

The method of working the mine is by the system generally followed in mines in this Dominion, known as the "bord-and-pillar system," but in one essential feature the mode of operations in this mine differs from that followed in any other mine in the country. It is usual in coal-mines where the bord-and-pillar system is adopted to remove the pillars when the seam of coal in that section of the mine has become exhausted, and the standing columns of coal are no longer required to support the superincumbent strata. In Ralph's Mine it is impracticable at present to follow this course, for any collapse of the earth due to the removal of the pillars would involve the almost certain consequence of the waters of the Waikato River or of the Wahi Lake finding their way into the mine, to the great peril of all persons employed therein and the eventual destruction of the property. As a result of these circumstances there is a considerable portion of the mine in which no further operations can be carried on, but which remains in all other respects precisely in the same conditions as regards the existing bords-and-pillars as those "districts" in which operations are actually in progress. This portion of the mine is known as the "old workings," and is so designated by witnesses, and will as such be referred to in this report. It is important to keep in mind the peculiar feature of the Huntly mines just noted, because it has a direct and important bearing on the subject-matter of this inquiry.

On Saturday, the 12th September last, a very violent explosion took place in Ralph's Mine whereby forty-three men lost their lives. The manager, Mr. Fletcher, was not in charge of the mine at the time, having been incapacitated by illness for a week or more, and the deputy manager, Mr. William Gowans, a certificated mine-manager, was in charge. From the evidence it appears that the day of the occurrence was what is called an "off day" in the mine. It was the day following the usual fortnightly pay-day, and it is not the custom of the miners to engage in the ordinary work of the mine on such days; but it is usual for a limited number of workmen to be employed on casual works of a necessary character for facilitating the working, or providing for the security of the mine. It is not disclosed by the evidence for what purpose the majority of the men whose bodies were found in the mine after the explosion went there, but it is conclusively established that a party consisting of five or six men was instructed by Deputy Smith, on the preceding Friday evening, to proceed on the Saturday morning (the 12th) to section 5 of the mine, in the old workings, for the purpose of lifting and removing iron rails which had on the cessation of work been left lying in some of the disused bords.

There are two ways by which the old workings can be reached from the shaft—first, by the travelling-road for a distance of 50 chains, thence by bords a further distance of about 10 chains (bord No. 6 of section 5 is open at the northern end, but the entrance is blocked by a door); secondly, the old workings can be reached by a more roundabout route, about 70 chains in length, by way of the little dip, south-east of the shaft, entering section No. 5 at the south end.

There is no direct evidence as to the route taken by the workmen in going for these rails, except with respect to the horse-driver Brownlie and two young men whom he took to accompany him. These, according to Brownlie's evidence, went the longer way round, by the little dip. The reason for this he explains by saying that he had to take a horse with him to bring out the rails, and that the opening through the door above referred to was not sufficiently large to admit of the passage of the horse. He says that from what Deputy Smith told him he expected the other men to go round by the travelling-way, and after passing through the door at No. 6 bord of section 5 (old workings) to meet him at the place where the rails were to be found. Before he arrived at the place appointed the explosion occurred, and all the men he was to meet there were, without exception, killed. Considerable doubt has been expressed as to the direction taken by the party who were proceeding to the place where the rails were lying, but after careful consideration of the facts and probabilities we have no doubt that they went by way of the travelling-road and entered No. 6 bord by the door previously mentioned. This was the shortest and easiest route, and no special reason has been shown why they should have gone by the other.

From the position in which Martin's body was found he would appear to have been the first man to pass through the door. This door was not secured by any lock or other protective fastening.