

The depth of these shafts is—two each of 166 ft. at Ralph's Colliery, and one of 207 ft. at Taupiri West Colliery (connected). The diameter of each shaft is 10 ft. The means of escape are adequate.

(5.) THE NATURE AND CHARACTER OF THE WORKING AND GENERAL MANAGEMENT OF THE MINE, AND WHETHER THE MINE WAS WELL AND SAFELY MANAGED.

The coal-seams consist of a superior brown coal, the thickness varying from 10 ft. to 34 ft., the average thickness worked being 20 ft.; the average dip of the seam is about 1 in 10. The system of work, as already mentioned, is bord-and-pillar. About 250 acres of coal pillars are now standing. No pillar-extraction has commenced, or is proposed, owing to the fact before referred to—that the surface is traversed by the River Waikato, and in places covered by lakes and watercourses of considerable magnitude, from which inundation would follow if the roof-support were removed. These extensive and unusual ramifications of old bords and stentons (or cut-throughs) require more than ordinary attention, as the conditions are somewhat unique. The tendency for gas-accumulations in the high places and of spontaneously ignited fires where coal and debris become piled up is great, calling for special care and attention. Special attention was given to the prevention of heating, but we think, on account of the presence of gas, more frequent inspections were necessary.

In view of what has been stated above, and of the fact that the Coal-mines Act and the special rules thereunder have to some extent been either neglected or disregarded by the manager, Mr. Fletcher, it cannot be said that the mine was in all respects well and safely managed by him. If Mr. Fletcher had performed his obvious duty in causing safety-lamps only to be used in Ralph's Colliery the disaster would never have occurred. He had ample warnings by previous explosions. A manager has not only to comply with the requirements of the law, but he has a duty to his fellow-man beyond mere statutory obligations. Had the Mines Department known of these cases at the time no doubt legal provision would have been made for the Inspector of Mines to enforce the use of safety-lamps, by which the disaster would have been averted.

Of the several cases of injury to workmen by the ignition of gas in Ralph's Mine and the Taupiri Extended, only in one instance—that of Kelly—was the matter reported to the Inspector of Mines. It is unfortunate that the Coal-mines Act does not enforce the reporting of all cases of injury by gas-ignition, whether trivial or serious. It only requires a report where the accident is attended with "serious injury to any person," leaving it to the manager to decide as to what is or is not a serious injury. The manager in these cases decided the injuries were not serious, but we are of opinion that where the man is incapacitated from work for fourteen or more days, as was the case in more than one instance, the injury should not be treated as anything less than serious.

(6.) THE EFFICIENCY OF THE INSPECTION OF THE MINE BY

(a.) *The Inspector of Mines for the District.*

With regard to the efficiency of the inspection of the mine by the Inspector of Mines for the district, your Commissioners find that the present occupant of the position, Mr. Boyd Bennie, has been assiduous and conscientious in the discharge of his duties, and has shown himself to be a capable and painstaking officer; but we consider that on occasions he has been satisfied with less than a strict and prompt compliance with orders given by him to the manager with respect to matters relating to the working and safety of the mine. He has regularly visited and inspected the mine, usually four times annually, except during the present year, when up to the time of the disaster he had made seven visits to the mine.

We have no reason to think that his inspections were otherwise than thorough and conscientious so far as regards the working-part of the mine, but we are of opinion that it would have been better if more attention had been given by him to the old workings, which actually formed part of the return airway of the mine. It is, however, due to the Inspector to say that it was at his instigation that this part of the mine was regularly inspected by the company's officials.