

## THE LATE FATAL POWDER-MILL EXPLOSION.

### CORONERS' INQUEST.

Yesterday a jury was empanelled before Mr. W. Carter, the coroner for the eastern division of Surrey, at the Eight Bells Inn, Ewell, on the bodies of William Budgen and William Mitchell, who died in consequence of the injuries they received by the blowing up of a powder-mill at that place, belonging to Sir Henry Bridges, on which they were at work.

The jury having been sworn, they proceeded to view the bodies, which presented a most dreadful appearance. Not a feature was discernible, the faces of each presenting merely the appearance of a swelled and blackened mass of flesh.

The following evidence was adduced:—

Elizabeth Humphrey deposed that she was called upon on Wednesday last to attend upon the deceased William Budgen, who she understood had been injured by the blowing up of a powder-mill. Witness remained with him until his death on Friday morning at a quarter past five o'clock. The deceased was attended by Mr. Stilwell. He appeared to be sensible at intervals, but all he said was that he had been blown up and lost his money. This he said several times. He never gave any information as to how the explosion took place, or blamed any person as being the cause of it.

Mr. Charles Stilwell, surgeon, of Ewell, deposed that he was called to attend the deceased William Budgen. He first saw him at the place where the accident happened. He was supported by four men. Witness examined him, and directed him to be removed to that house where he afterwards made a more minute examination, and found that his hands, face, and arms, were very severely burnt. He was perfectly sensible. Witness asked him how the accident occurred, and he said he could not account for it; he and his father were in the act of putting an iron ring on the spindle of the meter wheel when the explosion took place.

The Coroner inquired in what state the father of the deceased was?

Mr. Stilwell replied that he was in a very dangerous state. He was not at present aware that his son was dead, and he had no doubt that if he were informed of the fact, or questioned upon the subject, it would kill him.

The Coroner said, that as this was the case, it would not be prudent to make any inquiries of him.

James Baker, a labourer employed upon the works, deposed that he had known William Mitchell, the other deceased person, and proved that the body the jury had viewed was that of that person.

Mr. Joseph Ward, another medical gentleman, proved that he was called on to see Mitchell after the accident, and described the injuries he had received. He was sensible, and witness asked him if he knew how the accident happened, and he said he did not. He was in such a state that if he had been aware the occurrence had taken place wilfully he would have told the particulars, and witness had no doubt he believed it to have arisen accidentally.

Henry Tiebener deposed that he was in the service of Sir Henry Bridges, and usually worked in the corning-house. The corning-house was a place where the powder was taken as a green charge, and sifted before it was put to the stove. The corning-house in question had not been made use of for six months before this time, and the works were undergoing repair, and the deceased, Budgen, and his father, who were millwrights, were repairing them. When the explosion took place witness was engaged on the premises in mending sieves. The first thing he heard was a sudden cracking noise, which was immediately followed by a loud explosion, and witness thought that he, and the house he was in, were lifted off the ground. He looked out and saw that the building where the deceased persons had been at work, was levelled with the ground, the walls had been forced down, and some portion of them carried a considerable distance. He immediately ran to the spot, and the first person he saw was the elder Budgen, pulling his clothes off. The clothes were on fire. Another of the men was calling out "For God's sake, help me;" he went on further into the building, and he then saw the deceased Mitchell, who was standing amongst the wheels, jammed in such a position that he could not get out. Witness assisted him out. He was very much burnt. He could stand. His clothes were on fire, and witness assisted in taking them off and carrying him home. Mitchell had on the usual powder dress. Witness afterwards saw the younger Budgen in the act of walking away from the building. He appeared to be burnt a good deal in the face and hands, and was out on the eye. He was afterwards conveyed to the Eight Bells, where he died. The two Budgens, on the evening before the accident happened, told him that they were going to put some iron hoops on the

shaft of the wheel. Witness heard them say they should be obliged to put the hoops on hot, and they had a fire outside the corning-house for the purpose of heating the hoops. The fire was made of coal on the ground, and he did not notice that there was anything to keep the fire together. In witness's opinion the fire was about twenty yards from the building, and it was nearest to the wall side of it. The other sides of the building were composed of wood. He believed the millwrights had put on three out of the four hoops that were to have been put on the wheels before the accident happened. Witness asked the elder Budgen if he could account for the accident, and he said he could not, unless it was by a scale falling from the iron hoop they were working upon, or else by the lightning. There was a storm in the neighbourhood about that time; he heard thunder, but did not notice lightning. There was some grain powder in the corning-house, but not so much as a hundred weight. There were two barrels which contained powder, but there was not more than enough to fill one barrel. There might have been a hundred weight altogether. There was some dust powder in this corning-house. Dust powder was the refuse, which required to be re-worked in the mill, but it was combustible. The witness, on being questioned by the Coroner, said there might have been as much as two hundred weight of this dust powder. The building in question had been up for about eight-and-forty years, but they did not work in it more than three months during the year. The process of corning the powder caused a great deal of dust which, of course, settled all over the place. The great extent of mischief had no doubt been occasioned by the corning powder. It was usual to leave powder in the corning-house, but generally it was removed to the magazine.

It was here explained to the Coroner and the Jury that some of the powder in the corning-house was in a finished state, but required to pass once more through the mill.

Examination continued: Had no reason to believe that the occurrence took place otherwise than accidentally. The deceased, Mitchell, had on his "black" dress, which was very inflammable, and if he was attending to the fire outside his clothes might have caught fire, and they would have burnt very rapidly, and might have thus occasioned the accident. Did not think that a scale from the hoop the deceased persons were working on would have ignited the powder.

Mr. Gardner, the foreman of Sir Henry Bridges, explained that iron, at a black heat, would not ignite gunpowder.

By the jury: Witness had no orders to remove the powder. He did not think there was any danger in allowing it to remain where it was.

A juror said he had been informed that the witness had received positive directions to remove the powder.

The witness denied that this was the case.

By the Coroner: An engine was placed near the spot to enable the millwrights to wet the premises for their own security. Witness cleared out the corning house to make it more secure before the men came. He swept up nearly two hundred weight of dust from the wall and the floor, and took all the pains he could to get out all he could, and he placed it in the tubs where it remained till the explosion took place. The millwrights made their fire when they pleased. The wind blew from a direction right into the building.

Mr. Gardner was then questioned on his belief as to the origin of the fire, and he expressed his opinion to be that it had been occasioned by lightning. He said that it might also have been occasioned by the fire that was used to heat the iron; but he considered it not at all probable that the hoops could have caused the mischief, because they must have been too cold at the time.

Mr. Lipscombe, the landlord of the Eight Bells, deposed that he carried some beer to the corning-house for the two Budgens and Mitchell just before the accident happened. The former were at work at the wheel. He observed a large fire, in which they were heating the hoops; and they told him that they could not put them on unless they were red hot, and witness remarked that he should have been afraid to use them in such a place. Since the accident the elder Budgen had told him that he was not aware there was any powder in the corning-house. He had not left the mill more than five minutes when the explosion took place. In his opinion the accident was occasioned by a spark from the fire.

This being the whole of the evidence, the Coroner briefly addressed the jury, who returned a verdict that "The deceased persons were burnt to death in a powder-mill, which had accidentally exploded."