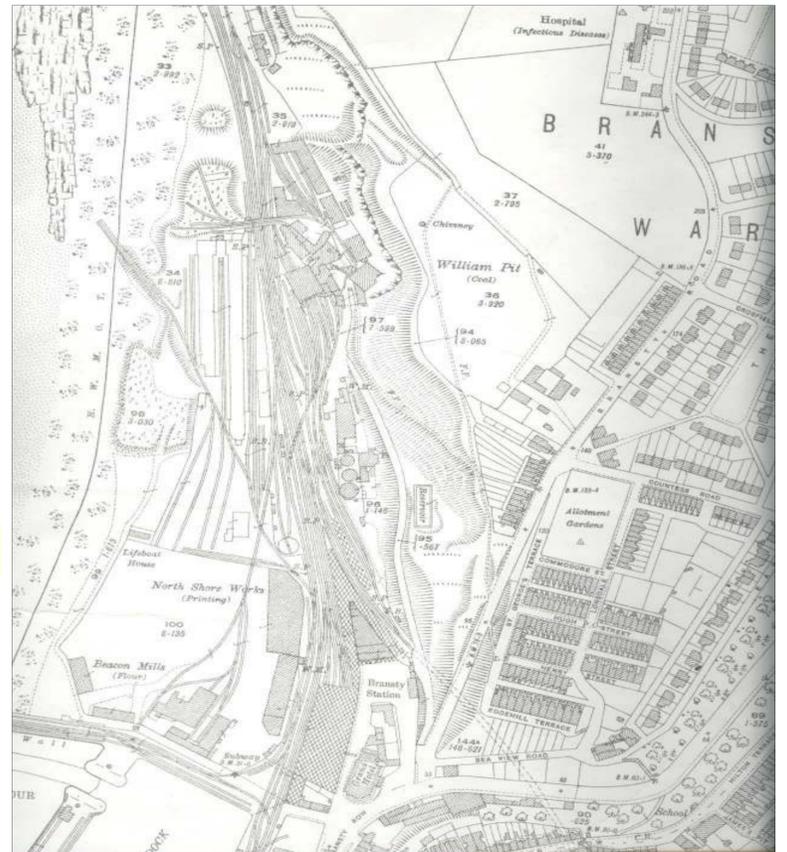


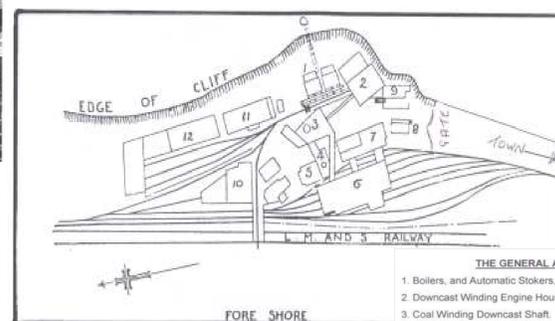
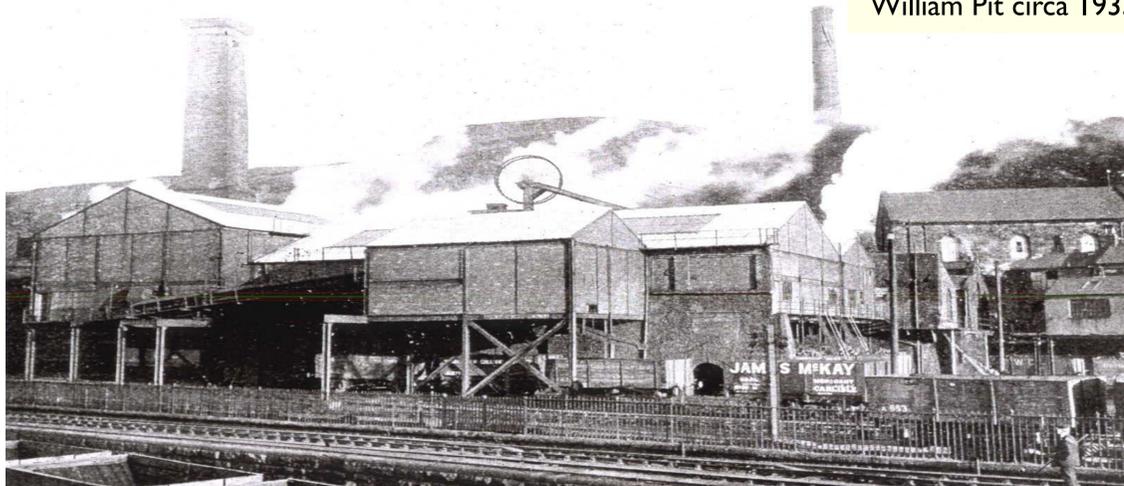
William Pit, Whitehaven - a brief history

Work to sink William Pit, on Whitehaven's North Shore, began in May 1804 with the first coal extracted in 1805. The mine produced coal for some 150 years, closing in 1954. During this time at least fourteen explosions occurred at William Pit, killing over 200 adults and children. Other accidents at the pit accounted for over 100 fatalities.

Two earlier accidents, in 1907 and 1941, were grim warnings of the disaster to befall William Pit on 15 August 1947.



William Pit circa 1935

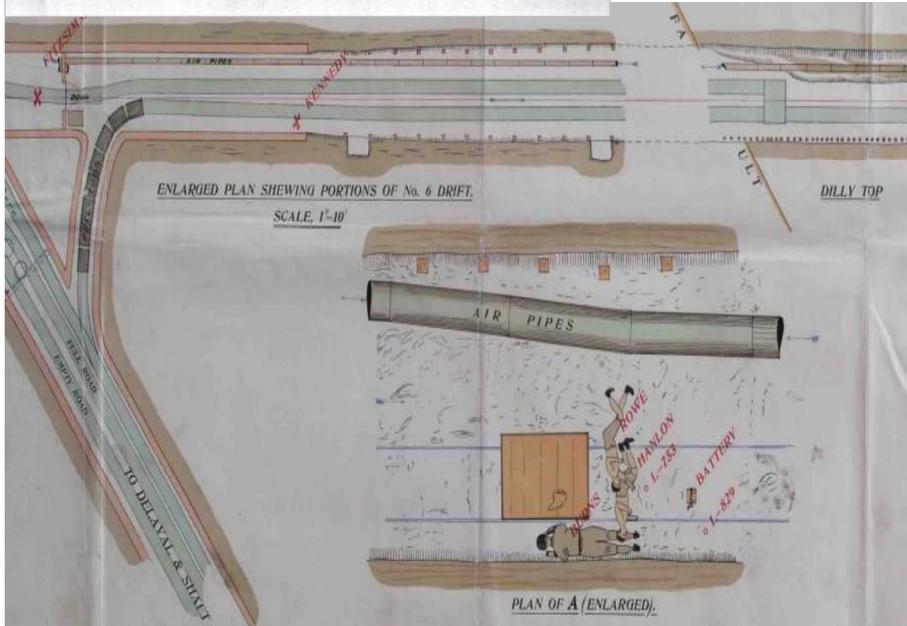


Ordnance Survey map of 1924 showing the William Pit site and the surrounding area

1907 disaster

On 26 November 1907 the routine firing of an explosive charge in William Pit ignited inflammable 'firedamp' (methane) and clouds of coal dust. The blast which followed killed 5 men and injured 6 others.

Plan of the 1907 explosion and position of the bodies (ref. DH 441)



THE WHITEHAVEN NEWS, THURSDAY, JUNE 12, 1941

WHITEHAVEN PIT DEATH ROLL NOW 12

FIRE AREA SEALED OFF BY STOPS



1941 disaster

Spontaneous heating and fires affected the coal seams in William Pit.

On 3 June 1941 water was being pumped into a 'hot' area in an attempt to extinguish such a fire. The heat caused the water to vaporize into an inflammable hydrogen mixture, leading to an explosion which claimed the lives of 12 men and caused injuries to 10 others.

THE WHITEHAVEN NEWS, THURSDAY, AUGUST 7, 1941

LOWCA JUNCTION: NEAR SCENE OF EXPLOSION IN WILLIAM PIT, WHITEHAVEN



William Pit, Whitehaven - 1947 disaster

THE WHITEHAVEN NEWS, THURSDAY, AUGUST 21, 1947.

WHITEHAVEN PIT DISASTER

104 MEN LOST
RESCUE WORKERS' HEROIC BATTLE
BEREAVED FAMILIES RECEIVE NATION-WIDE SYMPATHY

WHITEHAVEN'S second worst pit disaster occurred on Friday night when 104 men lost their lives in William Pit following a violent explosion in the main haulage road some 2 1/2 miles from the shaft.

At the time 117 men were working underground. It was soon ascertained that only 10 were safe; the remaining 107 were trapped behind heavy falls.

After specially trained rescue squads from Cumberland, Durham, Northumberland, and Lancashire had all worked for over 20 hours under nightmarish conditions and had hope been practically abandoned, there was a dramatic development—three men went through to safety. They had taken refuge in a remote working where the air was fresher.

This, however, was the only success achieved in a race with that deadly gas, carbon monoxide.

The bereaved families have received nation-wide sympathy.

Whitehaven's worst disaster happened in 1910 when 136 men and boys lost their lives in Wellington Pit.

The first indication of the surface explosion occurred at 10.15 p.m. when a small explosion occurred in the shaft. The explosion was not taken immediately as serious rescue operations were not commenced until 11.30 p.m.

At approximately 1.30 p.m. on Friday an explosion occurred in William Pit. A hundred and twenty men were in the mine at the time. Of these 104 men were killed and 10 were trapped and it will be some time before they can be rescued.

The explosion occurred in the main haulage road, about 2 1/2 miles from the shaft. The explosion was not taken immediately as serious rescue operations were not commenced until 11.30 p.m.

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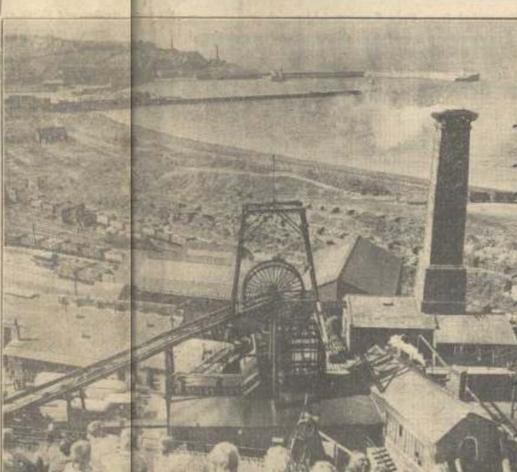
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William Pit from an unusual angle, a striking photograph reproduced by permission of the 'Yorkshire Post'. A number of waiting ambulances can be seen in the Pit Yard.

Late on Saturday afternoon the mine had been abandoned after three days of search. The rescue workers had been unable to find any more survivors.

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THE MEN COUNTY MOURNS

LONG CASUALTY LIST

- List of names and addresses of the 104 men who died in the disaster, including Andrew Allan, Thomas Allan, Harry T. Allan, John Allan, James Allan, etc.

MIRACULOUS ESCAPE OF THREE TRAPPED MEN

Route taken by survivors marked thus. Solway Firth. No 3 Rise. 3 Survivors remained here for 18 hours.



The rough sketch, which shows an outline of the shaft and a ground plan of the workings, gives the general public an idea of the route taken by the three men who escaped after being trapped for 18 hours.

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In the afternoon of Friday 15 August 1947, deep underground at William Pit, a 'deputy' (mine official) was undertaking routine firing of explosive charges in the roof of a tunnel to provide rock for supports. At around 5.40pm one of these shots ignited firedamp and coal dust, triggering a large explosion.

118 men had been working underground during the shift. Eleven of these exited the mine soon after the blast. Another three miners, lost underground, were found 20 hours later in the afternoon of 16 August.

Of the remaining 104 men who all perished, only 14 had been killed outright through blast and burn injuries. Many of the miners had survived the initial explosion only to be overcome later by the poisonous 'afterdamp' (carbon monoxide) created by the blast.

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Coverage of the accident and death announcements from the Whitehaven News of 21 August 1947

William Pit, Whitehaven - 1947 disaster



16 August 1947: relatives and friends maintain an anxious evening vigil at the pit gates, while others look down from the slopes above. Clergymen comforted those waiting for news of their menfolk.

Whitehaven town centre: neighbours search through the latest papers for news of the unfolding tragedy.



Canaries (above left) indicated the presence of deadly afterdamp. Rescuers from Durham and Northumberland (above right) joined the Cumberland rescue teams (below) in the recovery effort.



They cleared blocked tunnels, moved equipment, restored ventilation and carried the bodies of their dead comrades, all while wearing heavy breathing apparatus and in stifling heat. The work was physically shattering and mentally harrowing.

In all 35 rescue teams made 105 underground rescue visits, 75 of which were made by the 14 regular Cumberland teams.

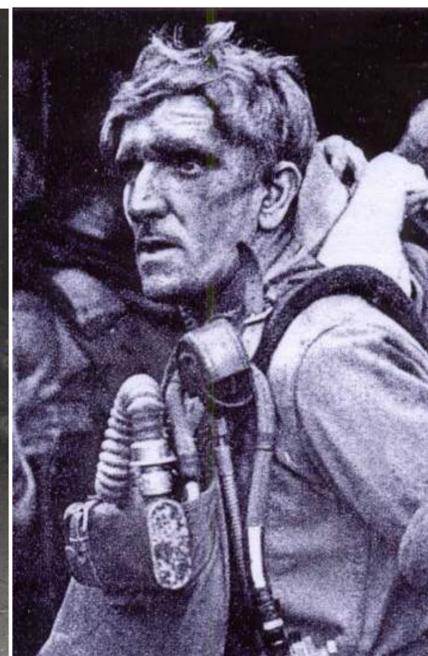
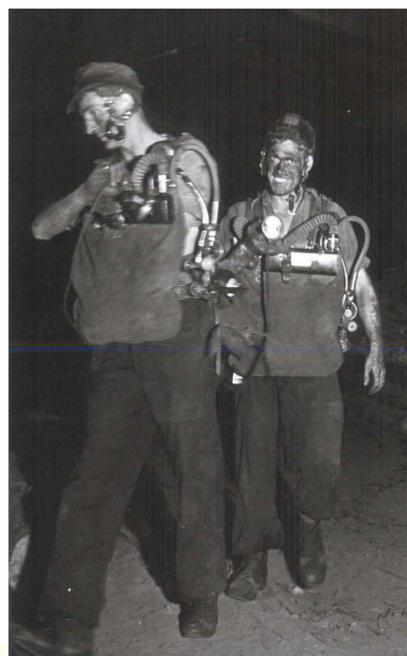


Nurses and orderlies (above left) await the arrival of bodies from below, while a rescue team (above) rests briefly before departing underground again.

Dogs were used for the first time in a coal mine to locate bodies buried under falls. Three RAF Police dogs including 'Rex' and his handler Flight Lt R D Cooper (left) joined the effort.

The first body was brought to the surface at 7.30am on 16 August; the last at 1.45pm on 23 August.

Pictures donated courtesy of Ray Devlin and other members of the public.



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