

WARRINGTON GUARDIAN

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SHOCKING ACCIDENT AT PRESTON BROOK On Tuesday last, an inquest was held at the Red Lion, Preston Brook, before H B White Esq, deputy coroner, on the body of a man named **Peter Cawley**, whose death resulted in the manner described in the following evidence. The North Staffordshire Railway Company was represented by Mr Keary, of the firm of Keary and Shepherd, Stoke-upon-Trent.

George Wainwright said : I am a bricklayer's labourer, and work for the North Staffordshire Railway Co in sinking shafts from the surface into Preston Brook tunnel. The body the jury have seen is that of Peter Cawley. I have known him about two years. On Saturday morning between 11 and 12 o'clock, deceased and I had orders from Mr Billington, one of the Company's foremen, to go into the tunnel and bore up to one of the shafts which had got stopped. We went in the ice boat ; this was at the end of five or six boats which were about to be taken through by a small tug boat employed for the purpose. The work we had to do was at the second shaft, not quite half way through the tunnel. We loosed from the boat before us some distance before getting to the shaft ; when there, Cawley was with me and all was right. He was steadying the boat on the side farthest from me, and I had commenced boring, when a quantity of smoke from the direction of the tug boat came upon me and made me insensible ; I fell back into the boat's bottom. I did not see Cawley, but just as I became insensible I heard a splash in the water. I did not come to myself until some time after I had been taken out of the tunnel. Four air shafts are being constructed. One at each end is made through – the middle ones are not. The tug boat could not have been more than 100 yards before us when the smoke came back which made me insensible. I had been in the tunnel before, but felt no ill effects. Deceased was standing in the bottom of the boat when he was steadying it. We had a light, but it went out just as the smoke came down. If I had fallen into the water when I became insensible, I could not have helped myself. We were told not to stay more than half an hour in the tunnel. On the previous Thursday it took us only a quarter of an hour to do what we required. Mr Carruthers, surgeon, Halton, deposed that he was sent for on Saturday afternoon to see the deceased and two other men, one of whom, he believed, was the last witness. He found two of them in the ice boat. They were evidently suffering from the effects of smoke or some suffocating vapour, but were naturally recovering. He afterwards went to see the deceased, who was lying on the floor in his own cottage. He was quite dead and appeared to have been so about two hours. He could not possibly tell whether he had been rendered insensible before being drowned, nor did he think that fact could be ascertained on a *post mortem* examination. He believed deceased was alive when he fell into the water, and was then drowned.

Joseph Newton, who is employed in working the tug boat, said he was in the habit of going through the tunnel on an average about eighteen times a day. About half past ten on Saturday morning, he started from the north end with a train of boats. Before entering the tunnel, he saw the deceased on the canal bank ; he held up his hand as a signal that he wanted to go through. Witness slacked for him, but could not see for the smoke whether he came on or not. After reaching the south end – which was in about 25 minutes – he did not see the deceased, and thought he had not started. He had no notice from anyone that a boat was going through which was not to come out at the other end. He waited about 35 minutes at the south end before returning with another train of boats. There was no rule as to the time of returning. They usually waited for a train of boats, and until the tunnel seemed free from smoke. After running some 500 or 600 yards with the return train up the tunnel, he came to a sudden stop with a shock. He did not at first know what had caused the stoppage ; but afterwards took a lamp and saw that there was a boat in the way, and that it was the ice boat that Cawley had motioned him to stop for. He could not hear or see anyone, and thought the boat must have broken loose and got into the tunnel. He set to work to put the fire out and let the steam off ; and when he had done this he found that the men in the train of boats behind had “legged” out of the tunnel and left him and the steerer of the tug boat. He then tried to get back to the shaft hole for air, but in doing so was overpowered by the smoke, and did not recollect any more until he “came to” and found himself out of the tunnel. He had been “giddy” several times before

when in the tunnel. He was about ten minutes at work at the fire before he attempted to get back. About three weeks ago he was two days laid up from the effects of smoke and vapour. If all the four shaft holes had been open, he did not think there would have been any smoke of consequence. These shaft holes were only begun about a month since.

Peter Cawley, nephew of the deceased and steerer of the tug boat, gave corroborative evidence. It appeared that he also was overpowered by the smoke and became insensible.

James Billington said he was a mason, and had been in the employ of the North Staffordshire Company about 30 years, and at Preston Brook about a month. He came to superintend the sinking of air shafts into the tunnel. It was occasionally necessary for men to go into the tunnel to bore up the shafts to let off the water, and to clear the holes already bored from above. This was first done on the Thursday before the accident, when he, with the deceased and two others, went into the tunnel for that purpose. He had no instructions from the company or any of their servants as to how this was to be effected. They were in the tunnel about three quarters of an hour, going, working and returning, and suffered no inconvenience. Before entering, he did not inform the engine driver that a boat was going through which would not pass out at the other end. On Saturday morning last, it became necessary to repeat the operation ; he told the deceased and George Wainwright to go in and do what was wanted, if they had time, but if they had not, to retreat to the north end as soon as they heard the tug boat enter the tunnel. He told them to go in the ice boat at the end of a train of boats then entering, but did not say anything to the engine driver about it. He waited for deceased and Wainwright, and after an hour was surprised that they had not returned. He listened at the tunnel end but could hear nothing ; then sent to **William Davies**, the tunnel keeper, and asked him to wait at the north end and listen whilst he (witness) went to the other end to see if anything had happened. On his way, he met a boatman, who said there had been a "jamb" (meaning a collision) in the tunnel; witness then returned to the north end, got some men together and entered in a boat, taking lights &c. When rather more than half way through, they heard the steamer "fizzing", then one of the men who was holding a light over the side said, "There's a cap" ; on examination, they found it was a man's head above the water. The body (that of the deceased) was taken into the boat ; it showed no signs of life. They went a little further and found the ice boat and tug boat "jammed" together ; George Wainwright was in the former, moaning and insensible. They got him into their own boat, and loosed the ice boat and tug. Witness returned with some of the men and Cawley's body and Wainwright to the north end of the tunnel, leaving several men with the ice boat to render what assistance was necessary. A doctor was sent for. He had passed through the tunnel a dozen times and felt no inconvenience but once, when was rather giddy from the smoke. The whole of the air shafts would be open in about a fortnight. In his opinion, the two most useful shafts were now open. He had instructions to open the end shafts first ; they were considerably smaller than the middle ones. The middle shafts were deeper than the others, and would take a much longer time to complete. The hole bored in the shaft could have been cleared from above, but not with so little trouble as from below. The shafts were being sunk by contract, and it would have interfered with the contractor if they had gone to the top. Two of the men who went in on Thursday had gone away, and deceased and Wainwright said they could do the work easily. He had no apprehension of any danger. If the men had been sensible, they could have heard the tug enter and got out without difficulty. The deceased was accustomed to the tunnel, having been a legger for many years.

William Davies, tunnel keeper at the north end, stated that the tunnel was about three quarters of a mile long. Up to the last five months, it was customary for the boatmen to leg themselves through. At each end of the tunnel, a notice was posted stating that boatmen having fires on board were liable to a 40s penalty. No one had ever been fined to his knowledge. About five months since, the North Staffordshire Railway Company started a tug boat to go through the tunnel. It was only three months since one of the drivers and a stoker were brought out at the south end in a fainting state. He reported this to Mr Johnson, the company's inspector. He was not consulted about Mr Billington going into the tunnel on Thursday to clear the holes in the shaft. On Saturday, he knew that Wainwright and the deceased went in and (????).

Mr Forbes, resident engineer of the Trent and Mersey Canal, was called and examined by Mr Keary.

He said that until recently boats had been “legged” through the tunnel – there being no towing path – but as this was attended with delay and inconvenience, the company, about five months since, under the powers of a special act of Parliament, commenced running a tug boat. The experiment was tried about a month last autumn, when he went through the tunnel himself on many occasions. There was no inconvenience, except on still days, when one suffered from the sulphur arising from the coal in the engine. No one was rendered insensible during the time the experiment was being tried. About the 22nd of April last, he heard that one of the engine drivers and the steerer had suffered very much in their heads from the sulphur. He sent orders for the driver to be exchanged for one from Barnton tunnel, and also took steps for having two air shafts sunk. He afterwards arranged for two others – one near each end – which were commenced at once. From the commencement of the running of the tug boat, the engine drivers had orders to get a good clean fire and a good chest of steam before entering the tunnel, and to discontinue tugging if there was any danger. He told the driver Newton on Friday last to discontinue until the shafts were completed if he saw any danger. When they were all completed, all danger would be at an end.

The Coroner having summed up,

The Jury returned a verdict of “Accidentally drowned”, and recommended the North Staffordshire Railway Company to discontinue the use of the tug boat until the four air shafts were entirely completed, and that arrangements should be made for enabling the engine driver to be aware of the number of boats he was taking through the tunnel, that he may know whether he brings them all safely out at the other end.