

East Wheal Rose Disaster

On the morning of 9th July 1846 it was bright and sunny but at midday heavy clouds formed in the north-west and then gathered directly over East Wheal Rose. A tremendous thunderstorm began, lasting more than an hour and a half. Torrential rain fell on the mine and surrounding hills but, strangely there was no rain at all three miles away.

Not long after the beginning of the storm the whole surface of the mine was under water as a flood poured off the southern hills 'in broad and deep waves'. Captain Middleton organised 300 men to pile up earth around the collars of the shafts but the volume of water pouring down was so great, and the exit seawards through the Lappa Valley so narrow, that an ocean of water soon overwhelmed the area.

Torrents of water poured down the shafts: the first warning for the unfortunate miners below was when their candles were blown out by a tremendous gale. In utter darkness and surrounded by the roar of rushing water men and boys struggled to find a way out. There were several miraculous escapes and acts of heroism.

Captain Champion was overtaken by the water several times but somehow managed to climb the slippery ladders against the tremendous weight of down-rushing water. A timber-man, Samuel Bastion, went down into the mine to lie across a manhole, diverting the flow of water and saving eighteen lives. Another miner returned to the flooded levels in search of his son but neither of them came back.

The beam engines and all the hauling gear had been put to work in raising men to the surface, clinging to the kibbles and chains 'like strings of onions' and survivors were taken to the 'dry' where the mine doctor took care of the injured.

At the end of the day forty-three men and boys were still missing but four of them were brought up alive next morning. Thirty-nine had lost their lives leaving twenty-two widows and sixty fatherless children.

The lower levels of the mine were completely flooded. But, by November all the debris and water had been cleared and the mine was in full production again.

