

Coal Mining and the Victorians



Lesson Idea: Recreating the Huskar Inquest

Overview

This lesson idea would work well as part of a Victorians topic or a study of coal mining. Some knowledge of the Huskar Pit disaster and Victorian life may be helpful.

This resource includes a lesson plan, background information and groups' prompt-cards.

	Activity	Teacher's notes
Introduction	<p>Discuss what an inquest is and why there would have been one.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is an inquest? 2. Why would an inquest be important? 3. Who do you think would have been present to give evidence? 4. Why would they hold it in the Red Lion Inn? 5. What do you think would be the possible outcomes of an inquest? 	<p>The answers.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inquiry following the unexplained death of somebody. Usually held by a coroner. 2. People would want to know how these children came to die and to find out if anybody was responsible. 3. Coroner; survivors; families of those who lost children; workers; mine owner; vicar; general public 4. This would be a central meeting point. 5. Blame would be apportioned if necessary.
Main body	<p>Explain that the class will be recreating the inquest and taking on the roles of people who would have been present.</p> <p>Preparation Spilt the pupils into groups. Groups could include the jury, the surviving children, other miners, parents of the deceased, Robert Clarke (the mine manager).</p> <p>Get pupils to consider how their group would feel about the disaster and what point of view they might want to get across. They should think about why they have been called to give evidence and what the jury might want to find out about from them?</p>	<p>See Preparing for the Inquest sheets. The jury needs to formulate questions that they want to ask each representative, based on what information they need to find out. Prompt questions are included.</p> <p>Pupils could use the evidence from the inquest to help them get some ideas or try relying on their imagination to get into another person's shoes.</p> <p>Give each group a prompt card if necessary in order to help them think about what questions the jury might ask them and to form their views.</p>

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	<p>The Inquest Groups should nominate a spokesperson to answer the jury's questions. The jury should ask each group their questions</p> <p>At the end the jurors decide on a verdict.</p>	<p>The spokesperson should be supported in his/her answers by his/her group who sit behind, feeding extra information if necessary.</p>
<p>Plenary</p>	<p>Discuss the verdict with the whole class - What does everybody else think?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think should have been done next to prevent something like this happening again? • How would you feel if you were one of the parents? Robert Clarke? A child miner who had to go back down the pit? • Read out the real verdict. How does it compare to the pupils' verdict. Do they think it was fair? • How does your life compare to that of a Victorian child miner? • What dangers do you face in your life? • What sorts of jobs do children do today? Are there still children in the world who work in dangerous conditions? 	<p>Opportunity to read Daz Beattie's poem.</p> <p>Opportunity to explore the 1842 Coal Mines Act, which banned women and children under ten from working in a mine.</p>

Inquest verdict given by the coroner, Mr Thomas Badger of Sheffield:

'It is now my duty to enquire whether any negligence had been used or any act of criminality committed by the parties, whose duty it was to render every assistance in their power towards rescuing the children from their awful situation. From the enquiries that have been made, I believe that there was no reason to suppose that such was the case, or that any act of criminality has been committed; and if the jury is satisfied, after the hearing the evidence, that such was a fact, they will have no difficulty in returning a verdict of accidental death.'

(negligence = lack of care)

Background Information

Huskar Pit was a coal mine in the village of Silkstone Common near Barnsley. It was owned and managed by a man called Robert C. Clarke. On 4th July 1838 a terrible disaster occurred. The day started hot, bright and sunny. But from about 2 o'clock a violent storm raged. Heavy rain fell and nearby streams began to flood.

The rain put out the boiler fire of the steam-powered winding engine, so workers underground could not be lifted out of the pit. This meant that just over 40 children aged between 7 and 17 years old, along with some of the men, were trapped underground. A message was sent for the miners to make their way to the pit bottom, and wait for the boiler to be re-lit, to allow them to be lifted out.

Those working underground were unsure about what was happening. Some thought there was a fire underground or on the pit top. Some people mistook a clap of thunder for an explosion. By this time the children had spent nine hours in darkness and they were desperate to leave.

Fearing for their lives, the children panicked. They ignored advice to stay where they were and attempted to reach the surface by walking out along the drift (a drift is a sloping tunnel leading to the surface; sometimes called a **day hole**) in Nabbs Wood. As the terrified children tried to make their way to safety, a stream swollen by the heavy rain overflowed into the drift. The children were washed off their feet and down to the ventilation door through which they had just passed. The water rose and twenty six children drowned. The majority of those who died were under twelve years old. Fourteen children managed to fight their way through the water and survived.

The inquest into the disaster was held at the Red Lion Inn, Silkstone by the Sheffield Coroner, Mr Badger. The purpose of the inquest was to find out what happened on 4th July 1838 and how twenty-six children came to lose their lives. In addition to Mr Badger, the others present included:

- Robert C. Clarke - Mine owner
- Rev. Henry Watkins - Parish vicar and local magistrate
- Those who had been working at the top and bottom of Moorend and Huskar collieries
- Hurriers who had escaped the flooded passageways by hiding in the slit
- Parents of the deceased children

Evidence at the Inquest

Joseph Husker, survivor: 'Eleven of us were together, they all drowned but me, the water swam me down the dayhole and through the slit into another bordergate. William Lamb said we were not to go out there we kept bothering him. We did not know what we were going out for; we thought it was a fire. The water washed the children down the dayhole against the door through which we had all come and they were all drowned.'

William Lamb, survivor: 'We did not know what we were going out for. We thought it was a fire. The water washed the children down the dayhole against the door, through which we had just come and they were all drowned. If we had stopped at the pit bottom we should have been saved.'

Uriah Jubb, survivor: 'If we had stopped at the bottom of the pit we would have been safe. I was going up the board gate with Elizabeth Taylor and others, we heard the water coming and me and Elizabeth Taylor got into a slit in the dayhole and we stopped there till we got out. The slit is a good way past the door and near the mouth of the dayhole. The water met the others as they were coming up and drove them against the door, where they were drowned.'

George Mann, a 13-year-old Silkstone hurrier at the Huskar pit: 'William Batty shouted down the pit and told them they were to stop a bit, they would not stop, and they went and met the water up the day hole gate. Batty did not damn or swear. He seemed to do all he could to get them out. I did not see Batty do anything that was wrong. They did not work the engine because they were without steam. It rained so hard that they could not get to the fire the engine. The hailstones broke the windows of the engine house.'

Joseph Holling, a hurrier from Silkstone: 'I was working at Huskar pit yesterday. Elizabeth Holling, my cousin, was working in the same pit, and was drowned. As I was making my way out of Huskar pit up the dayhole, which is a road for people to walk out of the pit and for horses to go down, I was met by a quantity of water running down the day hole, which drowned every one of us there; eleven of us were there together. They were all drowned but me. The water swam me down the day hole and through a slit into another board gate; by that means my life was saved. We never heard anyone say we were to go out at the board gate. William Lamb said we were not to go there. We kept bothering him, and he said we might please ourselves, whether we went or not. We did not know what we were going out for; we thought it was for fire...'

John Mellor, labourer: '...We were up to our knees in water to get the engine to fire. We began to draw the men out as soon as we got steam up. When the children were making such a dismal din at the bottom of the pit, I told them to have a little patience and they would be pulled out as soon as ever the steam was got up. We began to pull them out as soon as we could.'

John Hinchliffe, engine tenter at Moorend Colliery: 'I was working the water engine at Moorend colliery yesterday, between two and three o'clock, when the

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storm took place. The water from out a dyke near the pit began to rise very high, rapidly, until the water ran into the pit. I then went and told the banksman, Francis Garnett, that he had better call the miners out of the pit.

I saw Garnett go immediately to Moorend pit, but I did not see what he did. As soon as I had seen him go I went to my engine again. The storm was so severe I could not work the engine; it damped the steam so much that it could not work. The water was running into the pit mouth. There was plenty of time for the children to have been got out of the pit if they had only come to the bottom of it, and kept the right road... I do not attribute blame to anyone. I do not believe anyone could have prevented the children from being drowned.'

William Batty, a banksman: 'We stopped the engine on account of the heavy rain. I never saw so heavy a storm. The storm was so severe that we could not safely stop on the pit hill; it rained and hailed so hard. I was not aware of the water getting into the pit at the day hole, and did not know that any person was in danger. The hailstones were like large pieces of ice. I saw about 20 children taken out of the pit. I did not call down.'

John Burkinshaw- parent of George and Joseph Burkinshaw: 'Two of my children were in the pit and were both drowned in the dayhole. I have heard the evidence given before this jury by witnesses and I believe, as far as I can understand, that they have all given true evidence. As a parent, I do not blame any person. I believe this has been an accident.'

Revd Henry Watkins: 'I am happy to have an opportunity to testify that Mr Clarke *zealously rendered every assistance* in his power at the pit brow.'

(zealously rendered every assistance= tried extremely hard to help)

Glossary of Terms

Drift: also known as a **dayhole** or **pit rail**, these were horizontal or sloping tunnels driven into the side of a hill. They were sometimes used for ventilation or to allow pit ponies and/or workers in and out of the mine.

Pit bottom: underground area at the bottom of the shaft

Pit mouth: area at the top of the shaft

Boardgate: tunnel

Slit: narrow hole where coal has already been mined; sometimes these narrow slits could provide a short cut to the next passageway

Banksman: person in charge of the shaft; responsible for getting men in and out of the shaft

Engine tender: person who operated the winding engine, which wound men up and down the shaft

Underground steward: somebody who would have been in charge of the colliers

Preparing for the Inquest

Groups Giving Evidence

The groups who will give evidence at the inquest will need to elect a spokesperson for their group and answer questions from the jury. In order to be prepared, each group should think about how they feel and how they would answer these questions:

What information will you need to provide?

- Where were you when you heard about the flood?
- How were you involved in what happened?
- What do you feel about what has happened?
- Did you do anything to help?
- Could anything have been done to stop this happening?
- Who do you think is to blame?

What other questions might the jury ask?

What other information do you have?

Getting into role

- How are you going to get into role for your character?
- How you are going to portray your character's attitude and feelings about what has happened?
- Think about:
 - The language you use
 - Body language
 - How you use your voice: tone and volume

Preparing for the Inquest

The Jury

These are some examples of questions for the jury to ask some of the groups present at the inquest.

Children

- When did you first know something was wrong?
- What instructions were you given?
- Why did you decide to try to get out of the drift entrance?
- Was there anybody leading you?
- Did anyone try to stop you?
- Could anybody have done anything to save the lives of your friends?
- Have you ever been trained in what to do in an emergency?

Families

- How did you first hear about the death of your child/children?
- How long had they been working in the pit?
- Had they been trained about what to do in an emergency?
- Was your child obedient to you?
- Can you think of any reason why he/she would not listen to an instruction from one of the miners?

Miners

- When did you first know that there was going to be trouble?
- Who first raised the alarm?
- Did anybody speak directly to the children?
- What action did you take to get people out of the mine?
- Were people taken out in any order of priority?
- Could anything have been done to save the lives of those children?

Robert C. Clarke

- When did you first discover that an accident had happened?
- Is it normal for you to have so many children working underground in your pits?
- What kind of conditions would they have been working in?
- Do new workers receive any training on what to do in an emergency?
- Do you believe anything else could have been done to save the lives of those children?

Can you think of any more questions?

Thoughts of Huskar

How terrible to die, to die in youth
To die in childhood, a bitter truth.
Life's breath taken by grasping water
Lambs trapped and held, then put to the slaughter.
To die in terror, in true petrifying evil dark
Cruel smothering of life, washing away every tiny spark.
To have to wait in screaming knowing
That death ever nearer was coldly flowing.

Little lives of no value to man or nature
Where was Earth with her motherly nurture?
When these babes of toil faced such torment
Was she the provider of this violent torrent?
Or did man alone create this untimely tomb
These infants barely left their mother's womb.
Another example of man with nature tied
And still no ones fault that these children died.

Brothers and brother's sisters, playmate and friend
Stood together in terror awaiting their end.
The swollen stream swept into that mine
Lord, twenty-six tiny souls were then made thine.
Taken from mothers but also from pain
To face underground hardships never again.
Children in heaven should at last know the sun
As miners we pray that this has already been done.

Daz Beattie.

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Daz Beattie is a poet from Barnsley. He is a retired coal miner and has written a variety of poems about coal mining and life in Yorkshire.