

# Tragic death at Coniston Coppermines

Jeff Wilkinson ©

People who have read Eric Holland's excellent book: **Coniston Copper** will be aware of the name Thomas Millican. It was reported in the book that he suffered a terrible accident in 1849. He was the man responsible for lubricating a waterwheel and it was said that "he was caught by the arm and pulled into the waterwheel, only his watch and thumb later being found!"

There is no doubt that he existed but no one knew for certain if this accident actually happened and certainly no one knew how exaggerated the story has become over the years as no records were thought to exist.

**BUT THEY DO** and what a fascinating account it gives.

What was to become known as Millican's Wheel is also known as the New Engine Shaft Wheel. It is situated in Red Dell just beyond the fenced off area where the Bonsor Vein outcrops at the surface. The wheel served both the West End of the fenced off area - New Engine Shaft and the Thriddle Shaft. From around the 1830's it was powered by a 30<sup>ft</sup> diameter waterwheel, which was later to be altered to 40<sup>ft</sup> wheel.

The following article was published in the **SOULBY'S ULVERSTON ADVERTISER** on August 29<sup>th</sup> in the year 1850.

It is reproduced here in full, exactly as it was written.

## **SOULBY'S ULVERSTON ADVERTISER**

### **SHOCKING ACCIDENT AT CONISTON MINES.**

On Wednesday the 21<sup>st</sup> inst., a most distressing accident (unparalleled we are happy to say, in the accidents of these mines.) occurred at the above place, attended with loss of life, in the most shocking manner to one of the workmen, Thos. Millican, senr., aged 61 years. The deceased it appears on the day mentioned, proceeded to his usual employment at the works, an occupation in which he had been engaged for upwards of 13 years past, viz., attending the engine which draws the water and Ore out of the mine; and his first job in the morning in question was to pump out the water, and as usual to stop the pumps on a signal being given him by the person in care of them. When the water was all drawn out, the signal to stop was repeatedly given but not being attended to, the pump master proceeded to the engine house to ascertain the cause, but poor Millican could nowhere be seen, and the engine was immediately stopped, when he was discovered at the bottom of the wheel, in the inside, his body literally torn to pieces, and divested of every thread of clothing. The head of the unfortunate man was found completely severed at the outside of the wheel pit, and his bowels after having been dashed out, were, with other portions of the body, carried down the watercourse. We will not however, further pursue our revolting description, suffice to say that the mutilated remains were carefully collected, and deposited in a coffin at the mines to await a Coroner's Inquest, which was held on the following day, and the interment took place on Friday. As the wheel (which is 30feet high) is placed upon the mountain side above the works, and which was tended by himself alone, it is not known how he got in, but it is thought that he was in the act of greasing the axle, which it was necessary to do daily, and that owing to the slipperiness of the ground, near the pit, from the constant splashing of water from the wheel, he had slipped or stumbled, and fallen in. The wheel, was revolving at a most rapid rate, and deceased must have been immediately pierced by the almost innumerable screw bolts that project through the

**casing to the inside, like so many iron teeth, in the midst and upon which, as in an immense cilinder he had been hurled round and round upon them.**

So there it is, in graphic detail, Millican DID have a most horrific accident. From now on it can be told as fact. This was such a major incident that the tale has survived over 150 years and is not one that has become grossly exaggerated. One can only speculate on the impact this had on the tightly knit community, even one used to the regular dangers of working in such a hostile environment.

Delving into the Census has revealed further information about Thomas Millican and his family. A true mining family. Even the youngest that was only 12 years old worked in the mines!

**1841 CENSUS** - living at Old Office.

MILLICAN	Thomas	aged 50yrs.	copper miner	not born Coniston
MILLICAN	Mary	aged 50yrs.		ditto all
MILLICAN	John	aged 25yrs.	copper miner	
MILLICAN	Thomas	aged 20yrs.	copper miner	
MILLICAN	Mark	aged 15yrs.	copper miner	
MILLICAN	Wesley	aged 12yrs.	copper miner	

In this census it would be fair to assume that the word annuitant suggested that Mary Millican was receiving payment for the loss of her husband in 1850. Also the two eldest sons, John and Thomas have moved on.

**1851 CENSUS** - living at Far End.

MILLICAN	Mary	Head	W63	annuitant	Cumb. Garrigill
MILLICAN	Mark	Son	U25	copper miner	ditto
MILLICAN	Wesley	Son	U22	copper miner	ditto
FISHER	Martha	Lodger	U24	servant at mining office	Isle of Man

This article could not have happened without information provided by Maureen Fleming of Coniston. Maureen was on a local history course at Broughton in Furness and received a handout to accompany the course. The article relevant to the course was **not** the one about Millican, but luckily Maureen spotted it and being from Coniston realised how significant it was to the coppermines story. All that was then needed was someone who could pass it on to a wider audience of people interested in the mining history at Coniston, and here I am; Better late than never!

Tracing Thomas Millican's final resting-place has so far proved fruitless.