ROCK BLASTING AT PLUMP HILL
DEATH OF FOUR MEN
[BY AN EYE WITNESS]

For some time past preparations have been made by the owner of an extensive limestone quarry, named Symonds to blast a mass of valuable limestone at the Plump Hill, Mitcheldean, with a ton of gunpowder, and fears were excited for the safety of the district. Applications were made both to local justices and guardians to prevent the explosion, inasmuch as the immediate locality was dotted with dwellings, but it was stated that they could not interfere. On Monday night the powder was successfully fired, many persons having assembled near to witness the explosion, of which the following account is furnished to us by a spectator:-

Although expecting many to be present, I confess that the numbers far exceeded my anticipations. Six O'clock was the hour named for the blast, but before that period arrived numerous groups had posted themselves on the hill opposite, and soon after six the numbers had greatly increased. People came from all directions for miles around, some even long distances-on foot, horseback, and in various vehicles, and evinced deep interest in the event. As the hour named had passed, some grew rather impatient, and it was not until about half-past six that any preparation for firing was obvious; but about that time Mr Phillips, of Westburybrook Mine was observed in the quarry, talking with the men for a few minutes, and then passed on up to the hill, by the engine house, and across on the tips, and in a few minutes the red flag, or danger signal, was put up on the top of the rock. The people were motioned away from the rock, and the quarry fusees were lighted, and the men scampered away for protection. All was now intense excitement and expectation, but some fifteen or twenty minutes elapsed before the explosion occurred. After the expiration of nearly 20 minutes (17 I counted), the charge was discharged- not making much of a report, but effectually lifting the whole mass of rock (from side to side of the knoll) several feet, for a few moments, and then again sunk down, but thoroughly broken and rent to pieces. If Mr Symonds did not include in his programme the toppling over of the mass of rock, he may be congratulated on having attained entire success. He had a number of oak poles threaded with chains placed on the top of the rock, in a line with the subterranean passage to the chamber containing the charge of powder, and these, when the explosion lifted up the rock, looked like a piece of net-work, from the place I occupied. As soon as the discharged had effected its work a hearty shout of hurrah was raised, but was not continued as most of the people immediately left the hill to hasten to the quarry. I was among some of the first arrivals, but instead of going down the road, in front of the quarry, I followed a few others up the bank, or outer lip of the quarry, thus getting a full view by looking down into it. As soon as we could scramble up the steep and look over, we saw men fallen and falling in the midst of the dense fire-damp or fumes of powder

smoke. They fell like men shot. On coming in contact with the dense fumes there was first a jerk or jump of the body, then a contortion or twist of it, and it immediately dropped. The whole was almost the work of a moment. It was a distressing scene, but noble and heroic were those at hand, as men readily ventured their own lives to try and rescue the fallen; and two of the deceased are said to have perished in thus attempting to save others. Eight are said to have fallen under the destroying fumes, but four of them were resuscitated by the kind and persevering efforts of the volunteers, who took them in hand, and everything possible under the circumstances which could be done for others was done; indeed it was not till more than half-past eight that the remedies were discontinued. They consisted for the most part in the application of cold water, artificial respiration, and trusting the head into a hole in the earth, or of heaping turf over it. But all remedies in the case of the four referred to were without avail; in fact, there is reason to believe that there was no chance with them from the first, as it is believed they were dead already. The weeping of women, and the shrieks of relatives, as the real facts became known, and the dead were recognised were truly distressing to hear. The names of the four deceased are Thomas Goode, of Mitcheldean; Hiram Baylis and John Griffiths, both of the Plump; and William Tomlins, of the Meend, Cinderford. I understand that most, if not all, were married men, and leave families. It may not be out of place to notice a report in circulation, namely, that the firing of cannon so distinctly heard during the efforts for resuscitating the unfortunate victims at Plump Hill was done for the purpose of raising the dead body of the young man drowned in the Severn, near Newnham on the afternoon of the same day. The firing was in rapid succession, and continued for some time. The body was afterwards recovered.

THE INQUEST

Mr. M. F. Carter, Coroner, held an inquest on Wednesday afternoon at the Police Station, Mitcheldean, on the bodies of the four men killed. The jury having viewed the bodies, which lay at four cottages, a number of witnesses were called. The following is a summary of the evidence:-

Aaron Symonds said he lived at Plump Hill, East Dean, and had for many years been the owner of an extensive limestone quarry. Being desirous to displace a quantity of the rock, he drove a “heading” 13 yards in length, into the rock, and then turned the direction of the heading so as to form a curve or angle, and then continued the cutting a distance of 6 ½ feet in a downward direction. In that chamber he placed 19 cwt of powder, and then attached to it a fuse of sufficient length to burn 15 minutes. He then”tamped” the chamber and filled in the cavities with limestone and fine sand. In the performance of this operation he acted under the experienced direction of a Mr Briggs, of Clythro, in Lancashire, who had exploded three tons of powder at a blast, and a Mr Kirby, who had used large

quantities of powder at the Dover cliffs, and who was present during this experiment. The depth of rock above the chamber was thirteen yards, and he expected to displace twenty tons of stone. More than this was raised, but not to such an extent as he had anticipated. After firing the fuse, the explosion took place in 14 ½ minutes, and not a stone was hurled over the quarry. Directly after the explosion, Griffiths, one of the deceased men who fired the fuse, ran forward to see the result, and fell down dead from the inhalation of sulphuric gas. Neither of the deceased men had any right to enter the quarry, and they were at their own risk. By the direct action of the explosion no damage was done to either life or property.

Thomas Jenkins, another witness, who went into the quarry with one of the deceased men, said when he advanced there was no gas, but he observed some gas shoot from beneath the rock. He became senseless, and, running away, fell a few yards from Griffiths.

Thomas Wood, a policeman, gave evidence to the effect that he was stationed on the hill to protect the road, and after the charge was fired he went forward and saw the four deceased men down. With some immediate aid the body of one of the deceased men was picked up in a lifeless state, but before carrying it a yard or two they all fell together, and he (witness) was rescued. Witness added that he saw Griffiths, one of the deceased men, fall as though he had been shot down.

Egbert George Chate, an assistant-surgeon at Mitcheldean, who was present at the explosion, said that on going to Griffiths, he found him dead. There was at that time a large layer of gas covering an area of 20 feet and four feet in depth, which appeared to come from a fissure in the rock below where the powder was placed. He considered that the men died from the effects of the gas which was generated contemporaneously with the explosion of the gunpowder, and which consisted of nitrogen, carbonic acid and sulphuric potassium, which was sufficient to cause instant death. One of the men, named Tomlins, was not dead when rescued, and restoratives were applied, viz, a hole was cut in the earth, and he was placed in apposition, as was the custom in the Forest after an explosion, to inhale the fresh earth. He, however, quickly died.

The Coroner, in addressing the jury, exonerated Symonds from any blame, and submitted to the jury that he had exercised ever precaution in his power, when the jury found that the deceased men died from the effects of obnoxious gas after the explosion in blasting rock at Plump Hill.