



THE PARISH OF  
ST PATRICK'S  
KILSYTH  
1865 - 2015

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THE  
GARTSHORE  
PIT DISASTER - 1923

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150TH ANNIVERSARY



## The Gartshore Pit Disaster

To the memory of those who died on the 28th July 1923

On the evening of Saturday 28th of July 1923 at about 6pm a violent explosion occurred in the No. 3 Gartshore Pit, Croy, about two miles from Kilsyth owned by Messrs Wm. Baird & Co. (Ltd.).

Smoke and debris from the explosion was responsible for trapping and killing 8 men from Kilsyth and Croy. They had been working on building a water retaining wall at the old pit bottom, which due to new workings was now only about halfway down the pit shaft. Of the 12 men who were engaged in the working party, 8 were killed, 3 were injured and only one escaped unharmed.

### Those who died

**John Campbell, married (47)**

**James Campbell, married (49)**

**Daniel Coyle, single (18)**

**Samuel Garrie, single (20)**

**Robert James Gray, single (22)**

**Alexander Paterson, married  
(47)**

**John Patrick, married (31)**

**George Young, single (18)**



The funeral of Daniel Coyle leaving St Patrick's Church lead by Fr James Harold and Fr Daniel Murphy on Monday 30th July 1923

# Newspaper Reports

## ***"Eight Killed in Scottish Pit - Explosion Mystery***

*Glasgow July 29 - The sound of a violent explosion on Saturday night threw the mining town of Kilsyth into a state of consternation. The explosion had occurred in No. 3 Gartshore Pit, about two miles away, where twelve men were working on the construction of a lodgment for water at the bottom of a new shaft. Of the twelve men eight were killed and three were injured.*

*The explosion occurred near the bottom of the old pit shaft. Andrew Airlie, an elderly pit bottomer, was thrown against the wall. He raised the alarm, and was hauled up to the surface. There he enlisted the help of willing workers and insisted upon returning to the pit. The rescue party found seven of the men lying dead. One lay moaning with a heavy beam across his neck. Two were unconscious, and only one was able to move or do anything for himself. Their first task was to extricate the injured men and rush them off to the infirmary, but one of them, George Young, apprentice bricklayer, died on the way to the infirmary. The other victims were Robert Gray (single), Alexander Paterson (married, with two children), John Patle, John Patrick (three children), Daniel Coyle (single), Samuel Garrie (single), John Campbell (widower), and James Campbell (single). Patrick and Paterson had descended the pit only about ten minutes before the explosion, the cause of which is still unknown.*

*The task of the rescuers was rendered more difficult by the smoke and fumes, and two hours elapsed before the last of the bodies was brought to the surface. The features of most of the dead had been so severely mutilated as to be almost unrecognisable." **The Times 30 July 1923***

## ***"Explosion in Kilsyth Pit - Eight Men Killed and Three Injured - Appalling Scenes***

*One of the most serious accidents experienced for many years in the extensive coalfields owned by Messrs Wm. Baird & Co. (Ltd.), in the Kelvin Valley district, took place on Saturday night, when eight men were killed and three injured by an explosion. The scene of the disaster was what is locally known as the old No. 3 Gartshore Pit, Croy, about two miles from Kilsyth, where for some considerable time preparations have been going on for the extension of the underground workings, new pithead gear being in process of erection, while roads were being driven underground.*

*About six o'clock on Saturday night, while twelve men were at work in the old pit, a few yards from the bottom, a terrific explosion occurred from some unknown cause, and seven of the men were killed, an eighth died later in the Kilsyth Hospital, while three were injured, two of them having to be removed to the Royal Infirmary, Glasgow.*

### ***The victims were :-***

*Robert Gray (22, single), bricklayer, Charles Street, Kilsyth.  
Alexander Paterson (49, married), colliery fire-man, Parkfoot Street, Kilsyth  
John Patrick (31, married), oversman, Crow Row, Croy.  
Daniel Coyle (18, single), bricklayers' labourer, Westport Street; Kilsyth  
Samuel Garrie (19, single), bricklayer, Moniebrough Crescent, Kilsyth.*

*John Campbell (49, widower), bricklayer, Findlay Street, Kilsyth  
James Campbell (32, married), bricklayers' labourer, Newton Street, Kilsyth  
George Young (18, single), apprentice bricklayer, William Street, Kilsyth*

***The following were injured: -***

*Melvin Kelly (married), and his son, Melvin, miners, Twechar, both seriously injured and removed to hospital; and Samuel Sloan, miner, Twechar, who escaped with slight injuries.*

***Force of the explosion*** - *From the death-roll it will be seen that six of the victims were bricklayers and labourers. At the time of the explosion they were engaged at the old pit bottom, which is now about half-way down the shaft, in constructing a brick wall to act as a lodgment for water. This wall measured about 36 feet long, by 7 1/2 feet high, and 5 feet thick. The men had started their shift at two o'clock, and were not due to cease work until eleven o'clock. In addition to the bricklayers, three miners, a fireman, an oversman, and a pit bottomer were below at the time. The noise of the explosion was heard at Kilsyth and throughout a large area, and within a few minutes workmen from the miners' rows in Croy, Twechar, and Auchenstarry were hurrying to the scene. On arrival at the pithead steps were immediately taken to ascertain the extent of the disaster. Fortunately, the shaft was undamaged, although the lid at the pithead had been displaced by the force of the concussion.*

*First news of what had happened was obtained from Andrew Airlie, the bottomer, who had escaped injury and was able to ascend in the cage. He had been working about 15 yards away from the main body of the shift, and was thrown against the side of the wall by the explosion. He did not lose consciousness, however, and making his way through the stifling smoke and fumes, he managed to reach the cage and signal to be raised to the surface. Airlie was suffering naturally from his alarming experience, but after reporting to the fireman he pluckily insisted on joining the rescue party, and once more descended the mine. The party, in addition to Airlie, consisted of Mr Leishman, fireman, and Mr Comily another pithead worker.*

*By this time large crowds had gathered at the colliery, and there was no lack of volunteers for any work that might be needed. Among the gathering were a considerable number of relatives and friends of the men still in the pit, who had rushed to the scene in the hope that the alarming reports of the extent of the disaster might have been exaggerated.*

***The Work of Rescue*** - *When the rescue party descended they found the workings in total darkness. Not far from the foot of the shaft they were met by Samuel Sloan, one of the miners, who was limping from a wound in his leg. Proceeding as best they could amongst the wreckage of timber and bricks, they heard shouts coming from the neighbourhood of where the men had been at work, and making their way with difficulty, they came upon another miner, Melvin Kelly. He was partly covered with debris, and was pinned below a barrel. After rescuing this man from his perilous position, the party continued their work, and shortly afterwards discovered George Young, one of the bricklayers, lying below a heavy beam. He was suffering from terrible injuries, and though still alive when taken to the surface by the rescue party he did not survive.*

*A second descent was now made by the rescuers, who were reinforced by eight volunteers, amongst whom was Samuel Sloan, the first man to be taken out of the pit. This time they were able to reach the place where the wall was being constructed, and an appalling scene of destruction confronted them. The bodies of the bricklayers were found huddled together in a ghastly heap, some of the men so terribly mutilated that they were almost unrecognisable. It was evident that the victims had had no chance of escape, and that all had lost their lives as the instantaneous result of the explosion.*

*Nearly a couple of hours were occupied in releasing and raising the bodies to the pithead and several of the rescue party were so affected by this gruesome work that they had to receive medical attention on coming to the surface. The bodies were removed to the old engine house for identification purposes.*

*Meantime several doctors had arrived on the scene, and the injured, after receiving first aid, were conveyed to hospital in ambulances. George Young was taken to the Kilsyth Hospital, where he died soon after admission. The Kellys, father and son, who were suffering, from broken bones and other injuries, were removed to Glasgow Royal Infirmary.*

**The Victims** - *Among the victims were no fewer than three married men, while one was a widower.*

*Alexander Paterson, the fireman, who had descended the pit only ten minutes before the explosion, was 49 years of age, and leaves a widow and a family of two. Although connected with colliery work for many years, his only actual experience of a serious accident underground was as a member of one of the rescue parties at the Cadder Pit fire about a dozen years ago. He was an active member of the Congregational Church.*

*John Patrick, oversman, who had also just gone down the pit, leaves a widow and three children. He was well known in football circles in the district, and had played in the two local teams; and latterly with Croy Celtic. He is said to have acted as a substitute in the pit for another workman who was unable to take up his regular duty.*

*James Campbell had been engaged in special work at Gartshore for about a month. It is stated that before proceeding on duty he had made a remark to his wife about the work on hand being of a somewhat dangerous nature, and she had tried to persuade him to remain at home for the day, as he complained of feeling wearied. He replied, however, that the job was so urgent that he must return.*

*John Campbell, who had been unemployed for some months, leaves a son and daughter. The son works in the pit, and had been engaged with his father in working, at the wall, but was off duty when the accident happened.*

*Robert Gray was only occasionally employed at the pit. He was 22 years, of age, and the eldest of a family of seven. He took a keen interest in the work of the Kilsyth Gospel Mission.*

*Daniel Coyle had been in the pit in the early part of the day, and had resumed with the afternoon shift. He was 18 years of age, and the only bread-winner in a family of five. Only on Monday he had restarted work after a holiday in Ireland.*

*Samuel Garrie was also a young man, and resided with his father.*

*George Young, the lad who died in hospital, was 18 years of age, and was the eldest of a family of three. He had been in the pit since he was 14.*

**Interview with Pit Bottomer** - *In the course of an interview, Andrew Airlie, pit bottomer, gave a graphic story of his escape.*

*"About a quarter to six," he said, "I heard a tremendous explosion, followed by the crashing of timber and stone. Somehow or other I managed to keep my feet, and I shouted, 'Hullo, boys!' but got no response. I fought my way along towards the shaft, and gave the signal to those above that something had gone amiss. By the time I reached the cage, which took me to the top I was nearly overcome by the stifling smoke and fumes. After reporting to the fireman, I was one of the party which descended the pit and assisted in the rescue work. It was a slow and laborious job clearing away the fallen stonework from off our comrades, and more than one of us shuddered at the sight. Although I have been employed in the pits since I was a boy, I never in all my experience witnessed such an awful scene.*

*Mr Daniel Craney, who also formed one of the rescue party, stated that he first heard of the explosion half an hour after it occurred, and he hastened to the scene which, he said, was too awful to describe. He himself had been working on the job the previous night, and was due to resume at eleven o'clock. It was the irony of fate that the accident should take place just when the work was about completed, as it was expected to be finished in the*

course of the next shift. The men were working in a confined space, and this accounted for the terrible effects of the explosion.

*Condition of the Injured - On inquiry at the Royal Infirmary, Glasgow, late last night, it was learned that Melvin Kelly and his son were both fairly comfortable, and making satisfactory progress."* **Scotsman 30 July 1923**

### ***"Impressive Scenes At Funeral***

*Large crowds visited Gartshore Pit, near Kilsyth, yesterday, where squads were engaged clearing away the debris. The two injured miners Kelly, father and son, were reported to be progressing favourably in Glasgow Infirmary, and they are fully expected to recover. Sloan, whose heroism was spoken of was stated to be much better, and Airlie returned to the pit.*

*Impressive scenes were witnessed at the funeral of Daniel Coyle (18 years of age), which took place yesterday. A service was held in St Patrick's R.C. Church. The church was crowded, and hundreds waited outside. Provost Freebairn and several Town Councillors attended. The service was conducted by Father Harold, Kilsyth, and Rev. Professor D. Murphy, Fermoy College, Ireland. Former school companions carried the coffin from the church to the cemetery. The members of the Boys Guild, of which the deceased lad was a member, walked immediately behind the relatives. All places of business along the route were closed.*

*Today's Funerals - In connection with the funerals of the other victims of the disaster, it had been arranged that the funerals would take place today at different hours, but last night these arrangements were altered, and it was decided that the bodies of the men should be borne from their respective homes to Anderson United Free Church, where a service will be held at 3 o'clock, after which the fellow-workers of the deceased men will carry the coffins to the cemetery.*

*Sir Harry Hope's Sympathy - Provost Freebairn, Kilsyth, yesterday received a telegram from Sir Harry Hope expressing his deepest regret at news of the sad calamity, and sending his warmest sympathy with the relatives of those who had lost their lives.* **Scotsman 31 July 1923**

### ***"Sorrowful Scenes At Funerals***

*The funerals of seven of the victims of the Gartshore Pit disaster took place at Kilsyth yesterday afternoon amid many manifestations of sorrow. Pits, quarries, mills, and places of business in the district closed down, and thousands of people flocked into the town from other districts. Long before the hour for the funerals, the streets near the residences of some of the deceased men were blocked by crowds of people. Mr Thomas Johnston, M.P. for West Stirlingshire, travelled from London to attend the funerals.*

*The bodies of John Campbell, James Campbell, Alexander Paterson, Robert J. Gray, Samuel Garrie, and Robert Young were carried from their respective residences on the shoulders of relatives and placed in the Anderson*

*United Free Church. Women as well as men walked behind each coffin. The church could not accommodate all who wished to gain entrance. The people crowded the grounds of the church and the streets nearby. The Rev. Joseph D. Caskey, Anderson Church and the Rev David Beale, Congregational Church, conducted the service, during which many of the onlookers wept bitterly. Several motor cars were required to convey to the cemetery the many wreaths and flowers sent by friends and associations with which the dead men were connected. Kilsyth Town Band led the procession, followed by companies of fellow-workers bearing the coffins on their shoulders. The victims were carried in the order of seniority. The Salvation Army Band and the Kilsyth Public Band also accompanied the long procession, which was estimated to number several thousand persons.*

*The body of John Patrick was conveyed from Croy, and joined the funeral cortège at the entrance to the cemetery. The Rev. Father Charleson had conducted a service in the Holy Cross Church, Croy, before the cortège left for Kilsyth. The Croy Parish Brass Band accompanied the funeral party. Father Docherty and Father Healy marched in the procession, which numbered well on for 1000 persons.*

*Heavy rain fell while the procession was on the way, and continued all through the burial services, many of the mourners and onlookers being drenched to the skin.*

*A telegram was read at the service in the Anderson United Free Church from the Wesleyan Methodist Conference sitting in Bristol, stating that the Conference sent its deepest sympathy to all sufferers through the colliery disaster." Scotsman 1 August 1923*