

XIX.—COAL-MINING IN OLD GATESHEAD.
EXPLOSION IN “THE STONY FLATT.”

BY JAMES CLEPHAN.

[Read February 24th, 1886.]

In the affectionate *Memoir of the Rev. John Hodgson*, historian of Northumberland, written by the Rev. Dr. Raine, author of the *History of North Durham*, the Felling explosion, which swept away upwards of ninety lives by a sudden blast of the mine, occupies appropriately a considerable number of pages. The catastrophe had happened during Mr. Hodgson's incumbency of Jarrow with Heworth, and found, in the faithful friend and pastor, one whose kindness and energy were equal to the occasion. “In the month of May, in the year 1812, an explosion,” says the biographer, “took place of so dreadful a nature as to surpass in its awful consequences, with perhaps only one exception, any calamity of the kind which had previously occurred either in his own parish or in the whole mining district of the North of England.”

Of the “one exception” to which Dr. Raine alludes, he gathers a note from Mr. Hodgson's MS. folio of local words, under the word *Cramer*, a tinker or mender of broken china, etc.:—“Itinerant crammers formerly lodged in summer at Cramer Dykes, near the head of Gateshead, where there was a great colliery, in which above a hundred persons were killed by an explosion in the year 1700.”

In preceding years there had been occasional mining fatalities in the parish; as, for instance, in October, 1621, when, among the burials of St. Mary's, Gateshead, we read of “Richard Backas, burn'd in a pit;” and in February, 1692, “Michael Laurin, slain in a pit.” Later on, in October, 1705, the instructive church register has a tragic recital of loss of life by a colliery explosion, which fell under the eye

of the writer of these pages far on to a generation ago, and was given to the columns of the *Newcastle Chronicle* after its century and a half of repose in the safe keeping of St. Mary's. Time-honoured is now its date, and commends the sad tale of other days, which so well has been preserved, to suitable reception in the *Archæologia Æliana*. The patient recorder traces the burials through a succession of October days, from the 4th to the 13th, accompanying the mournful narrative with the words, "These were slain in a coal-pitt in the Stony Flatt which did fire," the total number being 31.

October 4.—Cuthbert Richinson, Michael Richinson, Ralph Richinson, brothers; William Robinson, John Liddel; John Broune, Clement Broune, William Broune, brothers; Robert, son to Clement Broune. "Blown up the pitt," John, son of John Broune, Adam Thompson, Joseph Jackson; Abigail, daughter to Joseph Jackson; James Hastings, overman; Michael Walker, his servant.

5.—Leonard Jordan, John Green, John Distanis, Richard Fletcher, John Hall, William Maine, Thomas Riddel, Thomas Huggison.

6.—Bryan Thornton, Michael Thompson, Robert Cooke, Matthew Hastings, overman, son to John Hastings.

7.—John Sayers.

10.—Edward Jordan, John Todd.

13.—Thomas Ridsdall.

Three brothers of one family perished—three of another. Three fathers with sons: a father with his daughter. Such are some of the facts as they appear in the register; and they may assist the reader in realizing, after the lapse of nine score years, the prolonged Gateshead agony of the reign of Queen Anne. It had one feature of aggravation now absent from our colliery explosions. Not men alone, but also women, were then employed as miners; and amongst those who were "blown up the pitt" in 1705, was "Abigail, daughter to Joseph Jackson." It was not, indeed, until the year 1842, that the employment of women in our mines was rendered illegal by Act of Parliament. The author of *The Pitman's Pay*, Alderman Thomas Wilson, of Fell House, Gateshead, refers, in a note to the preface of his edition of 1843, to the time when "it was customary to send girls down the coal-pits." "That disgraceful practice," he states, "ceased in this neighbourhood nearly sixty years ago. The custom was more pre-

valent on the Wear than on the Tyne. Here, again, has 'the march of intellect,' which, in the opinion of many, will bring a 'creep' upon society, superseded 'the wisdom of our ancestors,' and rescued 'the pitman's daughter' from the debasing slavery of descending into a coal-pit."

The "Stony Flatt," the scene of the disaster of 1705, was a portion of the table-land on the east of Bensham. It was then unenclosed, but Union Lane runs over the area, and it extended across the space of the field fronting Normanby Terrace in the memory of Gatesiders yet young. In this part of the parish of St. Mary, coals were brought to the surface from depths ranging between about twenty or thirty and fifty or sixty feet; and in our own century the remains of pit-shafts and coal-workings have been discovered in the course of sewerage and other operations. The spade, that friend of the antiquary, lets in the light upon the footprints of generations that are gone. Even the natural gravity of the earth will sometimes give way, here as elsewhere, and courteously invite the curious and observant eye to glimpses of what has been.