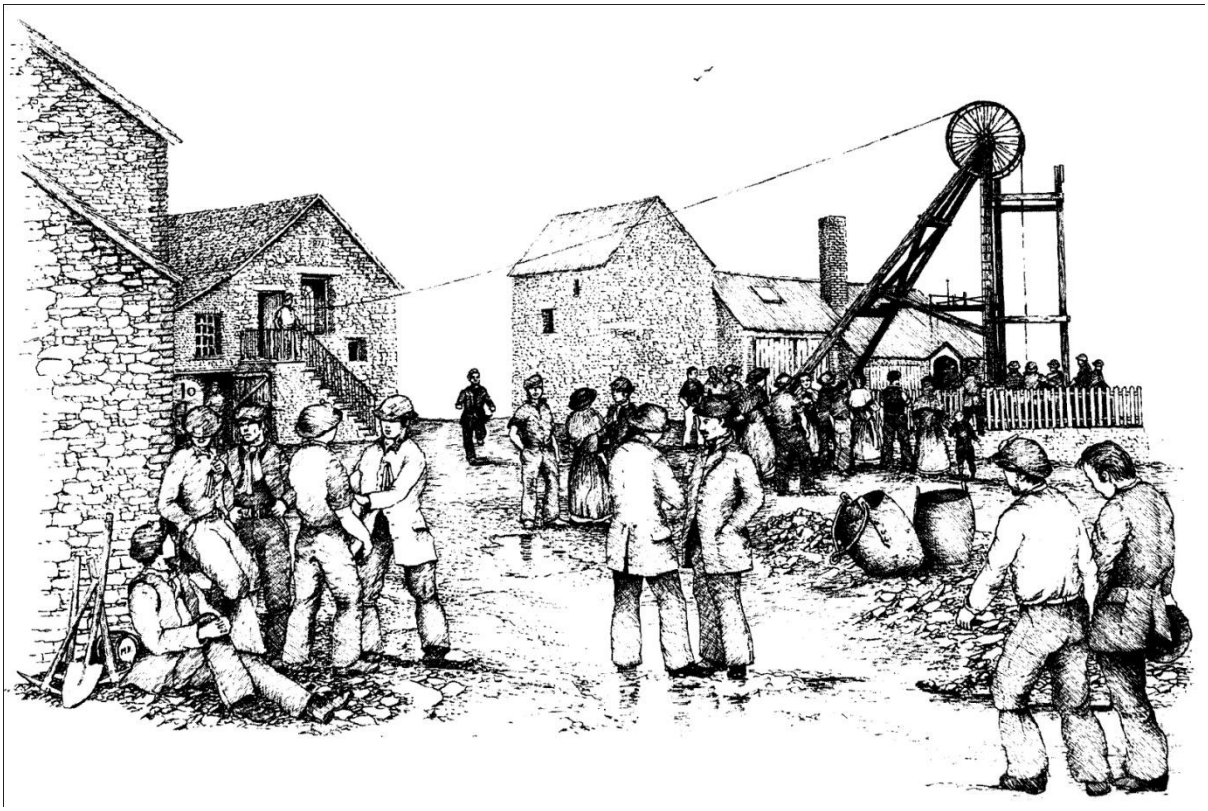
3D The Tale of George's Shaft



My name is William Holyoake. I'm a miner and I'm here to tell you about the terrible accident which happened in 1895. First, let me explain about the shaft. Gather around it, and we'll have a look. It used to be called 'Old Shaft' and that may be a better name because it was the first one to be dug. It was started in 1783, well over 100 years ago. Now it is 252 yards (230 metres) deep. In those days they found lead almost straight away, just below the surface. But now we have to go down 500 metres because all the lead above us has been worked out. There are some vast holes in the ground under here. When you came up the hill you walked on one of the old spoil heaps and every bit of rock there was mined from underneath where we are standing. See how wide the shaft is. It's wide enough for two cages side by side to balance each other. That's the way it was used, and this replica of the pit head gear doesn't show how big the cages were. Each one was big enough to hold seven men. Mind you, when I first started work in the mine, there were no lifts to take us to the bottom of the mine. We had to use ladders. Then in 1872 they put a winding engine in the building behind us. It saved us a huge amount of time. You can't imagine how high it is when you're climbing ladders in the dark. The highest building I've heard of is St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and this shaft is more than twice that height. You know when you're half way down because the other cage passes you on its way up. When we got the cages it saved 1½ hours of climbing each day. That's half an hour to go down at the start of the shift when you're fresh, and an hour to climb back up at the end of the shift. Maybe the mine owners thought they would save money by installing this. They would get us to work longer hours.

This is now a really modern mine. We don't have to drill by hand. We have pneumatic drills, powered from the Compressor House here on the surface, and we can extend a shaft ten times as

fast as they did in the old days with hand drills. But you've come to hear about the accident, so I'll get back to my tale.

You might have read about it in the Wellington Journal, and they reported what I said at the inquest into the deaths of my seven mates who worked on the same shift as I did. It was bitterly cold that year. We arrived at the mine whilst it was still dark, and we were pleased to be at work where we would be out of the cold. First we went into the Miners' Dry where we had left our clothes to dry over the steam pipes after working the last shift. While we waited we could hear the engineman testing the winding gear that raised and lowered the cages in the shaft.

Anyway, back to the disaster. There are two cages; one at the top and one at the bottom and they balance each other so that they are easier to lift. Seven men can fit in one cage, and soon the first load came up after finishing the night shift. When the rest of the shift came up the first group got in the cage and went down. Everything was quite normal. We'd worked here for years and we knew all the sounds the cage would make as it slid and scraped its way quickly down to the bottom. I told the inquiry that we trusted these cages. We watched the rope as it went round, raising and lowering the cages and there was never any sign of a broken wire. If we had seen any frayed ends, we would have given a warning and refused to go down. It's as simple as that. Anyway, it looked normal, so we went down. You can't imagine how far it is as you bump along in the dark. At the bottom you opened the gate, got out of the cage and then signalled to the men at the top that it was ready to lift again. I got in the second cage. All the usual noises but there was no jerking, no sign that anything was wrong. We reached the bottom, opened the gate and got out to join our mates. Then we sat in the dark with just a couple of candles waiting for the others to come down. In two or three minutes we heard the cage coming down. The noise was like thunder. The cage crashed down with the bodies in it. The cage was all smashed up. My poor mates never stood a chance. The thick wire rope smashed down on top of the cage. We signalled up at once and proceeded to take the rope away by drawing it along the level. The rope was knocked about. The cage was completely smashed. The cage was as tall as a man standing and reaching up at full stretch, like this. But when it hit the bottom the whole thing only came up to my knees. We had to take it to pieces to get the bodies out.

The luckiest man in the world is young Will Lewis. He'd got into the cage with his Dad, George and the others, and then George realised they'd forgotten their drills. They'd left them with the blacksmith to be sharpened. So Will got out of the cage, and Arthur Wardman got in. When Will got back he was just in time to see the top part of the broken cable fly into the air. It shot back and nearly cut the head off the engineman.

Eventually they got together a rescue party. They came down ladders and it takes a long time. I've never counted how many steps there are on those ladders but it must be a thousand. They got the second cage working, and we used it to take the bodies out. But we went up the ladders. All one thousand steps. We weren't going to trust the cable again after that.

They said at the inquest that the cable had rotted in the middle. You couldn't see because the strands of wire on the outside were still good. But the middle had rusted through and they said the winding drum was too small. Well, we didn't know that. No-one ever tells the miners.

They were good men. Hard workers, steady, reliable, safe, people you could trust. Good religious men, lay preachers, pillars of the local church and chapel. Four of them were buried at Hope Church and there was this great procession through the snow. No, I don't want another winter like that.

There was another accident when a rope broke, but then the cage was empty and no harm was done. And, yes, you remember William Lewis, the young lad who got out of the cage to pick up the drilling rods and missed the accident? Well, he fell off a ladder a couple of years later while he was climbing up a shaft. Stupid lad only got a few bruises, and when they investigated all the ladders were in good order. He must be related to a cat. He seems to have nine lives.

Standing around the shaft now you can see it isn't like it was when the accident happened. First, there is only one cage. But if you look down you can see how wide the circular shaft is, and it's lined with brick so that the sides don't fall it. There is plenty of room for two cages side by side. And then the other difference is that this cage isn't for transporting men. It has a railway track and it is used for ore wagons, because that's the way it was being used when the mine closed. That's right. The accident was in 1895 and the mine had nearly come to the end of its life. The price of lead went down and down. But all the time we had to go deeper to find more lead, and our costs went up. Then at the bottom of the mine we found zinc instead of pure lead, and there isn't much of a market for zinc. So it looks as though Snailbeach's days are numbered.

Mind you, I'm not sorry. I've had enough. I can't climb the ladders like I used to. I have to keep stopping for breath. And in the mornings I'm often sick and I bring up my breakfast. I can work all right because these power driven rock hammers do all the work. But they say they destroy your health. They call them 'widow makers' and people reckon the dust they make is dangerous. There's talk about having to spray water to keep the dust down. But if they do that we'll just be covered in cold wet mud all day and no-one wants that. So they can keep the water. We'll just have to put up with the dust. Until it kills us.