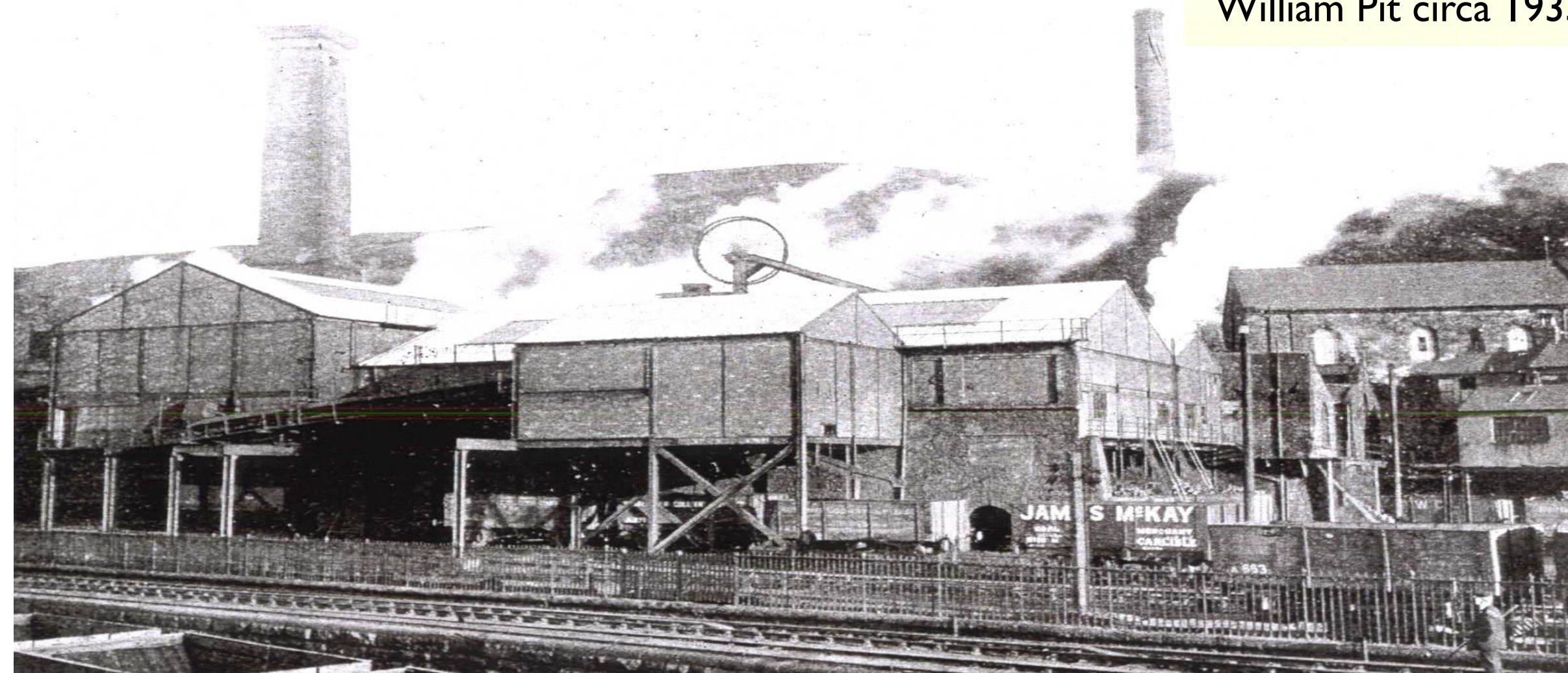


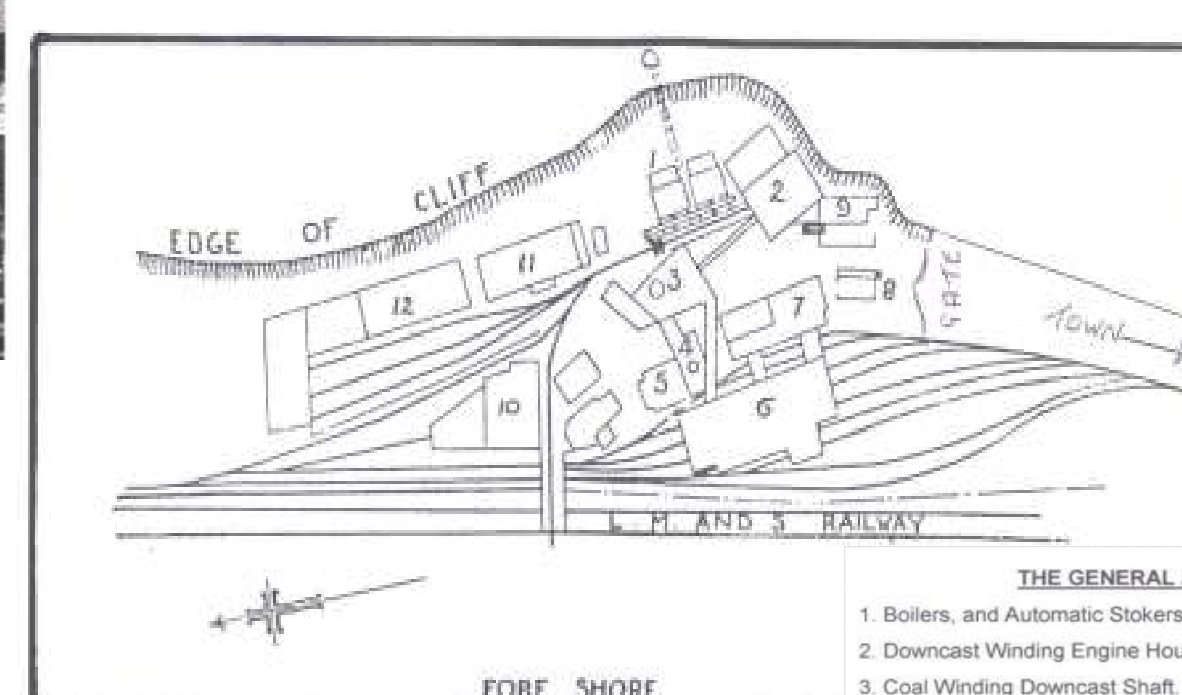
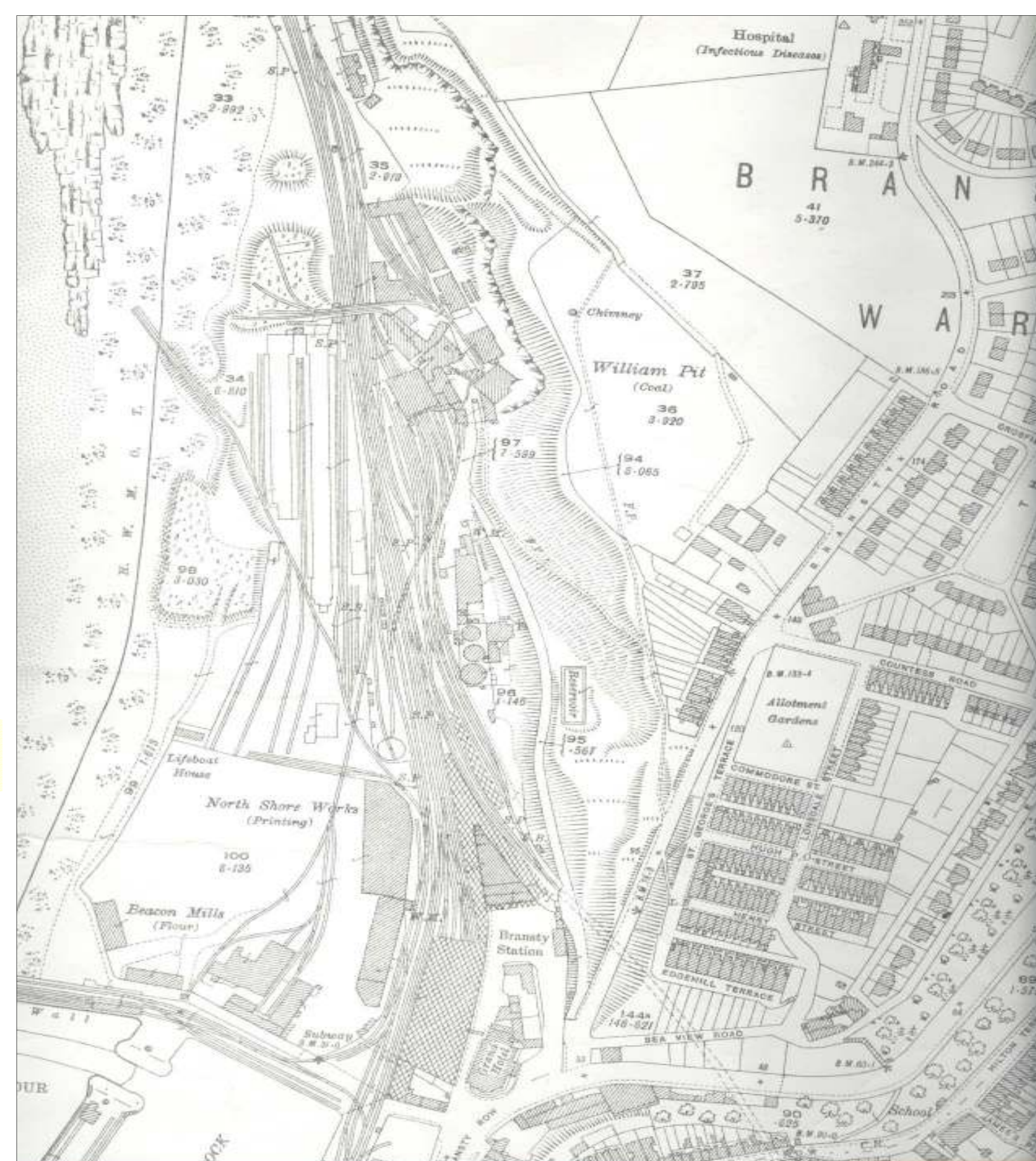
William Pit, Whitehaven - a brief history

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

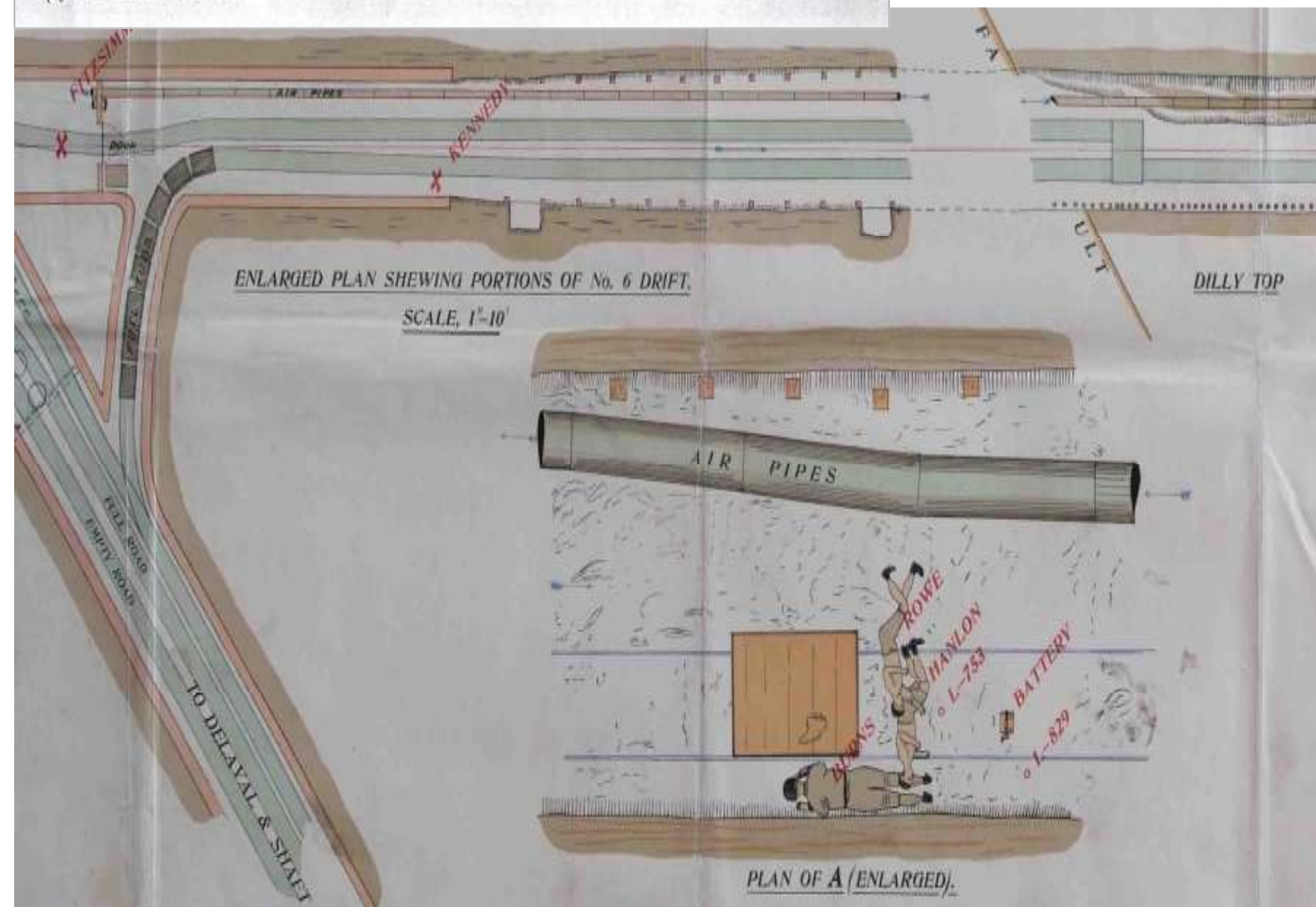
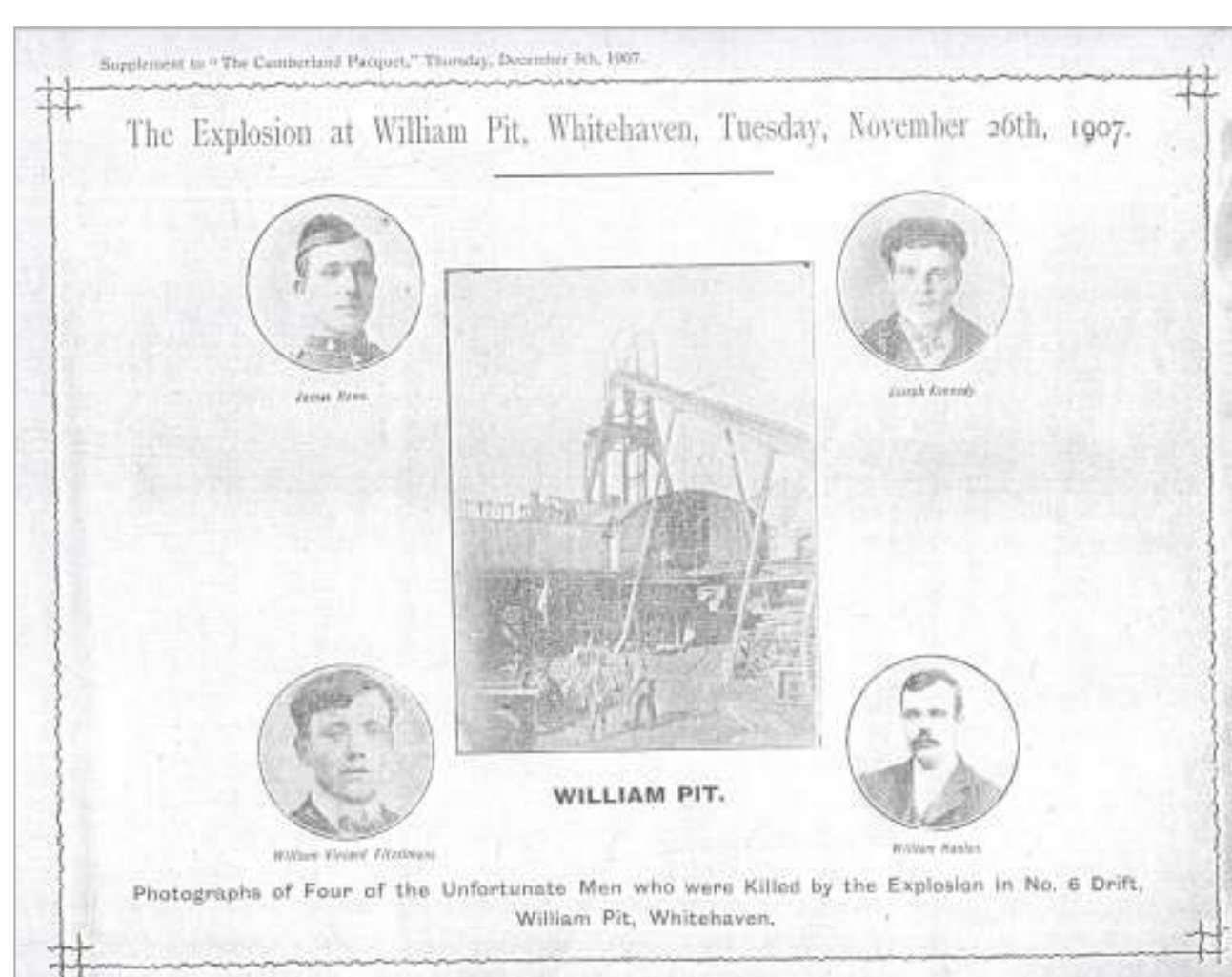


Ordnance Survey map of 1924 showing the William Pit site and the surrounding area

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)



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.



- Edward Glaister, 48, left a widow and nine children (below).
- William Harker Lee, 27, (top right) had been severely wounded at Dunkirk in 1940. He then made a daring escape from a German Prison Camp via Belgium, France and Spain for which he was awarded the Military Medal in 1941.
- Father and son Jack and Harry Allan (bottom right) who were both killed in the disaster.



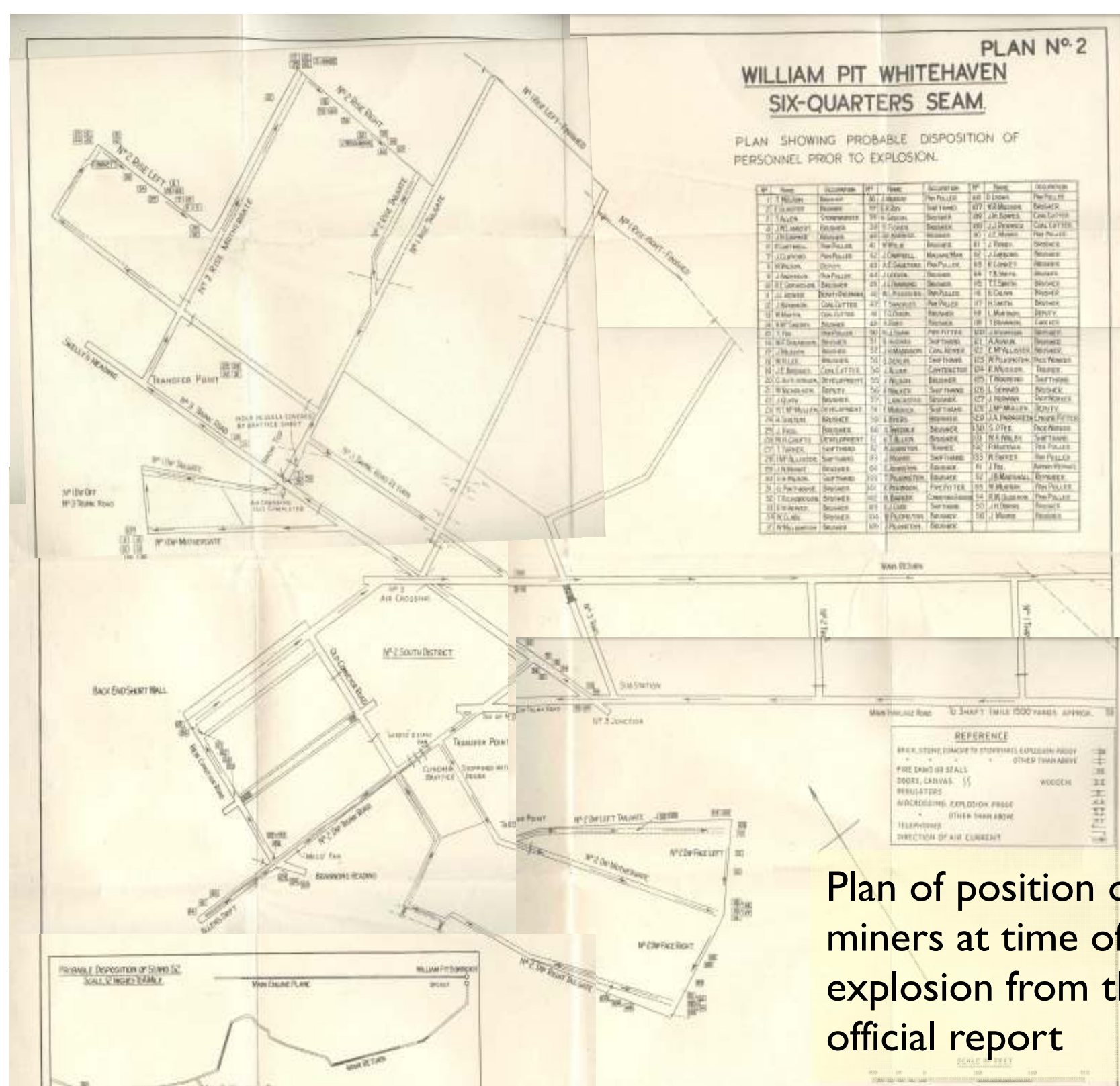
The Official Enquiry

Bryan's report, published in June 1948, found that the deputy who fired the fatal charge had not followed proper safety procedures nor had the management supervised his activities properly. Ventilation and suppression of coal dust in William Pit were also found to be inadequate.

[illegible]

Whitehaven Borough Council established a relief fund to administer some £100,000 donated to the miners' dependants after the disaster. 19 dependants agreed to take Workmen's Compensation soon after the disaster which amounted to £10,215 (an average payment of £538 each).

The other 86 dependants brought a court case against the National Coal Board (NCB) for negligence in January 1949. The NCB agreed to settle out of court without admitting liability. The 86 dependants received a total of £155,600 (an average of £1809).



Plan of position of miners at time of explosion from the official report

[illegible]

"News" Special

THE out-of-court settlement at the Cumberland Assizes recently in the test case brought against the National Coal Board by a widow of one of the 104 men killed at William Pit, Whitehaven, in August, 1947, has resulted in £155,000 being set aside for the benefit of the 86 dependants who were joined in this action.

In addition 10 dependants who refused to take part in the Assizes action and agreed to a compensation settlement have been awarded £10,215, making a total of £165,815.

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.

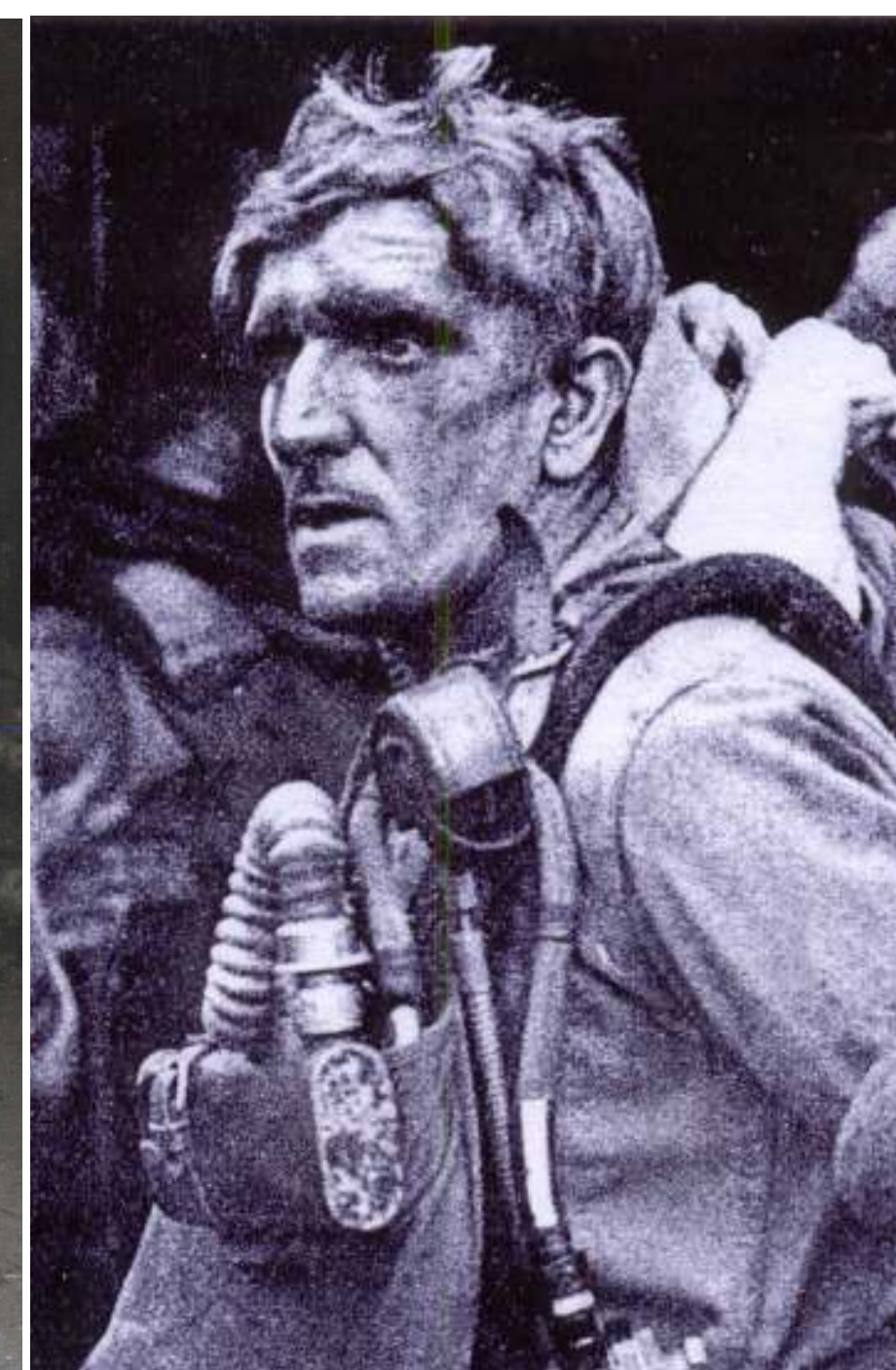


Nurses and orderlies (above left) await the arrival of bodies from below, while a rescue team (above) rests briefly before departing underground again.

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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