

'Markham Colliery Pit Disaster 1938' given by Paul Murray 7th October, 2021.

Paul introduced his talk by referencing the recent purchase of a life-saving medal group which was outside of his usual collecting and, therefore, research habits! The place referred to in the title was specifically a pit known as Number 1 colliery at Markham near Chesterfield owned by the 'Staveley Coal and Iron Company'. Coal had been mined there since 1882.

Regular mining in the 'black shale seam' [where the explosion had happened] had started there in 1925. It was approximately 690 yards underground and was the deepest seam at the colliery.

It had only two ventilation shafts. Paul showed contemporary photos of the Markham site from the 1920's.

The Explosion:

On 10.5.1938, at about 05.45hrs, the miners' shifts were about to change. It is thought [but not known for certain] that a coal tub or tubs had worked loose, went out of control and derailed creating a large quantity of coaldust in the air.



Pictured above: A 'coal tub' of the era.

Damage to an electrical cable then caused an electrical spark which ignited the dust to cause an underground explosion and produce large amounts of carbon monoxide ['CO']. Of the 171 who were working, 79 were killed and 38 injured, making it the Derbyshire coalfield's worst ever disaster. About twelve minutes before the explosion, some survivor eye witness accounts report 'hearing a noise like a heavy bump' others seeing a cloud of dust and another described 'seeing a blue wave'. Many described feeling a rush of air and dust sufficient to knock them down rendering many unconscious. All those who died were as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning. Others were injured through trauma and burns.

Paul showed an aerial photo of the pit site with numerous ambulances and other photos of distraught families which had been taken on the following day.

Local collieries all contributed their rescue services. At Chesterfield Rescue Station, and only twenty-four minutes later, seven rescuers had left for the Markham Pit. By 06.37hrs, they were descending the lift shaft. Other rescue teams were at Markham within the hour. These teams were not large, usually between 7 and 9 men, with appropriate equipment.



Pictured above: A team of rescuers at Markham colliery.

At 06.40hrs, the Chesterfield and Mansfield stations' teams and superintendents met with Corps Superintendent Mr R. Ringham and Mr W. Fry and Bolsover Chief Superintendent Dr J.B. McKay at Markham. They were all able to assist with the immediate treatment of the unconscious with 'Carbogen' [this substance generated a gas mixture containing approximately 70% oxygen and 30% carbon dioxide].

As they proceeded further into the pit, thirty-five men were immediately treated who hadn't been overcome with CO poisoning. It is thought they were further away from the explosion. These rescuers were using just 'traditional' canaries to check for dangerous gases in the pit.

The rescuers found active fires, smoke and bodies.

Dr McKay, Chief Surgeon of the Bolsover Ambulance Division, gave a detailed description of his collapse which was reported in the Derbyshire Times whilst Dr McKay was still in his hospital bed – On descending to the bottom of the lift shaft, initial gas conditions seemed in 'fairly decent order'. He met with Mr Ringham and Mr Fry and set about reviving the nearest casualties. Dr McKay had walked further into the mine passing dead bodies but hadn't realised his colleagues weren't following. He then felt 'giddy all of a sudden', staggered, collapsed on his hands and knees and thought he shouted out. He didn't remember any more until after being admitted to hospital.

In another reported conversation reported in the Press, he recalls more as when being rescued, he is told 'Hey Doc, your canary's dead...'

Seventy-nine had died in the tragedy. All the funerals were arranged for the same day Saturday, 14th May, 1938 at various localities. There was much community grieving at the scale of loss of life particularly as some families had experienced multiple loss [for example Herbert Hargreaves' father and son both killed] and in another family, two sons perished. Overall, 69 women were widowed and 103 children were made fatherless. Recent photographs were shown of the graves at local cemeteries some of which had not been well maintained quite possibly because of the financial impact on the victims' families.

Territorial Army members Lance Sergeant Frost and Lance Corporal Hardy who were in the anti-aircraft battery of the Sherwood Foresters both had military funerals as did ex-servicemen George Jackson and Ambrose Grainger with buglers of the Oxcroft Ambulance Division sounding the Last Post and Reveille.

In Barlborough, there was a decision to bury ten of the eleven casualties in one grave.

The award of the St John Ambulance Brigade Medal in gold for life saving in is believed to be the first awarded for twenty years. It was awarded to Dr John Benjamin McKay for his personal bravery in the cause of humanity – Paul specifically thanked Roger Willoughby for providing the full citation which was read out:

‘On the 10th May,1938, a serious accident involving heavy loss of life occurred at the Markham Colliery of the Staveley Coal and Iron Company. Divisional Surgeon John McKay of the Bolsover Division [of the St John’s Ambulance brigade] was summoned to the colliery at 06.30am, arrived at 06.40am. He at once descended the shaft and found deputies administering carbogen to unconscious men; taking over control, he organised artificial respiration squads and proceeded, accompanied by a man with a stretcher, into the main return airway where he came across many unconscious and dead men. He examined all the cases and separated the dead from the living. He at once put the artificial respiration squads in charge of the latter; some of them responded sufficiently to be ultimately resuscitated by carbogen. Whilst working on a case, he was overcome by the fumes and collapsed. He was at that moment waiting for the arrival of stretcher parties some of whom themselves had become casualties. Whilst still unconscious, he was taken by a stretcher party to the surface ambulance room where he was partially revived but kept relapsing into unconsciousness. He was removed to the Chesterfield Hospital where he was brought back to consciousness. During periods of semiconsciousness in the ambulance room, he made repeated requests to be sent down the mine again. Dr McKay was one of the last men to be brought out of the pit alive and he owes his life to the fact that he was trodden on by a stretcher squad carrying a corpse causing him to utter a groan whereupon the squad removed the corpse from the stretcher and brought out Dr McKay instead. Dr McKay was three days in Chesterfield Hospital and three days in bed at his home. Dr McKay is not a colliery official and, therefore, his duty did not require him to go underground into very grave danger. He went voluntarily, in spite of some opposition, knowing the risk, in the expectation that his medical knowledge and skill would be of service to those in great need. In this respect, he stands out alone amongst the many other brave men who worked so heroically after the disaster and who accepted the risk in the phase of life as a mineworker’.

The Life Saving Medal of the Order of St John [LSM] in hall-marked gold is indeed a rare medal.



Photos above left and centre: Obverse and reverse of the St John of Jerusalem Life-saving award in gold presented to Dr J.B. McKay. **Image right:** Divisional Surgeon J.B McKay.

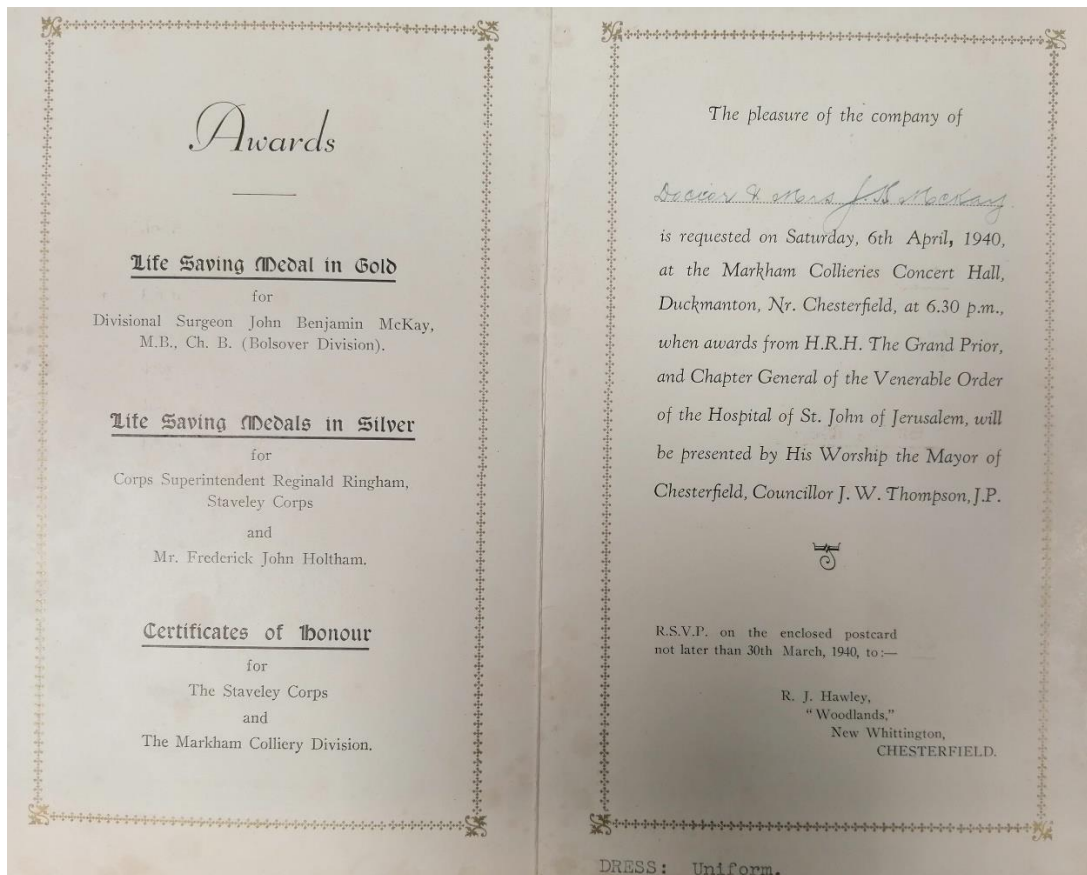


Above photo: Dr J.B.McKay's other medals: left to right: Defence Medal, Queen's Coronation medal and 3 clasp Service Medal of the Order of St John of Jerusalem. [See next images for Dr McKay's awards].



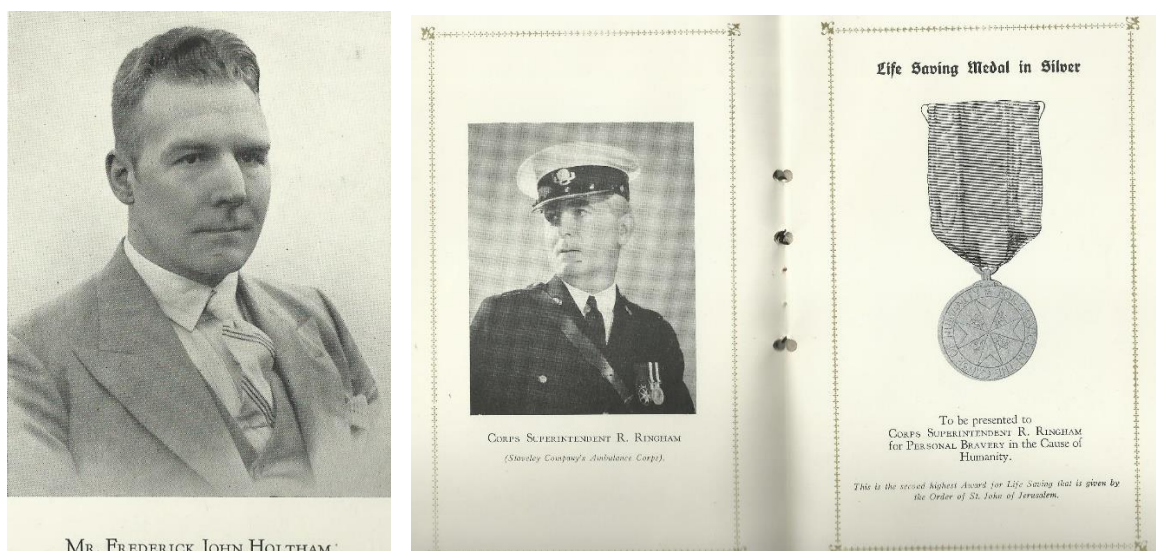
Above image: The Order of the Officer of St John of Jerusalem.

Above right: The Commander Badge of the order of St John of Jerusalem.



Above: Award ceremony invitation for 6th April, 1940 for Dr and Mrs McKay. 'Dress: Uniform'.

Two others received the LSM award in silver: This is the second highest award for life saving awarded by the Order of St John of Jerusalem – The recipients were Corps Superintendent R. Ringham of the Staveley Ambulance Division and Mr Frederick John Holtham.



Above left: Mr Frederick John Holtham was awarded the St John of Jerusalem LSM in silver.

Above right: Superintendent R. Ringham was also awarded the St John of Jerusalem LSM in silver – these images from the award programme.

Superintendent Ringham, in the course of his duties, partially collapsed three times but refused to relinquish his command over the rescue parties. Mr Holtham was with the shift that had just finished work but remained below long before the rescue brigades with their protective equipment arrived and could take over. During this period, many members of the shift lost their lives. Mr Holtham was conspicuous in this work in the face of a possible second explosion and continued to work for many hours before having to give up as a result of physical exhaustion.

General Certificates of Honour were presented to the Staveley and Markham Divisions for their heroic effort above and below ground in rescuing the casualties and removing the dead.

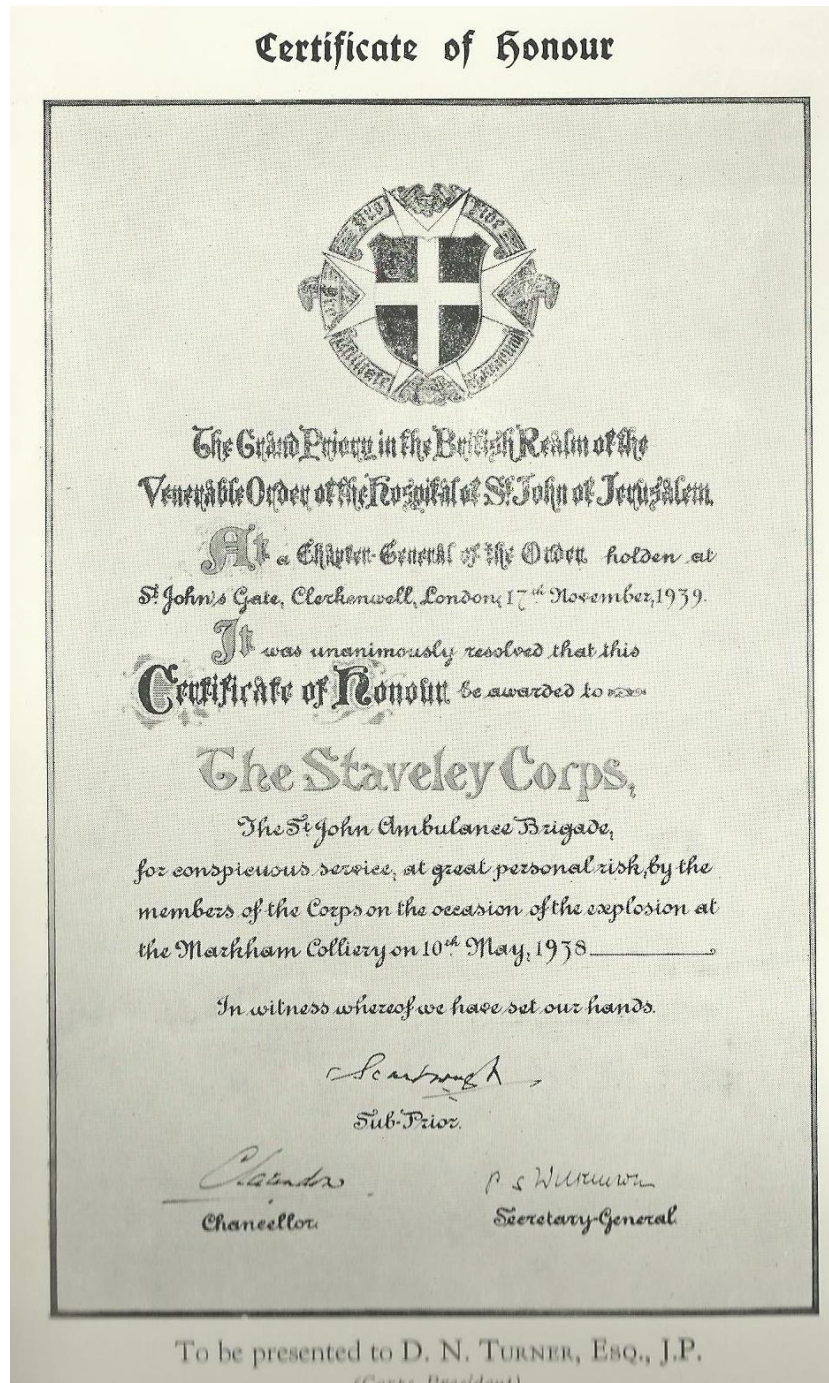
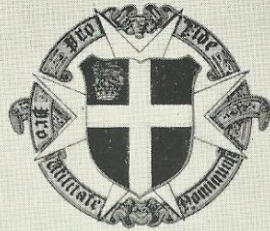


Image above: Certificate of Honour presented to Staveley Corps the St John Ambulance Corps.

Certificate of Honour



The Grand Priory in the British Realm of the
Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem.

At a Chapter General of the Order, holden at
St John's Gate, Clerkenwell, London, 17th November, 1939.

It was unanimously resolved that this
Certificate of Honour be awarded to

The Markham Colliery Ambulance Div.

The St John Ambulance Brigade,
for conspicuous service, at great personal risk, by the
members of the Division on the occasion of the explosion
at the Markham Colliery on 10th May, 1938.

In witness whereof we have set our hands.

Sub Prior
Sub. Prior.

Chancellor
Chancellor.

Secretary-General
Secretary-General.

To be presented to
DIVISIONAL SUPERINTENDENT W. Fry

Above image: Certificate of Honour presented to the Markham Colliery Ambulance Division.

The awards were announced 17.11.1939 and were presented at a ceremony by the Mayor of Chesterfield on 6.4.1940.

Although no photos were available from the presentation, other photographs of the ambulance division were shown one of which showed a Victoria Cross [VC] winner.

All the funeral expenses were met by the 'Staveley Coal and Iron Company'.

Dr McKay was appointed Officer of the Order of St John of Jerusalem on 22.6.1945 and became Commander of the Order of St John of Jerusalem 12.1.1954.

Dr McKay died 12.3.1958 – his obituary and other career details were read out. McKay is buried at Bolsover – His wife Marian was a Superintendent of the Order of St John of Jerusalem. Her Service medal of the Order of St John of Jerusalem was also shown.



Above left: Obituary photo of Dr J.M. McKay.

Above right: Gravestone of Dr McKay and his wife Marian at Bolsover.

Other obituaries from the disaster were found in local newspapers. Specifically discussed was George Henry Jackson, aged 42 years, a Military Medal [MM] winner and local man from Clowne. Paul had previously purchased Jackson's Victory medal [VM] from an auction site in South Africa some twelve years earlier. After messaging in the BMF [British Medal Forum], Paul had access to a photo of George Henry Jackson. A photograph of his headstone in Clowne cemetery was shown. Shortly after, Paul then received a serendipitous message advising that Jackson's British War Medal [BWM] and 1914-15 Star were at that moment for sale on Ebay!! The trio is now reunited.



Above left: Trio [reunited!] to 20268 G.H. Jackson [Notts and Derby Regiment] a casualty of the explosion.

Above right: Reverse of 1914-15 showing naming to G.H. Jackson.

Jackson had enlisted in the Sherwood Foresters early in WWI. He had received a commendation card from his Commanding Officer presumably for his actions during a heavy bombardment near Ypres 10-16 February, 1916. [The regimental war diaries confirm this bombardment]. He had been awarded the Military Medal [MM] for multiple gallant acts as a stretcher bearer [but note the institution of the MM was not until 25th March, 1916].

Perhaps Jackson's MM will be the next re-unite?!

A modern photo of Markham Colliery was shown from 1979. Sadly, there were two other pit disasters there in 1937 [six casualties] and most recently in 1973 when 19 fatalities occurred after a failure in a lift cable.

Paul showed contemporary photos of the site now which has been converted into a memorial 'heritage trail'. Miners are represented by steel plates in silver [those going to work] and black [for those leaving work. Local firms have sponsored named discs for those killed in local pit disasters.

A short 'Pathe' newsreel of the incident in 1938 was shown.

Sales statistics of life saving medals 1990-2020 from Dix, Noonan and Webb [DNW] indicate only limited numbers have been sold – 1 in gold, 4 in silver and 6 in bronze. Note the gold medal was only issued from 1907 onwards.

Members' comments and Q and A:

With McKay's obituary newspaper article, there is a photo of McKay wearing his award and medals left chest but the gold life-saving award was not visible. However, another member advised the explanation which was that life-saving awards would be worn on the right breast which, in this instance, was mostly omitted or obscured in the image.

The danger of CO from incomplete combustion of carbon remains a significant hazard today either from poorly maintained gas appliances and/or in poorly ventilated spaces. CO is dubbed the 'silent killer' as it is an odourless and colourless gas.

President Roger Bragger praised our speaker tonight for a detailed, stimulating and thought-provoking talk which had highlighted the extraordinary courage and selfless actions of the rescue parties.

Typed 17-25.11.2021.

Chris Davies

BMS Secretary.

I would like to thank Paul Murray for use of some of his photo's, for permission for me to photograph the medals and to post the meeting notes in the public domain on the BMS Website. With my usual apologies for typos and any errors.