



222

222

**The Highly Emotive Edward Medal (Mines) in Bronze to Workman, Later Deputy, H. McKenzie, Who Helped With the Attempted Rescue of Miners Trapped by a Terrible Fire in the Wellington Pit, Whitehaven, 11.5.1910; Of the Original Shift of 143 Miners Only 7 Survived; McKenzie was Subsequently Killed Alongside 13 Other Miners in the Haig Pit Disaster, Whitehaven, 11.2.1928 - Their Bodies Have Never Been Recovered**

Edward Medal (Mines), E.VII.R., Bronze (Hugh McKenzie.), *nearly extremely fine*

£1,400-1,800

E.M. *London Gazette* 11.2.1911 Hugh McKenzie, Workman 'On account of conspicuous bravery in connection with the attempt made to rescue their fellow workmen at the Wellington Pit, Whitehaven, on the 11th of May, 1910.'

The original citation, *London Gazette* 22.7.1910, states: 'On the 11th May, 1910, a terrible fire occurred in the Wellington Pit, Whitehaven, at a point about 4,500 yards from the shafts. Various rescue parties, with great courage and self-devotion and at considerable risk, descended the mine and endeavoured to extinguish the fire and penetrate to the persons in the workings beyond the same. Thorne and Littlewood, fitted with breathing apparatus, reached within a distance of 150 yards of the fire, but were driven back by the great heat and effusion of gases. The others got to within about 300 yards of the fire, working in the smoke backing from the fire. It was found impossible to penetrate to the scene of the fire or to rescue any of the entombed miners. Had an explosion occurred - a by no means unlikely eventuality, seeing that the mine is a very gassy one - they would undoubtedly all have been killed. Special gallantry was shown by John Henry Thorne, to whom the Edward Medal of the First Class has already been awarded, and by James Littlewood.'

For this action John Henry Thorne and James Littlewood were awarded Edward Medals (Mines) in Silver (the award to Thorne being a Second Award bar); and 64 men, including McKenzie, were awarded Edward Medals (Mines) in Bronze, the greatest number of Edward Medals ever to be given for one incident. H.M. King George V presented all the medals at Buckingham Palace in two separate ceremonies, firstly in August 1910, and secondly, in the ceremony which included the award to Hugh McKenzie, in February 1911.

#### The Wellington Pit Disaster

'The first indication something was wrong reached the shaft top about eight o'clock on the evening of Wednesday, 11th May, 1910. An exploration party was dispatched down the shaft and news quickly spread around the town. A large party of police was almost immediately on the spot but there was no issue of keeping order - the huge crowds, which soon grew to thousands, stood quietly on the clear, starlit night. A terrible explosion involving a large loss of life was feared.

An entire shift of men, numbering 143, had entered the mine the previous evening. Only seven had managed to escape immediately after the explosion, leaving 136 men still unaccounted for.

Right through the night and all the next day, rescue parties were at work trying to reach the workings where the missing men were entombed, but it was extremely difficult, the atmosphere dense. Some of the timbering in the mine was on fire while the only means of ventilating the portion of the pit where the men were trapped was entirely cut off. At the pithead there were heart-rending scenes. Women, with children, in pain and anxiety waited for news of their loved ones. Many of them stayed at the pithead all night and the whole of the following day refusing to leave for rest or refreshment and a number collapsed, worn out by their vigil. As the day wore on and successive rescue parties reported the stupendous difficulties underground, hopes of saving the imprisoned men diminished and the distress of the crowd grew more acute. The demonstration of grief was extreme. Weeping women and children would not leave as it became

extremely doubtful any further lives would be saved. The mine was on fire, many fire extinguishers and other fire appliances had been sent to the scene. In Whitehaven itself business was at a standstill. The fishermen and dock labourers all volunteered any assistance they could render. And a large number of doctors and nurses had mustered waiting to give aid. The police were engaged keeping the crowd from surging on to the pit shaft.

Mr. J.B. Atkinson, H.M. Chief Inspector of Mines for the Northern District, arrived at four o'clock in the afternoon, accompanied by Mr. H.A. Abbott, Inspector of Mines for the North-Eastern District, and they were briefed on the situation. They both then descended the shaft to inspect the progress that had been made. The fire by now had taken hold at the friction gear. With the risk to the rescue teams and the possibility of a further explosion, Mr. Atkinson ordered the mine be cleared of all men. He stated it would be impossible for anyone to be alive on the other side of the fire and ordered every man to proceed to the surface. Some of the rescue party, concerned for trapped men, needed to be forcibly dragged away.

A conference was held at the pit top at nine o'clock that Thursday evening between the Inspectors and Colliery Officials. It was decided to wait until special rescue teams arrived from Armstrong Whitworth and Co. at Elswick, and The Sheffield Mining Company. The teams arrived around eleven o'clock that evening and proceeded to enter the shaft with their special breathing apparatus. The Sheffield men, John Thorne and James Littlewood, were well known in mining circles as the two most experienced men available. The party descended the shaft at 11:25pm, accompanied by the Inspectors, Colliery officials, and a party of the best miners that they could find. On reaching the bottom, they walked for just under three miles before stopping to set their equipment. Thorne and Littlewood then set off on their own in an attempt to pass the fire and get into the workings beyond, to check the air there. After battling ahead for 170 yards the smoke was so thick that they could not see their torches. Thorne, who led, with Littlewood a few steps behind, tripped over some fallen telegraph wires which were so hot they badly burned his legs. On reaching the brattice cloth, he put his hand around the side and described it "like putting your hand inside an oven". They could hear the crackling of the fire but could see nothing for the smoke. The heat was so intense that the soldered name plates on the helmets were melted and caused a blister on each of the men's faces. Reluctantly, they decided to turn back after twenty minutes, no longer able to stand the heat and fearing for another explosion. On arrival back at the shaft top, it was realised that nothing further could be done for the trapped men. Mr. Atkinson made the decision to build a two foot thick stopping in the main passageway in an attempt to starve the oxygen of fire. This was achieved by Friday morning.

On Friday morning a large congregation of around 3,000 miners assembled in the Market Place demanding to be allowed to continue the search for their trapped comrades. A

telegram had already been sent, by the miners, to the Home Secretary, the Rt. Hon. Winston Churchill, asking for such permission.

On Sunday morning, a party of seven entered the mine hoping to reach the seat of the fire by the return airway. About one and a half miles in, the doors separating the intake from the outtake were opened and four men entered with breathing apparatus. Mr. Steel, the Mine Manager; Mr. Blair, the Assistant Manager; Mr. Henry, the Under Manager; and John Thorne had travelled about 190 yards when their canary fell from its perch. Further on, their safety lamps went out. Undaunted, they continued over many falls until the heat was 85 degrees Fahrenheit and they could no longer see their electric lamps for the smoke. They had reached a point 500 yards beyond the stopping in the intake and within 400 yards of the fire. They reluctantly came to the decision that no one could make it past the fire and all beyond must be long since dead. It was decided to build another stopping in the return and a further stopping in the intake as the only possible course to put the fire out.' (*Whitehaven News*, 12-17.5.1910 refers).

The first of the bodies were recovered from the pit on the 27th September, and a mass funeral took place with an estimated 10,000 people attending. Many families had lost more than one family member, with the McAllister family losing seven members to the fire.

**Mr. Hugh McKenzie, E.M.**, born Whitehaven, 1879; awarded the Edward Medal for gallantry at the Wellington Pit Disaster; killed in an explosion at Haig Pit, Whitehaven, 11.2.1928 along with 13 others, their bodies to this day having never been recovered.

#### **The Haig Pit Disaster**

'On the 13th December, 1927, an explosion occurred at the Haig Pit, Whitehaven, causing the deaths of 2 workmen and 2 deputies. As a result of a fire caused by that explosion 2 inbye districts had to be sealed off. The whole pit remained idle for nearly two months, and as all indications pointed to the fire having been extinguished it was decided to attempt to recover the sealed area. On the 11th February, 1928, rescue men were sent forward to the place where a fire was known to have broken out in December. The rescue team returned and reported the fire out and the place cool, and brought back pieces of coke and charred timber. Further progress was made up to a little after midnight, when a series of explosions took place, one of which was extremely violent, blowing out for about 100 yards the brick and cement stopping walls on the main intake. The rescue team and other persons stationed on the outbye side of the district managed to escape, but the 14 explorers actually in the district at the time perished. A gallant attempt was shortly afterwards made by a rescue party to penetrate the district, but owing to the main intake being completely blocked by falls, and the great risk of further explosion, it had to be abandoned and the area sealed off again. At the time of writing the seals have not been broken.' (1928 Mines Inspectors Annual Report refers).