler and the hissing from the boiler itself was enough to drown out all noise of any signalling. Having tended to the boiler for several minutes he returned to the Engine Room where he immediately caught sight of the visual indicator showing that rapping had occurred to call down the empty cart. At the same time Peter Gibbs rushed into the room:

'Quick George- did you not hear those raps from below! They want the cart.'

George and Peter stood in the Engine Room as George sent the cart down. The two men looked at one another, concern and fear clouding their faces. *What could the signal mean – had the men already put out the fire below and, job done, wanted to be pulled up? Surely not, so soon*. Even as the cart was no more than halfway down, a more urgent rapping signal was heard from below.

A growing sense of dread was now mixed with impotence. They could do no more – the cart was on its way down, as requested. The fire-party below wanted urgent assistance, needing the cart to affect an early exit from the Old Pit. They waited an agonisingly long two minutes for the cart to reach its destination, then hoping, praying to hear the signal to have it raised.

As each minute passed, with no response, they began to fear the worst. They searched for unlikely explanations that might fit the circumstances. *Could the fire-party have changed their plan and possibly found a way of reaching the New Pit?*

They sent word to the pit owner that something serious was amiss and Mr Brain arrived in sombre mood. As they recounted the chain of events that had just unfolded, his ashen face reflected the concern on all the faces of those present, a small posse of fellow colliers having assembled at the Old Pit. Everyone now looked to Brain to give an instruction, resolve a situation requiring immediate action. But he was hesitant, thinking perhaps it was still possible the bailiff and his party had somehow found a safe passage to the New Pit, hoping that there was an alternative but unlikely explanation for the events that had been described. Hesitant also because, on this occasion, he could not turn to his trusted and experienced bailiff, Abraham Cook, for advice or as a sounding board. He felt the enormous weight of responsibility falling on him, wretched with indecision – *should he send more men down the mine to ascertain what had happened to the first party, with the slim possibility of rescue but with the risk of further loss of life? Or simply wait until the mine could be made safe, before sending a search party?* Faced with such a difficult dilemma involving mortal consequences, he bought time to think through the decision. He made off once again in the direction of the New Pit, to consider the options, trusting the walk there would provide clarity.

Elijah Edwards and John Wilmott had arrived at the New Pit some time after 8pm, having heard about the fire. Offering whatever assistance was required, they waited at the New Pit, expecting the Cooks and Walter to emerge there.

By midnight there was still no sign of the men and the pit-owner finally made a decision. Edwards and Willmott were instructed to go to the Old Pit and prepare to go down to see what had happened to the original party. What prompted this decision will never be known. What is clear is that Edwards and Wilmot received and followed Brain's instruction. In so doing, they were no doubt also strongly motivated by a sense of loyalty to three fellow-miners (one the much-respected bailiff) missing below ground in uncertain circumstances.

Knowing the risk that they were taking, but choosing not to dwell on it, Elijah and John climbed aboard the cart at the Old Pit, which by now had been raised again and was at the surface. The two men had known each other for years and like all pit workers, had an intrinsic trust in one another. Their mission was to find what had happened to the Cooks and Walter and if the worst had happened, to recover the men's bodies.

In the light of what had occurred previously, it had been agreed on this occasion to leave the cart at the bottom in case it was needed in an emergency. As events transpired this change of procedure almost certainly saved further lives.

At the bottom of the shaft Elijah and John stepped out of the cart, then stopped and listened, standing motionless to listen for any noises and accustom their eyes to the dark.

'Anyone there?' shouted Elijah. 'Abe Cook, can you hear me?'

The candles they carried for illumination cast ghostly shadows on the walls of the shaft. They set off down the roadway towards New Pit, but something was not right. The flames of the candles guttered and they became aware of a sulphurous smell.

'What's that awful stink?' muttered Elijah.

'No idea, but I've never smelt it before in a pit.'

'You're right, I'm getting a bad feeling about this'. Elijah's gaze swept the roadway ahead.

That was when they saw an unaccustomed shape on the floor of the roadway not 10 yards away. As Elijah approached, his sputtering candle threw a dim light on the shape, confirming it to be one of the fire-party. No sooner had this happened than his candle went out completely.

'Right John, we're off, before this sulphur catches us too' said Elijah, turning immediately and hurrying back to the shaft.

They jumped into the cart rang the signal to be brought up. To their intense relief, they were climbing almost immediately, thankful to be leaving the putrid air that had claimed the lives of at least one and possibly three fellow colliers. The pit owner was waiting for them as they emerged from the cart:

'Well, Edwards what did you find? Why back so soon?'

Elijah and John recounted the sad news of a dead body, whom they thought to be the younger Cook. They told Mr Brain of the sulphurous smell and how their candles had gone out.

'We didn't think it was safe to proceed further to find the others, Mr Brain, and besides, I am unfamiliar with the Old Pit' said Elijah.

Their report galvanized Brain, who decided to put water down the pit to drive away the fumes. He gave the order, which was carried out straightaway. Until he could be sure there was no further risk to men entering the pit, he could not ask anyone to go down. Besides, now it was a matter of recovery of the bodies, rather than rescue, so in truth the urgency of the situation had somewhat abated. Try as he might, he could not prevent the nagging questions from bothering him like an intermittent toothache: *Should I have stopped Cook from taking himself and two others down the mine? Am I the one responsible for their deaths?* He guessed that, as long as he lived, there would never be adequate answers, and that he would always be haunted by the consequences of his decisions that day.

2.00am Monday 27 March

Once it was deemed that sufficient water had been pumped into the Old Pit to purify the air, William Jones and Henry Isaacs were sent down to recover the bodies of Abraham Cook Senior and Junior and Alfred Walter. Reaching the bottom, there was no sulphurous smell or smoke to prevent them from finding all three bodies, cold and lifeless within twenty yards of one another close to the bottom of the shaft. As the cart carried its sombre cargo to the top, Jones and Isaacs were silent, respectful of their dead colleagues. Shocked that the mine had claimed the life of Cook Senior, the Bailiff and most experienced man in Golden Valley. Grieving also for the lives of two young miners, who trusted in the judgement of the bailiff, and the wives and families they would all leave behind.

Reaching the surface, the bodies of the three men were carefully removed from the cart and laid out on hastily arranged tables in the pit office building, awaiting the arrival of the local doctor who had been called to attend to the three bodies and certify the deaths.

Aaron Brain steeled himself for the necessary but unpleasant task of informing the relatives of the dead men. It was his responsibility and one which weighed heavily on his shoulders. Worse still for Aaron, gnawing away at him, was the question that would haunt him until his dying breath: *was **he** responsible for the deaths of the three men by allowing them to set off on their ill-fated mission to put out the fire? But the experienced Bailiff had insisted it was safe, hadn't he?* Questions for the inquest to consider, for there surely would be one. For now however he had more pressing duties.

Sarah and Emily Cook, had been waiting at the New Pit for word of their menfolk, unaware of the events that had occurred at the Old Pit. They had been informed that Abraham father and son had both been part of the fire-party still unaccounted for. Though fearing the worst, they nevertheless held onto a forlorn hope that somehow the men would be found alive. Aaron Brain approached them, and after taking them to one side, explained the sad news about their husbands. Grief stricken and sobbing, the women clung to each other, unable to utter words but taking solace in each other's embrace. A small group of friends accompanied the women the short distance to the Old Pit to be with their husbands. Meanwhile Aaron set off to see Alfred Walter's family to impart the same sad news.

PART THREE

The aftermath

Following the recovery of the bodies, the shafts of the mine were ordered to be sealed to allow the fire to burn itself out. No further risks were to be taken until it was known that safe working could recommence. Seven days after the fire was assumed to have started a thermometer was lowered into the shaft of New Pit and there was no indication of fire, which was believed now to be extinguished. Nevertheless, Aaron Brain had decided that the covering to the shaft and any further exploration should not take place until after that weekend, on Monday 2 April.

The accident required important notifications: H.M. Inspector of Mines for Western District Mr Donald Bain was alerted to the accident by the owner and he immediately attended Golden Valley to investigate. Following normal procedures in such cases where there was loss of life, the Coroner for Western district of Gloucestershire Dr E M Grace was informed and an inquest arranged. In the meantime, the bodies of the deceased had been removed and were laying in the houses of their families.

The loss of three lives cast a pall over Bitton and the surrounding villages. Little else was mentioned for days in this small mining community. The pit and the paper mill together were the predominant employers, so everyone knew someone - family member, friend, or neighbour - connected to the Pit. The likelihood of accidents, particularly down the pit, was accepted as a risk of going to work. When they happened and lives were lost they were treated with a degree of stoicism. A fact of life - and death.

But this was different. There was genuine shock about the circumstances of this particular accident. This was not a rock fall or explosion caused by dangerous gas. Neither did it happen in the course of a day's work at the mine. Three men descended into the mine to put out a small fire on a non-working day and never came out alive.

What further amplified the shock was the identity of the victims. Abraham Cook was well known and respected in the community, his family liked by all. As a pillar of his local chapel, and the Bailiff at the pit he was a man of standing. That his young son, not long married and with a young infant, was amongst the victims only deepened the gravity of the event. Furthermore young Alfred Walter, the third victim was leaving a wife and four young dependent children. The loss of three lives was an immense tragedy to comprehend given the circumstances of the men's mission to extinguish a small fire, a task so seemingly innocuous at the outset.

All this was felt too, only in more extreme measure, by the victims' families and loved ones for whom the grief was raw, as they tried to come to terms with their loss. Sarah and Emily Cook were able to take solace in each other's company, as they grieved together. Alfred Walter's widow Elizabeth had four children under 12 that needed attending to. She relied heavily on the help of family and neighbours. At times such as these, mining communities such as Bitton would turn inwards and support the distressed families, both materially and emotionally. Following the Golden Valley accident of 1882, things were no different. But despite this, the immediate challenge for Sarah and Emily Cook and Emily Walter was the inquest, which had been convened to start on Friday 31 March at the Crown and Horseshoe Inn at Oldland Common. All three women had decided to attend. It would be extremely painful less than a week after the deaths of their husbands to hear the evidence and re-live

their nightmare. But necessary to understand how events had unfolded last Sunday afternoon. Could things have been done differently? Whose responsibility was it that their menfolk had died? And ultimately, was this really an unavoidable accident?

The inquest which would seek to resolve some of these questions began on 31 March 1882 in the inauspicious surroundings of the Assembly Room at the rear of the Crown and Horseshoe in Oldland Common. Although inquests had the status of legal proceedings, it was not unusual for them to take place in such venues, a local location being important to ensure the maximum attendance of witnesses with minimum disruption to their lives. It also served to underline the importance of the hearing for the people of the community, from which the victims had come.

As people gathered for the hearing outside the pub, the families of the deceased were prominent. They had the air of those wishing they had a more urgent appointment, whilst simultaneously realising they were carrying out a sorrowful duty. The witnesses themselves who had been summoned to give evidence were present, nervous about the ordeal of answering questions in an intimidating setting, and steeling themselves to do the best they could in the circumstances, trusting to their memory of the events that took place five days previously. Perhaps the most nervous was Aaron Brain, the pit owner, who had played such a prominent role in the events of the 26th. He had spent a miserable few days and several sleepless nights trying to make sense of the accident and wondering whether he had contributed in a material way to the deaths. Would the inquest find him culpable in some way?

There were faces unknown to the local people, no doubt legal representatives of the key parties who would be examining the witnesses. Others, armed with notepads and writing equipment, represented the local newspapers who were following the incident at the pit, there to report the proceedings for the Western Daily Press and the Bristol Mercury.

Absent from the scene was the Coroner himself who, it was said, had arrived some time ago and was inside the impromptu inquest room empanelling and swearing in the jury of local men.

The pub's landlord had arranged the room as directed in advance by the court official. At the far end of the rectangular room a makeshift dais big enough to accommodate a desk and chair for the Coroner had been placed. Then to the left were twelve seats for the Jury and opposite these on the other side of the room was a separate space from where witnesses would give their testimony. Next, facing the dais were seats reserved for the solicitors acting for the interested parties, namely Mr Nurse for the widows of the Cook men, Mr Bowman for the widow of Alfred Walter and Mr Doggett for Aaron Brain and Co Ltd, proprietors of the pit. Finally the remaining space was allocated to benches for the public, including the families of the bereaved.

At last the assembled throng waiting outside was admitted and the waiting was over. Due deference was shown to the bereaved family members, who entered first, and took benches at the front of the public seating. Once everyone was settled, all that could be heard was the faint hum of chatter, like

that in a theatre before the curtain was raised. All fell silent however as a door behind the dais opened and the imposing figure of the Coroner appeared.

Dr E M Grace was a well-known figure locally and indeed nationally, but not exclusively for his position as a local magistrate and county coroner. One of five brothers, 'EM' was the third, all doctors, who played cricket for their county Gloucestershire. Born in nearby Downend to a doctor father, he was arguably the best cricketer of his generation, or at least would have been considered so, if not for the arrival of his younger brother W.G. Grace. Just two years before the accident at Golden Valley, E.M. and W.G Grace had played for an All-England side against Australia at the Oval, the first time the two sides had met on English soil. While those assembled in the Crown and Horseshoe knew about the cricketing exploits of 'The Doctor', the inquest was the first time that many had set eyes on him in person.

What could they expect from this man in his capacity as the coroner? He had acquired the reputation of a larger than life character, marrying four times and siring 18 children. Known for his lust for life and inexhaustible energy, he could also exhibit a quick temper. How would the personality of this colourful character play out when in control of solemn proceedings at the inquest?

The Coroner's first words to the court were to address the Jury.

'Your first onerous task as jurors is to view the bodies of the deceased. As they currently remain in the houses of their families this will require you to make your way to Cadbury Heath and to a house close to the pit. As this will require a certain amount of time, I propose to adjourn this hearing until later today. The inquest will reconvene at two o'clock.'

With that, he rose and left the room, and the jury were escorted from the room setting off to make the six-mile round trip as requested by the Coroner. Meanwhile the public, slightly nonplussed by this somewhat unexpected turn of events, took themselves off, making plans to return in the afternoon.

The afternoon session started promptly at the appointed hour. The jury were in their seats, having undertaken their surely unwelcome task of viewing the victims. The Coroner was in place and the inquest room was silent.

The first witness was then called, Peter Gibbs the experienced pitman who, together with George Britton was operating the steam engine and the cart at the Old Pit that night. Gibbs described attending the pit at Mr Brain's request and preparing to get up steam in the engine to wind down the cart for the Cooks and Walter who would be tackling the fire. Under questioning, he spoke about the descent by the three men.

'A quarter of an hour or twenty minutes after the men entered the shaft the bell was rung for the 'cart' to be put down for the return journey. It was put down as quickly as possible. But when it got to the bottom there were no signals to raise it. After this we began to feel uneasy. There was a consultation with Mr Brain, and after the lapse of an hour or so, Elijah Edwards and John Wilmott decided to go down.'

The Coroner intervened for clarification: 'Is it usual to haul the 'cart' immediately after it has gone down?'

'Abe Cook would always insist it was done. I cannot explain his reason for doing so, except perhaps it was to keep the rope and cage dry.'

‘On this occasion did they ring to have the cart hauled up, or did you haul it up without a signal?’

‘Without doubt they signalled to haul the cart up.’

Mr Bain the Inspector of Mines asked Gibbs to describe the signals in use. Gibbs looked hesitant and a little confused as he tried to answer.

Mr Gay one of the jurors spoke up:

‘In my opinion not many men in the district knew the signals.’

The coroner noted that the signalling system was carefully detailed in the colliery rules and Mr Brain confirmed Gibbs and Britton were both familiar with the system as they used it frequently.

Next called to give evidence was Samuel Britton who worked with Peter Gibbs on the fateful night. As Banksman it was his job to listen for the signals from below and to organise the lowering and raising of the cart. As he approached to give his testimony, a piece of paper was handed to the coroner via the court official from Aaron Brain, the pit-owner indicating that Britton had difficulty hearing. Dr Grace read the message, paused to consider its importance before deciding what to do.

‘On account of Mr Britton’s deafness, I have decided that he should not be questioned.’

As Sam turned to go back to his seat, Mr Bain, the mines inspector asked the Coroner if he might put one question. This was agreed.

‘Mr Britton, could you hear the raps in the engine room?’

Yes, replied Sam.

Mr Bain concluded by reminding the court that there were visual signals in addition to the ringing.

Gibbs’ testimony was supported by the next witness called. Joseph Hughes said that approximately a quarter of an hour after the men had gone down he had been in the engine room and had heard ‘the bell ring five or six times quickly’ to indicate the party below wanted the cart sent down. At that point, ‘the cage was immediately lowered’.

The Coroner thanked the witness for his evidence and Peter Gibbs stood down and resumed his seat in the room. Dr Grace consulted his pocket watch – it was gone three o’clock but he wanted to hear from two more key witnesses before adjourning for the day. From his long experience, it was always important to hear the testimony of those directly involved in any incident before memories blurred.

‘Call Elijah Edwards’ were the words from the inquest official. The burly figure of Edwards rose from his seat in the body of the room and strode forward to the front where he took the oath. Elijah introduced himself to the court and was asked to relate his recollections of the previous Sunday evening.

‘I arrived at the pit at around eight in the evening, when I heard there had been an accident. I went to see if there was anything useful to be done. When I got to the New Pit I saw smoke rising from the shaft. They told me the Bailiff Abe Cook and two others had gone down to put out the fire. So I waited at the New Pit, expecting the three men to come out there.

‘What did you do next?’

‘I waited there until about midnight. Then Mr Brain, the pit-owner asked me to walk over to the Old Pit.’

‘When you got there where was the cage?’

‘It was at the surface, sir. So, at Mr Brain’s request me and John Wilmot went down to see if we could help the three men or find out what had happened to them.’

The courtroom was pin-drop silent, eager to hear just what had occurred on this first rescue trip.

‘When we got down there our candles went out, but not before we espied the body of one of the men who we thought was young Abe, on the roadway a little way off. There was a terrible smell of sulphur, like I have never smelt before. Knowing there was terrible peril to breathing the gas, we got back in the cart and rang to be lifted up. Once we reached the top we told Mr Brain what we had seen. That was when he decided water should be pumped into the shaft to clear the foul air.’

The Inspector of Mines asked: ‘Was there any smoke at the bottom of the pit.’

‘No sir. We could not see very much, but there was definitely a smell like sulphur.’

Dr Grace intervened: ‘You were at work on the Saturday shift in the New Pit I understand. What was the state of that pit when you left work?’

‘The New Pit was completely clear. There was no smoke and no unusual smells. Fires were never lit in either of the pits and there was no firedamp that anyone knew of.’

‘Thank you, that will be all Mr Edwards.’ The Coroner finished making his notes of the evidence given and turned to his official to call the final witness of the day.

William Jones announced himself to the inquest as a collier with 35 years’ experience of Golden Valley, who lived in Cadbury Heath. He had been alerted in the early hours of last Monday morning to the news that there was a fire at the pit and there were some dead men at the bottom.

‘When I arrived at the Old Pit around 2 o’clock they were throwing water down to chase out the fumes. Henry Isaacs and I together decided to go down and recover the bodies of the three men.’

‘And what did you discover at the bottom?’

‘When we got there, we found Abraham Cook Senior lying on his back dead. About six feet off was Abraham Cook Junior, and the body of Alfred Walters was a dozen yards farther in. They were all dead, and the bodies were cold and stiff.’

‘And what was the state of the air in the mine?’

‘There was then no smoke or sulphur in the pit, which was quite cool.’

The Mines Inspector asked what Jones thought had killed the men.

‘I suppose sulphur came upon them before, but it was driven away by the water poured down the pit. We didn’t go further into the pit as we had been told by Mr Brain not to. But after we had brought up the bodies I went to the New Pit where there was still a good deal of smoke coming out.’

‘What do you think might have caused the fire?’

‘The view I came to was that there was some wood on fire at the bottom, and that this had been caused by somebody dropping a snuff of candle at the place where the men changed clothes near the bottom of the pit.’

'Was the shaft itself lined with wood?' 'No,' came the reply, 'and there was little wood lying at the bottom of the shaft.'

The jury foreman Mr Ollis asked Jones whether he thought the men had gone very far into the mine.

'I believe they had gone some way as they had mud on their legs and their candles and candlesticks were with them where they lay.'

There were no further questions from anyone, so William Jones was allowed to return to his seat, evidence completed.

The Coroner scribbled some more notes, spoke to his court official then addressed the court.

'I am afraid we must adjourn the inquiry in order to discover if the fire originated from accident or carelessness. If it was accidental, the matter will end there; but if the fire was the result of carelessness, a very serious question will arise for the consideration of the jury. The inquest cannot be concluded until the pit has been explored. Mr Brain – when is the earliest the pit may be examined?'

'Within a few days, Doctor Grace.'

'In that case, we shall re-convene the inquiry to a later date, the principal evidence to be heard on that day being that of Mr Bain and Mr Brain.'

In the days leading up to the 28th April the date arranged for the second day of the inquest, the Coroner had examined his notes of the testimony so far given. Dr Grace knew well from his experience of countless inquests it did not pay to jump to any conclusions until all evidence had been heard. In any event the pit had not re-opened to allow a proper inspection of the site of the fire. The crucial evidence of the Mines Inspector Mr Bain was still to come, a man who could be depended upon by virtue of his position to present a reliable and above all independent view of the circumstances leading to the tragedy. His testimony would be very influential. As important, the inquest would also hear from Mr Brain the pit-owner who had extensive knowledge of the mine as well as playing a central role in events on the night of the accident. Witnesses had already testified that Mr Brain had tried to persuade Abraham Cook against his mission.

In the Coroner's judgement therefore, the main issue to be resolved was whether the fire itself, the root cause of the fire-party descending, had been accidental or else caused by carelessness. If the latter, then a person or persons who was culpable may be the subject of a criminal charge.

Meanwhile, for Aaron Brain the circumstances of the accident still constantly played on his mind, day and night. *Should he have forbidden the Cooks and Walter from making the descent? By failing to do so, didn't that make him responsible for three deaths?* Overlying this constant internal turmoil, he was now anxious about his forthcoming evidence. He wondered whether the questions would centre on his role that night or his knowledge of the mine generally and its workings. He took some consolation from the coroner's words at the conclusion of the first day, which had focussed attention on the fire and its causes rather than the deaths. That said, he was expecting a very uncomfortable day.

All was ready in the inquest room, with every seat occupied, meaning a few latecomers were standing at the back of the room. Everyone, not least the victims' families, hoped that today would bring an

end to proceedings with a definite and clear outcome. The families needed to bury their menfolk, and the community had a strong desire to move forward, putting this ghastly accident behind it.

A hush fell on the room as the Coroner Dr Grace entered and took his seat. He outlined what was planned: four witnesses, all colliers, were to be called to give their evidence, before the testimonies of Mr Brain and Mr Bain which would conclude the case.

First Joseph Cumley was questioned. He confirmed for the court the ringing procedures for calling the cart, as given in the evidence of previous witnesses. Importantly, he said he was present at the moment Sam Britton failed to hear the ringing. He had only worked at Golden Valley for 14 weeks but had known Abraham Cook for many years: 'I've worked in many pits and Abe Cook is as able and experienced overman as I have ever worked under.'

Then John Fry, also present that night, relayed to the court the discussions he had heard between the bailiff and the pit-owner.

'Cook said that it was perfectly safe to go down.'

'What was Mr Brain's response?'

'He told him he should not consider going down unless it was quite safe to do so.'

Samuel Fudge, the engine driver at the New Pit was the third witness that morning. While he did not hear any conversations between Cook and Brain that night, he could confidently say that from his knowledge of Mr Brain, he would not urge anyone go down the mine if it was not safe to do so.

With no fresh facts or insights emerging from these first three witnesses for the jury to consider, the inquest then called Stephen Adams, who was the rapper at the New Pit.

'What was the state of the pit when you left it at the end of the Saturday shift?'

'There was no sign of fire and all was safe.'

'What sort of man was Cook to work under?'

'He was a pretty safe man to work under. He never forced a man to work in a dangerous place.'

The Mines Inspector Mr Bain intervened with a question:

'What do you think caused the fire?'

'Well there was a good deal of loose timber about. I think the snuff of a candle must have been thrown down to cause the fire. I never knew coal to catch fire by spontaneous combustion.'

With no further questions forthcoming, Stephen Adams was allowed to stand down. Dr Grace consulted his pocket-watch and announced the hearing adjourned for lunch: 'We shall reconvene at two o'clock.'

Shortly after the appointed hour, Aaron Brian, dry-mouthed from nervousness, made his way to the front of the inquest room. He started his deposition by outlining his identity and gave an account of what had happened on the evening of the fire, starting with Hancock alerting him to the fire, continuing with the arrangements at the Old Pit for the fire-party. This tallied with the accounts from previous witnesses. When he came to describe conversations with his bailiff Abraham Cook, he was very clear.

‘I asked Cook whether he thought there would be any danger, and he replied that there would not be the slightest danger in going. I suggested whether it would not be advisable to leave it till the next day, but he said he would go down at once.’

The Mines Inspector then proceeded to question Brain about his credentials and the working of the mine.

‘For the record can you tell the inquest how long you have worked at Golden Valley Colliery?’

‘I’ve been the Manager for nine years, since the 1872 Act came into effect. I have other business interests but at the time of the incident, I devoted the largest part of my time to the pit. Since the accident I have given up managing Golden Valley.’

‘Can you tell the inquest about the workings in the mine and the likelihood of fire starting?’

‘We have been working the Cuckoo and Smith's coal veins. The fire was in the direction of the Cuckoo seam. In my time, I’ve never known the heat of the coal to cause spontaneous combustion. There had once been a fire underground before, but I don’t know how it started.’

‘What is your opinion of Abraham Cook, as regards his trustworthiness?’

‘Cook was a trustworthy man, and I would have trusted my own life in his hands.’

‘And how safe do you consider the mine to be?’

‘The engine at the New pit is in good working order. There had only been one accident with it, and that was through over-winding 18 years ago.’

‘Mr Brain, what do you believe caused the men’s deaths?’

‘It must have been through suffocation.’

‘Have you any theory about what started the fire?’

‘I’ve formed no opinion about how it started.’

Mr Nurse, solicitor for Mrs Cook, asked whether, if the cage had remained down rather than being hoisted up, the men could have been rescued alive.

‘I cannot say, came the reply.’

A juror raised his hand to ask a question: ‘Was a banksman put in place when the men went down?’

‘Peter Gibbs acted as banksman.’

‘Were you in attendance at the Old Pit in the course of the evening?’

‘I was there on three or four occasions, throughout the evening.’

Having heard Brain’s testimony, there was a murmuring in the room, whether as a reaction to what had been said by the pit-owner or in anticipation of what was to come next it was hard to say. Everyone seated in the inquest room knew that the final witness, Donald Bain the Assistant Inspector of Mines for the South Western District, was the ‘expert’ witness whose opinion about the event leading to the tragedy would ultimately be the key to the eventual verdict of the jury. Bain had spent some years in the Durham mining area before becoming one of Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Mines for the south-west area. He now lived with his wife and young family in a well-to-do area of Newport in South Wales. A youngish man in his early thirties, he was sufficiently qualified and capable to be

appointed to such a serious position. But not a man local to South Gloucestershire nor someone (or so the colliers in the room felt) who had ever toiled in a pit. Despite these reservations, as Donald Bain took the oath, there was silence as he started his testimony.

The Coroner began: 'Mr Bain, you have already prepared your formal report on the accident I believe. Would you be so good as to read it.'

Holding a sheaf of papers constituting his report, the Inspector started by describing the pit and its workings, and the events leading up to the deceased descending the pit, his report tallying with the statement of Mr Brain and the other witnesses. He moved on to the fate of the three men and their likely cause of death:

'The deceased were found at the bottom of the shaft, having no doubt been suffocated by the products of combustion given off by the fire which was subsequently found near the bottom of the New Pit. From marks that were noticed in the drift leading from the Old Pit, it would seem that the deceased men had penetrated some two hundred yards into the workings, but had to retreat, and had been overcome before they reached the shaft, except the elder Cook, whose body was found at the bottom of the pit.'

He reported on his views regarding the likely cause of the fire:

'As soon as the pit was reopened I made an examination of the place where the fire was discovered, but I regret to say there was no evidence to show how it had originated. A small seam of coal seemed to be on fire, some timber in the neighbourhood had been burnt. The top part of the shaft walls was in a great measure supported by timber and this timber may have been wilfully set fire to. But I am unwilling to think this to be the cause. It is possible the men coming out from work on Saturday might have heedlessly thrown down a piece of candle and set fire to some dry timber at the side of the road.'

He reached the section of his report where he outlined responsibility for the fire and the subsequent deaths:

'Mr Brain, who at the time of the accident acted as manager, has always shown readiness to meet the requirements of the law and some important alterations have been effected, at the inspector's request during the last five years. I direct the owner's attention to the great necessity for keeping the underground roads of sufficient size for a travelling way for the men and for the sake of ventilation.

After the inspector had finished reading his report, the Coroner asked him to comment on the Engine Man in Old Pit on the night.

'It is clear to me from the evidence we have heard at the inquest that the man who occasionally acted as Engine Man at the old pit engine was very deaf. In the light of the importance of having a man in charge of the winding machinery who clearly understood all signals that might be given, I recommend that another man should be appointed for the duty.'

Mr Bowman, acting on behalf of the Walter family asked the inspector whether, if the cage had been left at the bottom of the pit and the appliances were in proper order, the men could have been brought out alive and without danger.

Without hesitation the response was: 'I can't say that all'.

There were no further questions and Mr Bain returned to his original seat. An expectant hush fell on the room. All present knew the inquest was moving towards its conclusion, with all evidence having

been heard. Dr Grace the coroner, consulted his notes for a moment or two then proceeded to address the jury.

'It is now my job to summarise the key elements of this unfortunate matter and to direct you on the issues for you to consider.

You have heard evidence that it had been the custom at the Old Pit to draw up the cart after the party going down had got out of it. On this occasion, Cook would have had the cage drawn up as soon as he got out at the bottom. It has also been proved that the men rapped to have the cart sent down, and that as it was being sent down there was more signalling, so that at that time there must have been somebody alive in the pit. Had the cart been at the bottom there would have been opportunity for them to have got in and been pulled up. That, of course, seems to be the unfortunate part of the business.

You have heard that the manager, Mr Brain, did not advise Cook down in any shape or form, but on the contrary, advised him, if there was any danger, to wait till the next day. He did not seem to have taken upon himself to order the men down the pit. Mr Brain seemed not to have interfered with the foreman, except to consult him as to whether there was any danger. Cook, for his part thought there was no danger, and in fact, it did not strike anyone connected with the pit that there was any danger to be apprehended. The men seemed to forget that the fire would not only consume all the pure air in the pit, but would create foul air as well; no doubt this is why these men were suffocated. It is for you, the jury to consider whether anybody is to blame.'

And with that, he sent the jury off to a smaller room in the inn to deliberate the case.

Some of those present took the opportunity to stretch their legs; the majority chose to stay and retain their seats, believing perhaps they would not have a long wait to hear the verdict.

Their wait was not a long one – in less than half an hour, word was passed to the coroner that the jury has reached a decision. The inquest reconvened and the Coroner asked for the jury to be brought in.

In a suitably grave tone, he asked the Foreman of the Jury, Thomas Ollis if they had reached a verdict.

'We have sir.'

'What is your verdict on the death of Abraham Cook Senior?'

'Accidental death.'

'What is your verdict on the death of Abraham Cook Junior?'

'Accidental death.'

'What is your verdict on the death of Alfred Walter?'

'Accidental death.'

The coroner recorded the verdicts in his notebook as they were given.

At that point, Ollis spoke further:

'Some members of the jury are anxious that the suggestions made by the Inspector should be carried out, as no doubt they will be. We have no power to order it but we recommend that a more intelligent man, or a man more capable of hearing, should be placed at the engine.'

This caused a stir in the room as the assembly considered the impact of Ollis's statement.

The Coroner said the mines inspector had spoken to him on this point:

'He has informed me that there could not be a much more intelligent man than the Engine Man, and that his only defect is his deafness. If it had indeed been a case of a man being killed owing to the signalman not hearing, then the duty of the jury would have been very clearly to bring in a verdict against the responsible person who ought to have ensured that there was a man at the engine capable of hearing. I still think the recommendation of the jury is a very fair one that there should be a man employed who could hear, although as we have been told, his services were not often required.'

He uttered these last words with a tone of finality which suggested to everyone the matter was closed. With that he proceeded to thank the jury members for their service at the inquest and then departed the room signalling the end of the inquest. But for those left in the room, as they slowly dispersed to go their separate ways, this didn't really seem like the end. True, for the grieving families there was now a kind of closure, with the possibility that they could arrange funerals and begin the process of rebuilding a life without their bread-winning menfolk. There would be considerable worries ahead. Financial survival was the first hurdle, as little official provision was available for the hardship they would face. They would fall back on the help of family, friends and the community to make ends meet. Church or chapel could be relied upon to offer some support. Occasionally the pit-owner may make a donation to the families, but this was not guaranteed.

Tombstone of Abraham and Abe Cook, Warmley Wesley Chapel. Inscription:

' ...of Abraham son of the above aged 57

and his son Abraham aged 27who were both suffocated

in the Golden Valley Pit on Sunday March 26th 1882'

For the miners who had given their testimony, at least they could feel relieved that they had done their duty in coming forward and giving their accounts. They would continue to go daily to the Golden Valley colliery, as many of them had done for decades, to earn the wherewithal to feed and clothe themselves and their families and pay the rent, just as they had always done. They would never forget the accident that had killed three of their workmates (how could they?). But it was part of the job of being a miner, a risk of going deep underground to dig coal, and you had to accept that risk, however much you pushed it into the recesses of your mind.

The mine-owner Aaron Brain, since the accident had already withdrawn from management of the Golden Valley colliery, though we shall never know to what extent this was attributable to the events of the accident or simply coincidental. It is inconceivable that his indirect involvement in the deaths of the three men, would not have left him with a psychological scar.

Dr Grace the Coroner would continue to pursue his GP duties, alongside his amateur cricket exploits, and be called upon to officiate at future inquests in his area, some no doubt future mining accidents. While Donald Bain the Mines Inspector would carry on visiting collieries to pronounce on the state of other pits and to give a professional's verdict on the causes of accidents.

The Golden Valley accident of 1882 would leave its mark on all those involved but none more so than the Cook and Walter families whose lives had been devastated by the loss of their loved ones.

Author's Note

The Fire-Party tells the true story of an accident which took place at the Golden Valley colliery in South Gloucestershire in March 1882. I first became aware of the details while researching my ancestors, in particular Elijah Edwards my great-grandfather, who has a role in the story. Reading contemporary newspaper accounts of the inquest at the time, I soon realized that this was a story that could deservedly be re-told in a way that would make it more accessible, interesting and dramatic.

The newspaper accounts gave me bare details of all the key individuals of the event (names and sometimes occupations) but to make a readable account I would need to further research these people and their families. I quickly uncovered my personal well of ignorance about mining generally, its practices and the extent of mining in South Gloucestershire, which I needed to rectify. With an interest in genealogy I was able to build up the background knowledge of the story's protagonists, through research of census and vital records online. The mining context had to come from wider reading and with the help of a number of specialist research and interest groups who gave much needed advice and help. I am grateful to them all and their details are listed in the following section.

The resulting book is a semi-fictionalised historical work. All characters in the account were real and the details provided concerning ages, spouses, families and where they lived are accurate according to official records. Having forensically examined the newspaper reports of the time, I constructed an accurate timeline narrative of the events of 25-27 March 1882 to understand and re-tell the story of the accident. It should be said this was not an exact process, as there were a number of discrepancies in the testimonies of various witnesses at the inquest (for example, in the matter of recollection of timings); allowance also needed to be made for inaccurate reporting by journalists.

The description of the accident necessarily relies on the testimony of the witnesses, filtered through the words of the journalists. It is therefore only as accurate as these sources, though there is a large degree of commonality in the witnesses' statements. This hopefully means that The Fire Party provides a reasonably reliable record of the circumstances leading to the death of the three men.

As for added fictional colour, it will quickly become apparent to readers when I have stepped outside known historical facts for narrative purposes. Aaron Brain's churchgoing and the Cook family visit to chapel are fictional for example. So too details of the Sunday family lunch in the Cook household. The context of churchgoing in Oldland and Bitton is of course authentic and I trust the narrative licence can be justified.

The narrative also sets out to capture in a small way the lives of those living in a small mining community in South Gloucestershire in the last quarter of the 19th century. Life expectancy was much shorter, particularly for infants, formal education for the young short and basic. Working conditions were harsh by today's standards (whether in a mine, at the local papermill or elsewhere). Children would regularly be in paid work by their early teenage years. The risk of injury and death from accidents at work was many times higher than today, though the state was beginning to introduce safety regimes in mines and other workplaces. Against this backdrop, one can appreciate the importance of family and other support mechanisms like the local church or chapel, which I hope is reflected in the story.

Once having read The Fire Party, you may wish to consider as I did when writing it, whether the conclusions of the inquest jury were entirely satisfactory. I found myself being drawn back constantly

to the ambiguous position of Aaron Brain, the pit owner. Allowing his Bailiff to dictate the course of action in putting out the fire, by descending with the fire-party, is puzzling at the very least. Despite Abraham Cook's position, experience and seniority (in years) over Brain, the pit-owner could (should?) surely have forbidden it. In so doing the lives of three men might have been saved. This is possibly judging a situation of the 1880s by modern day standards. However, it is unimaginable that the Golden Valley pit accident could happen in today's 'safety first' regime of protecting employees.

There appear also to have been technical and system failures, which were contributory factors in the men's deaths. The procedure of raising the cart immediately passengers had reached the pit-bottom is the most obvious; the deployment of George Brittan who was partially deaf which impeded the speed of response another. The responsibility for both might be said to lie ultimately with the pit-owner Brain. However, reading the inquest testimonies, it is quite obvious that all operational decisions on a day-to-day basis at the pit were made by Abraham Cook. In this context, it is not surprising that his decision to take the fire-party down the pit was not overruled by Brain.

In the light of these facts the jury's verdict of accidental death seems to me justifiable. The Coroner appeared to be giving a clear direction that no party had been criminally negligent, requiring a different verdict. But the reader will make up their own mind on the facts as described.

Geoff Flook

November 2023

Appendix one

Sources and acknowledgements

Contemporary documents and vital records

British Newspaper Archive – reports of the accident and the inquest

Western Daily Press 28 March 1882 and 29 April 1882

Bristol Mercury and Daily Post 29 March 1882, 1 April 1882 and 29 April 1882

Ancestry UK – access to vital records of protagonists

Mining and archeaological

South Gloucestershire Mining Research Group (SGMRG) - use of datafiles compiled from Public Records Offices in Bristol and Gloucester concerning accidents and fatalities

Bristol Industrial Archeaology Society (BIAS): Journal 23 (1990) - general and specific information about Golden Valley Pit

The Coal Authority - historical information relating to Bristol/South Gloucestershire coalfields

The Bristol Coalfield, John Cornwell (2003), Landmark Publishing - general and specific information about Golden Valley Pit

Local and topographical

Bitton Parish History Group – for a wealth of information about Oldland Common, Bitton, St Mary's Bitton

Website: Warmley Wesley Methodist Main Page (timsff.co.uk) -burial details of deceased

Bristol and Avon Family History Society – burial details of deceased

Website: Warmley Tower burials (uomc.org.uk)- burial details at Warmley Tower Methodist Chapel

Personal thanks are due to the following who were generous with their time in helping me research the account and to any other person who has helped or contributed whose names are omitted here.

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Tim Dunn - Warmley Wesley

Mike Slucutt – Unity Methodist (Warmley Tower Burials)

Appendix two

Photo acknowledgements and credits

Cover – detail of Cook family photo – (see below).

Cover –image of contemporary map, courtesy of The Genealogist.

Page 2 – finger post - ©Geoff Flook.

Page 4 – Elijah Edwards – detail of family group photo, Flook/Edwards family photo collection.

Page 8 – St Mary's Church - ©Geoff Flook.

Page 9 – Cook family group – 1872 photo widely reproduced. Owner of rights not traceable.

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Page 20 – Crown and Horseshoe – use of photo courtesy of Crown and Horseshoe pub, North Street, Oldland Common.

Page 21 – Dr Grace - Photo by E Hawkins, Brighton extracted from book 'Famous Cricketers' 1896, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=18753618

Page 29 – Cook family tombstone - © Geoff Flook

Appendix three

Elijah Edwards in the Flook family tree