

Heroism in the Coleorton Colliery

SEQUEL TO THE RECENT FATALITY

BRAVE MINER DECORATED BY
THE KING

ENTHUSIASTIC RECEPTION AT
COALVILLE

The King received at Buckingham Palace on Tuesday, a number of persons recommended to him for decoration with medals for bravery for saving or attempting to save life on land.

The prospective recipients of the decorations were driven to the Grand Hall of the Palace and conducted to the Throne Room, where the ceremony took place.

As each was presented, the Home Secretary read a brief account of the deed for which the recommendation was made. The King personally affixed the medals, shook hands with the recipients and spoke a few words of hearty recommendation.

Among the men who were honoured was William Birch, who was given the Edward Medal of the second class, for bravery during a fall at Coleorton No.3. Colliery (Bug & Wink) on December last, when at the risk of his own life, Birch endeavoured for some time to save a comrade named Charles Marshall, a youth of Ashby-De-La-Zouch.

Birch was commended at the inquest by Mr. Hepplewhite - H.M. Inspector, by the Coroner – Mr. H. J. Deane, and by the manager of the Coleorton Colliery, Mr. F. Tatham, who had taken a great interest in the case, and accompanied Birch to London on Tuesday.

An enthusiastic welcome awaited the hero when he arrived at Coalville by the 8 o'clock train on Tuesday night. A number of miners had arranged to have a band to play him to the Market Place, and thought it had not been made public. The news of this arrangement got out, and when the train steamed into the station, there was a crowd of three or four thousand people waiting in the street. In the crush, Birch got separated from Mr. Tatham and others who met him on the platform, and he appeared in the street alone. But he was wearing

the medal, which had been affixed to his coat by the King, and he was soon identified and escorted to the market place by the crowd, with the Coalville Town Band playing "see the conquering hero comes". Many a stalwart miner pressed through the crowd to give Birch a hearty handshake as the King had done some hours before, and Birch, who is a very unassuming man, took it all quietly.

Much curiosity was shown by the crowd in respect to the medal Birch was wearing, and there was much eagerness to get a glimpse of the same. It was a round shaped medal with a portrait of King Edward VII on one side, and figures representing one miner succouring another on the other side, with the word "Courage" above.

In the Market Place, a platform had been erected and this was mounted by Birch together with the miner's agent, Mr. L. Lovett, - Mr. T. Y. Hay, Mr. F. Tatham, Mr. F. Blow, Mr. Geo Brooks and Mr. Bollard.

Mr. Lovett said it was a proud day with them. As they all knew, Birch had been presented with a medal for trying to save the life of a comrade, and the circumstances showed that there was among miners, as among other classes, a certain amount of courage when it came to assisting anyone in distress. They were pleased that the King himself had placed this medal on Birch for the bravery he displayed in an accident at Coleorton Colliery, and they could say that they as Leicestershire miners were nearer the Crown that day than they had ever been before (applause). Narrating the circumstances leading up to that day's event, Mr. Lovett said that on the night shift of December 16th 1910, Birch was working in the Coleorton pit with a young man named Charles Marshall. They were removing timber, and had nearly finished the night's work when a fall of roof occurred and brought down two settings of timber. Both Marshall and Birch were knocked down. Marshall had a large stone on his legs and asked Birch to remove it. He tried to do so, but a second fall occurred, burying Marshall and also Birch up to his shoulders. Birch got free, and still worked away trying to liberate Marshall and would have succeeded in another minute or two, but a third fall occurred knocking Birch's light out. Another man came up with a light, and then a fourth fall occurred, completely burying Marshall, and they heard no more of him. It took forty minutes to get him out, and then he showed no sign of life. At the inquest, the Inspector and the Coroner commented on the plucky manner in which Birch tried to liberate his mate, and Birch's reply in simple language, was that he had never known anything like it before...." A poor lad begging to be set at liberty, and twice getting it all off but the last stone, and then for it to be of no use". The unfortunate youth was killed, but Birch could not have done more (applause). No doubt many of those present new something of pit work and they would know that when a fall had taken place and there was loose stone hanging above, there was real danger for anyone going under, but in spite of that, Birch had tried to extricate his comrade. The circumstances of Marshall's death, he said, were very sad, but it had its bright side, inasmuch as it showed what a man would do to save his fellow man. It was not the first time it had been done in mining, but he was glad that a Leicestershire man had received this recognition from the King for the first time (applause). There

was a bravery born of ignorance, but Birch knew of the great danger to which he was exposing himself, when he was doing his best to extricate his comrade. There were among miners many brave men. They knew that when explosions occurred or when there were rushes of water in the mine, there were always rescue parties willing to do what they could. He remembered the late Mr. Stokes, H. M. Inspector of Mines saying that when courage was wanted, give him a miner. And it was so. He (Mr. Lovett) was pleased to testify to the gratitude he felt, that the King had recognised the bravery of Birch in the risk he ran in trying to save his comrades life (cheers).

Mr. T. Y. Hay (manager of the Whitwick Colliery) said that as secretary to the Coalville Owners Association, he endorsed all that Mr. Lovett had said, and he was pleased to take part in the welcome of Birch that night. It was the first case he knew of the Edward Medal being awarded, and he was proud that it had come to Leicestershire. It was in accidents in mines such as falls of roof and explosions that man had to be brave. There were hundreds of miners who had done brave things which had never been heard of (hear, hear), and they were pleased that Birch's act had been recognised. He was glad that Mr. Tatham had taken such great interest in the same, and when it was mentioned to him (Mr. Hay) on Saturday night, he said he would only be too pleased to be there that night to welcome Birch. With all the legislation and inspection, he was afraid they would still have accidents in mines. He would welcome anyone who could come and save them from accidents, but while they went on ripping millions of tons of coal out of the earth every year, with thousands of men employed, they would have accidents. It was nice to know, however, that there were men like Birch, to do what they could to save a comrade, and to show such courage, as he did when required (applause). He (Mr. Hay) had been in Coalville for twenty years, and he regarded himself as a Leicestershire man, and he felt proud of Birch as he was sure every owner and every man in Leicestershire would. If there were other cases of bravery in Leicestershire mines, they must see that they were recognised. It was like the "Victoria Cross", and a great honour to any man. He hoped Mr. Birch would live long to enjoy the honour conferred on him that day by the King (cheers).

Mr. F. Tatham, manager of the Coleorton Colliery, said that he would like them all to understand that he did not take any honour for this to himself, but at the same time, he was pleased to know that he had one brave man working for him (a voice: above one). He would be sorry to think he had one who was not brave (cheers). He must say that he had done his best in regard to this case, but he felt that every brave act of that description should be recognised in a similar manner. When a man risked his life two or three times over to save a comrade, it was only right that something should be done to recognise it. Probably some of them had done similar things without being rewarded – he himself on one occasion saved three lives – but it showed they were getting better legislation and were getting nearer that situation in which every man realised that his fellow man was his brother (cheers). That was a principal he would very much like to advocate. He was pleased to be able to stand there with the miners' agents, for whom he had as much respect as he had for the secretary of the Coal Owners Association (cheers). He hoped it would become more and more the aim of them all to work together on both

sides, avoiding friction (hear, hear). In some districts the operation of the 8 hours Act caused a tremendous amount of trouble, but he was pleased to say that in Leicestershire, as a result of sound common sense on the part of leaders of the Miners' Association and Coal Owners Association, they had been able to steer clear of difficulty in regard to that. He hoped that this feeling would grow (applause). In regard to Birch, he hoped that it would be an inducement to other men to put forward a hand to help a brother in distress as the occasion arose. Birch had asked him to thank them on his behalf as he was no speaker. He told him (Mr. Tatham) that he could do a lot better down in the kitchen at Buckingham Palace than he could do on a public platform (laughter and cheers). On behalf of Birch, he thanked them for the splendid reception they had given him. He had not expected to see such a big crowd.

Mr George Brooks said that he would like to say that when the matter was mentioned to Mr. Newberry, Mr. Blow and himself, they at once took the matter up and approached the "Town Band", who readily complied with their wishes. Mr. Lovett and Mr. Hay also said they would be delighted to be there, which showed that whatever was said in the Press about the relationship between masters and men, there were times when both could combine to give honour when honour was due (cheers). With all the mining legislation that could be brought in, they would never prevent accidents. Miners had, as it were, to face death, but a good practical miner would never allow another man to go into danger where he was afraid to go himself. He could say that from what he knew of Leicestershire miners. He moved a vote of thanks to the Band and Mr. Hay, Mr. Tatham and Mr. Lovett for the interest they had shown in the matter. He added that Mr. Birch knew nothing of these arrangements for his reception. How it had got out to the extent it had, he, (Mr. Brooks) could not understand.

Mr. Newberry seconded the vote of thanks which was heartily accorded.

Mr. Lovett responding, said it was as Mr. Brooks had said – there was a common ground on which they all could stand, whether they were colliery managers, colliers or miners' agents, and that was the cause of humanity and doing the best they could for their fellow men (cheers).

The Band played the National Anthem and the gathering then dispersed.