

INSOLE, JAMES HARVEY (1821 - 1901), colliery proprietor

Name: James Harvey Insole
Date of birth: 1821
Date of death: 1901
Spouse: Mary Ann Insole (née Jones)
Spouse: Marian Louisa Carey (née Eagle)
Child: James Walter Insole
Child: Mary Ann Lilly (née Insole)
Child: George Frederick Insole
Parent: George Insole
Parent: Mary Insole (née Finch)
Gender: Male
Occupation: colliery proprietor
Area of activity: Business and Industry
Authors: John Prior-Morris, Richard L. Ollerton

James Harvey Insole was born in Worcester on 30 April 1821. He was the second of six children of **George Insole** (1790-1851) who was then a Worcester carpenter and later a South Wales colliery proprietor, and his wife Mary (née Finch, 1791-1866).

In 1828, the family moved to Cardiff, Glamorganshire, and James attended schools there and in Melksham, Wiltshire. Upon reaching his majority in 1842, he entered into partnership with his father as George Insole and Son, colliery proprietors and coal shippers. He also received an inheritance left him by his great-uncle, a wealthy saddler's ironmonger of Birmingham, Warwickshire, who had died in 1831. James married Mary Ann (née Jones, 1818-1882), the daughter of his great-uncle's business partner, in Edgbaston, Warwickshire, on 23 December 1843.

James and Mary Ann lived next door to his parents in Crockherbtown, Cardiff, where their three children were born: James Walter Insole (1845-1898), Mary Ann Lilly Insole (1846-1917), and George Frederick Insole (1847-1917).

In 1844, James and his father leased and revived collieries at Cymmer, Glamorganshire. In 1848 they opened 36 coking ovens to supply the Taff Vale Railway and were shipping coal to customers in France, the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia and South America. James took sole control of the business after his father's death in 1851.

By 1852 the family had moved just out of town to the more rural Penhill and in 1855 James began building Ely Court (now known as Insole Court) near the newly-fashionable cathedral village of Llandaff.

Disaster struck the Cymmer mine in 1856 when 114 men and boys died in the first underground explosion in Wales to take more than 100 lives. At the subsequent inquest, James escaped later charges by claiming that all responsibility for the operation of the colliery lay in the hands of his mine manager. He denied that mine ventilation had been wilfully neglected, stating that he could not recall having received safety recommendation letters from HM Inspector of Mines. He also maintained that he would never refuse money for safety (however, it was not until the 1870s that each miner in his collieries was provided with a secure safety lamp). James became a Justice of the Peace and Borough Magistrate in the same year.

Whilst the Cymmer colliery supplied bituminous coal, its steam coal seams lay expensively deep. Therefore, in 1862, James sank a pit at Abergorki, Glamorganshire, at the top of the Rhondda Valley, which provided a reliable supply from 1864 to 1873. (During the 1870s, improved technology made the extraction of deep coal at Cymmer viable and by 1877 an assured supply of both house and steam coals was secured at this site which lasted until the outbreak of World War II.)

In 1865 the Penarth Harbour, Dock and Railway Company, of which James had been a director since its formation in 1856, opened the new dock at Penarth to by-pass the congestion besetting the Bute docks. In 1866 James was elected as the inaugural President of the Cardiff Chamber of Commerce, and he became a magistrate for the county in the following year.

During the 1870s James withdrew from business in favour of his sons, but promoted an employee, William Henry Lewis (1845-1905), to be managing partner. James was then able to concentrate on the more genteel pursuits of art collection (which he later displayed at various exhibitions) and horticulture (exhibiting and winning at local horticultural shows). He became a 'gentleman of coat-armour' (arms granted 1872) and purchased Chargot House with its manorial estate in Luxborough, Somersetshire, in 1875. He also developed Ely Court into a gothic mansion and expanded its grounds by converting surrounding farmland to form a large ornamental park. By the end of the decade, his two sons were married gentlemen in landed houses to the east and west of Ely Court while his daughter had married into another wealthy coal-shipping family and was living in London.

Other activities include: Cardiff Street Commissioner (1848); Vice-consul to Spain for Cardiff (1858); director of the Ely Valley Railway Company, the Cardiff Hotel Company, and the Cardiff Baths Company; benefactor of the University College of South Wales (land and scholarships); and a 'leading benefactor' of the Cardiff Infirmary (built in 1883, including the Insole Ward).

James's wife Mary Ann died in 1882, seven weeks after undergoing a tracheotomy. Eight years later, in London on 25 September 1890, James married Marian Louisa Carey (née Eagle, 1844-1937), an Irish widow twenty-two years his junior and the sister-in-law of his eldest son (as well as the daughter of his former agent in Dublin). James's eldest son died in 1898, also after a medical procedure.

In 1900 James referred to himself as 'the Patriarch of the So. Wales Coal Trade'. James died peacefully at Ely Court on 20 January 1901 (cause of death, 'senectus', i.e. old age) and was buried nearby at Llandaff Cathedral on 24 January 1901 (these events being somewhat overshadowed by the death of Queen Victoria just two days earlier). His will granted Marian the right of occupancy of Ely Court for life, unless she remarried. This she did in 1905 whereupon his surviving son, George Frederick, took up residence. James's business interests passed to his son (via James's will) and his widow (via her sister's will). He left an estate valued in 1901 at £245,388.

James Harvey Insole consolidated and extended the coal extraction and shipping business founded by his father **George Insole**. James's business activities provided employment, added to the economy and promoted South Wales coal across the world. He was a respected member of Cardiff society and contributed to charities and local institutions. However, James was also a coal owner of his time. He used his wealth to gain social status and, at least to modern eyes, failed in his duty of care to his employees.

Authors

John Prior-Morris

Richard L. Ollerton

Sources

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Richard L. Ollerton, 'Hereford Cider, Worcester Leather, Birmingham Iron, Rhondda Coal: Foundations of a Welsh Coal Mining dynasty', *Morgannwg* (2012), LV1, 62-83

E. D. Lewis, *The Rhondda Valleys: a study in industrial development, 1800 to the present day* (London 1959)

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Death of Mr J. H. Insole. A Pioneer of Cardiff's Trade, *Evening Express*, 21 January 1901 [NB Some details given in this obituary are not correct]

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Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Insole Court](#)

Wikipedia Article: [James Harvey Insole](#)

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