

16th September, 1936.

*Written
18th Sept. 1935*MEMORANDUM:

As requested by the Honourable the Minister for Mines, I have to furnish a report upon the conditions of production, working, management, inspection and insurance at the various coal mines other than the three major collieries.

Fifteen collieries were inspected and complete details of the conditions obtaining on the occasion of each inspection are attached. These, generally, cover the matters under review.

PRODUCTION: A production graph is appended and this reveals that, during the past five years, the total output from coal mining activities, including the three major collieries, has declined 25,011 tons. Since 1930, there has been a marked increase in the number of small productive mines, particularly in the North-western part of the State, and the graph further discloses that, whilst the State production has receded 25,011 tons, the output from the major collieries has declined 38,150 tons, and that from the small mines has increased 13,139 tons.

The decline in the State production, the loss of trade to the major collieries, a decline in the number of employees at those collieries, and the consequent reaction upon the continuity of working days for members of the Coal Miners' Federation have caused much concern to the Federation, and this is to be anticipated especially when it is known that during the same period the small collieries have prospered on the productive conditions that have applied.

CONDITIONS OF WORKING:

The safety of operations or of the applied methods of working is frequently a matter of opinion, and opinions differ. As an expression of opinion, and without anticipating any future development of weakness, it is regarded that the applied methods at two collieries were not serving the best interests of safety. The conditions encountered at the remainder were not deemed immediately unsafe, although details of observed practices, in several collieries, might be promulgated for modification or improvement for a betterment of the conditions of working. Low-seam working is admittedly uncongenial but not necessarily unsafe.

Wheeling conditions, through ineffectual drainage and mean roadway formation, were definitely unpleasant in several collieries.

With two exceptions, the ventilation is naturally controlled, and the conditions are necessarily variable. Records have established a marked absence of controlled air circulation and of deliberate measures to attain a maximum effect from the quantity of air available for ventilation, with the result that flame-extinction tests revealed a deficiency in the quality of the air in the productive places of eleven collieries. In several instances it was definitely impossible to register the quantity of air intaking for ventilating purposes, as the velocity of the air currents was insufficient to cycle the anemometer. Mine temperatures were not excessive and no personal discomfort should accrue therefrom.

It is not intended to present any contentions upon conditions which may occur on other occasions, but, on the occasion of these investigations, the quality of the air and the quantity circulating were frequently in conflict with the standards prescribed by the provisions of the Mines and Works Regulation Act, and it is not desirable that Miners should endure or be permitted to endure conditions that were observed in several of the mines.

The Act provides for second-exits at prescribed distances from principal entrances and of minimum sectional areas, but there was a pronounced absence of adequate arrangements at several mines and, although difficulties may attend the maintenance of fixed minimum sectional areas in the case of low-seam workings, it is contrary to good practice to pursue productive operations without the establishment of adequate second-exits for emergency purposes.

In three instances only was any equipment provided or being provided for rendering first aid in case of accidents despite the legislation controlling such equipment where persons are employed underground.

Occasional irregularities were encountered in the storage and handling of explosives, qualifications of miners, and other details, but these are sufficiently covered by the observations recorded upon each colliery and recapitulations is unnecessary.

MANAGEMENT.

Except in one case, the registered colliery managers are either selected members of the parties operating as owners or are employees of the owners, and, where more than four persons are engaged each manager is the holder of a Permit entitling him to act in that capacity under the provisions of the Mines and Works Regulation Act.

The registered managers may be styled working managers and, in the majority of cases, they engage in coal-getting at the coal faces, similarly to other hewers.

The registered manager of the Stanhope Coal Mine does not work at the coal face as a hewer, but engages in other work in and about the colliery.

Generally it might be conceded that weekly inspections are made by the registered managers and inspections may be made daily, but there is no regular procedure in regard to pre-shift daily inspections, and, in some instances, no pre-shift daily inspection is made to conform with the provisions of General Rule 4. In those cases where the rule is observed, the inspection is made by the registered manager.

INSURANCE:

Co-operative parties and working-owners appear to be exempt from insurance for the purposes of the Workers' Compensation Act, but instances were encountered where contract miners and employees on wages are not insured for the purposes of that Act.

WAGES:

The rates of wages applying to members of the Coal Miners' Federation are for hewers 20/3 to 20/6 per shift, for wheelers 17/6 per shift, and where miners engage under the contract system the earnings must be made up to 19/6 per shift irrespective of the quantity of coal produced at contract rates.

There is a marked discrepancy between those rates and the rates paid on the earnings at the small collieries, where miners are paid from 10/- to 19/9 per shift, wheelers 9/- to 11/6 per shift, and where ^{contract} earnings are on a flat rate without make-up.

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GENERAL: A Permit issued under the provisions of the Mines and Works Regulations Act does not entitle an uncertificated person to act as manager of a colliery where 20 men are employed underground. The number to be employed underground is not to exceed 12 but the legislation, as phrased, may be construed to mean 12 persons on each of three shifts, making a total number of 36 underground employees.

As to the questions raised by the Honourable the Minister for Mines, it may be stated that it is not desirable that the working manager should be the sole judge of the safety of a mine and this is not the case under the provisions of the Mines and Works Regulation Act, which Act imposes a responsibility upon every person to use ordinary and reasonable precautions to ascertain that the place in which he works and the appliances he uses are not unsafe, and he shall not use anything or work in a place that is unsafe or apparently unsafe. There is also the question of inspections by Departmental Officers.

Working managers carry out inspection duties generally but the question raised by the Coal Miners' Federation appears to concern daily inspections of the colliery workings prior to the commencement of each shift, as prescribed by General Rule 4 of Part 3 of the Schedule to the Act, and it must be conceded that no special procedure is adopted in this regard at some of the small collieries.

During the depression period of about 1930 several small collieries, particularly in the North-western part of the State, were established by parties of otherwise unemployed persons as a means of livelihood. The Department has materially assisted operations by drilling to locate new areas of coal, by financially assisting developmental work and by the construction of roads to facilitate the transport of coal from the mines. In addition, surveys have been made and plans have been prepared of the colliery workings by a Departmental officer free of cost to the operators.

The major output of coal from the small collieries in the North-western area is purchased by the Goliath Portland Cement Company at a price based on the ash and moisture content. A typical sales list shows a variation of 18/6 to 20/- per ton. Kiln practices at the Cement Works have been built up on a fuel consumption of equal proportions of coals from the North-western and East Coast series, the ash content of the former being appreciably less than the latter. The price of both coals compares favourably at the Railton railhead.

In the majority of cases it could not be regarded that the methods of working were immediately unsafe but many of the other conditions attached to the working of collieries were observed to be below the standards prescribed by the provisions of the Act and it would appear that degrees of latitude have been allowed to enable these collieries to function. Current legislation might be enforced gradually to cumulatively eliminate the deficiencies, but gestures of rigid and instant enforcement of the legislation, the introduction of additional legislation for the control of conditions at coal mines, and the acceptance of the whole of the suggestions of the Coal Miners' Federation may incur the suspension of operations at several small collieries and thereby result in persons now engaged in operations becoming unemployed. Conversely, the decline in the demand for native coals, loss of trade to the major collieries, reduced employment, and enforced periods of idleness at those collieries must be conceded as having logically caused much concern to the Coal Miners' Federation. A critical position has developed and before venturing upon any aspects of administration or reconciliation, an expression of attitude from the Ministers concerned, upon the data revealed by this investigation would be of value. If deemed advisable, a conference between the Ministers and myself, or between the Ministers, representatives of the Coal Miner's Federation and myself would be more advantageous in clarifying the issues involved, several of which are Governmental rather than administrative.

(Signed) W. H. WILLIAMS.

Acting Chief Inspector of Mines.