

# **The Terrible Price**

## **Gresford 1934**

Final Script  
September 7– 2004

**Running Time: 28'03"**

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Still: Aerial photograph of Gresford  
*Background music brass band plays 'Gresford'*

Voice over "We were all ready for bed  
**Claris Davies,**  
**Miner's daughter**

(Interview)  
and I can see he was looking. He always cycled to work and there was a big high wall by the door and he had the cycle his bike against the, the wall. He was pumping up the air into the tyres and he was looking at us.

And Mum said what are you looking at? Oh nothing, he said goodnight. God bless. And that that's the last I ever saw of Dad."

**Movietoneneews Trade Mark**  
**British Movietone News – It speaks for itself'**  
*(With signature music)*

Newsreel pictures, including aerial shots show the colliery scenes

Newsreel Caption & *dramatic archive music*  
**Tragic explosion in Welsh Colliery**

**ARCHIVE NARRATION**  
*"Views of the coal mine in North Wales depict the scene of the terrible pit disaster involving such tragic loss of life.*

*A big explosion in the Gresford Colliery, near Wrexham, in the early hours of the morning occurred when men were working below.*

*The exact figures cannot yet be accurately computed but the scene at the pithead, as news is anxiously awaited, tells its own story.*

*The deepest sympathy is extended to the bereaved from the whole country."*

(Main titles over picture of the Gresford Colliery Wheel)  
**The Terrible Price**  
**Gresford 1934**

*Music: Folk song, Ewan MacColl  
Sings 'The Gresford Disaster' (RTP)  
You've heard of the Gresford disaster,  
And the terrible price that was paid;  
Two hundred and forty-two colliers were lost,  
And three men of the rescue brigade.*

**Doris White**  
**Colliery electrician's daughter**

"It sent shock waves throughout the whole country because so many people's lives in the 30's were, were caught up in coal mining and it brought home to people just how dangerous the job was and there was a lot of sympathy."

Archive Film & caption  
**'Coal Face'**  
**Royal Mail Film Archive**

Sound effects with Benjamin Britain's music

**ARCHIVE NARRATION**  
***"Coal mining is the basic industry of Britain.***

***The coal mine's of the country employ 750,000 men.***

***The miner works in a cramped position.***

***Often he has scarcely the room to swing his pick.***

***He works along the seam hewing out the coal."***

Gresford Wheel & Caption  
**A miner's life**

*Soundtrack Ewan MacColl*  
*'Down there in dark they are lying;*  
*They died for nine shillings a day.*

News photograph of pithead

*They've worked out their shift and it's now they must lie*  
*In the darkness until Judgement day*

Caption  
**Albert Rowlands**  
**Miner's son**

"The conditions were shocking, he uh he he used to to work it was so hot most of the time he'd used to uh work in a pair of me me mothers knickers, second hand knickers, that's all he wore,"

Caption

**Robert Edwards**  
**Gresford Miner**

“In the thirties it was blinking hot, like a baker’s oven and uh, as I say, everybody knew that it was hot and like that, but it was a job and you couldn’t say anything about it because, there was no other jobs,”

Caption

**Emily MacGregor**  
**Miner’s daughter**

“He was what they called a hewer and they used to have to pick the coal. His big pick used to sit in the shed at home and he used to take that with him and they used to hack the coal out of the side after what it had been what they called propped up.”

Caption

**Gilbert Tarran**  
**Miner’s son**

“He’d say around the meal, sometimes when he was in the kitchen. He used to say, I don’t know how long I’m gonna stick going to Gresford, he said, because under the conditions we work in he said “Nobody should have to work”

Albert Rowlands

“He used to he used to come home absolutely tired and black from head to foot, just like a Negro, covered with coal dust, I used to get up in the morning there’d be 9 times out of 10 his head on the table fast asleep.”

Gilbert Tarran

"I think his wages then was, I think, around 7 shilling a day and it was a 12 hour shift by he got out from home and by he got so he had no time hardly to do anything at home you see, the time's gone, 12 hours.

(Still: John Tarran and his family – circa 1930)

So he didn't do very much.

He liked to go to church on a Sunday morning. He always went, every Sunday morning and then he'd come home and do the dinner when he came back."

Archive film & music  
Showing miners underground

\*Corner caption  
**'Coal Face'**

#### **ARCHIVE NARRATION**

***"Fireman... driver... hewer...weighman... overman..."***

Interview: Albert Rowlands

"At Gresford the coal cutters worked regularly, they were always wanted getting the coal they dug, they brought up. But occasionally they wouldn't need the afternoon shift for instance, so they used to blow the hooter and all the local people would hear it. Gresford hooter's gone, so that the afternoon men wouldn't go bother going"

Archive film of pithead

Emily MacGregor (starts voice over picture)

"He worked terrifically long hours when there was work. When there was work. And many times I have come home from the grammar school or from the church school and during the summer and my father's been sitting on the step outside. I never thought I would remember this, but I do. And he was crying and when I went up to him and asked him what he was crying about, he said, they have taken everything from us.

(Pause)

Including our pride."

Claris Davies

"They looked down on people that were miners in those days - a lot of people. But I'm proud of um my dad. He was a good dad."

Caption/Gresford Wheel

**Friday evening  
21 September 1934**

*Soundtrack Ewan MacColl  
It occurred in the month of September,  
At two in the morning the pit*

Archive Film coal seam splits

*Was wracked by a violent explosion,  
In the Dennis where gas lay so thick.*

Interview: Doris White

"My father and his brother were both electricians, they were employed as electricians at Gresford Colliery, they used to work alternate shifts.

(Voice over picture of her Uncle Norris- she continues))

"It was Norris's birthday and on his way to work that evening he called at his parents home, probably because it was his birthday and because it was so near to his place of work and he called to see them.

He wasn't feeling too good actually that night, he was, he was suffering from some ear trouble that he had and my father actually offered to go down instead of him .But he said no, he said it's all right, he said, I'll go down tonight he said I'm off tomorrow so that's fine,"

Emily McGregor

"Most of the men from our village had changed their shift to the night shift, that night because Wrexham and Tranmere had a football match and they wanted to go to the football match.

Caption

**Albert Rowlands  
Colliery lamp boy**

"Well, I left home with my father and as we were uh cycling along towards Gresford um 2 more miners came out of a side street. They'd be neighbours, and there's four of us cycling along. He said to me you'd better get on ahead you

know cos I really should have been on uh a bit earlier than most miners. You were expected to be there to dish out ,to dish out the lamps. So I just cycled away and left him and I didn't ever see him again, that was it.

(Pause)

When I arrived, my job then was at one of the windows dishing out the lamps and he was at another window There was 2 windows and they were split in 2 lots - so I didn't even see him to give him his lamp."

**22** Caption/Gresford wheel

**Saturday**

**22 September 1934**

Caption

**Stuart Hibberd - BBC Radio News**

**ARCHIVE NARRATION**

***"The whole of today's news was overshadowed and darkened by a terrible mine disaster in North Wales.***

Archive film, Aerial of pithead

***There was an explosion followed by fire at Gresford Colliery, near Wrexham early this morning.***"

Albert Rowlands (voice over & interview)

"The foreman turned to me, he said, go and get the ambulance man. So I got me bike out...Anyway I got to the, I got to the ambulance man and knocked on his door. He shoved the window up, asked me what I wanted, I said you just, all I could say, You're wanted at the pit."

Robert Edwards

"The people in New Broughton were shouting "Oh! Gresford's gone up! Gresford's gone up!"

Gilbert Tarran

"And this knock came on the backdoor and I went down to see what it was and it was Billy Bellis, I said what's the matter Billy, he says I've gotta get dressed and get ready to come with me to Gresford,"

Photograph: Doris Whites grandfather.

Doris White

"My grandfather was up very early the next morning. I remember him telling me that he saw quite a crowd of people walking past his house towards the pit head and he went down to ask them why, why, where they were going. What they

were doing, and it was then that he found out that there had been an explosion in the early hours of the morning and um he obviously realised straight away the implications of this and he went down there himself.”

Albert Rowlands

“I don’t know what time it was exactly but um I do remember them bringing stretchers up, men dead on stretchers, they had to be dead they’d a blanket covering them you know, and they were just taken away.”

News photograph of mine rescue team

Stuart Hibberd

**ARCHIVE NARRATION**

***“Six bodies were brought to the top within a few hours of the outbreak.***

***The Ministry of Mines has been informed...***

News photograph, crowd at pithead

***that the number of men still trapped by fire in the pit is believed to be between one hundred and one hundred and twenty.”***

Robert Edwards

“The yard was packed with people. So I walked through, I met me boss and he said ‘Go get a lamp and tally’ that’s the safety tally ‘and come down with me.’ So we went down the pit and there...you never seen so many sights in all your life.”

Caption

**Harold Bent**

**Miner – Rescue Volunteer**

“We had to go to where the fire was and the fire was I’m looking up there right across a bit further than that and you couldn’t douse it, you couldn’t get beyond that and that’s where all the men were trapped.”

Doris White

“At one point they came up against a terrific fall of coal ,which my father described as just shifting and spitting out flames and I think they realised then that there was little hope of finding anybody.”

News Photograph: Crowds in pouring rain at pithead

**ARCHIVE NARRATION** Stuart Hibberd

***“Good progress is being made in subduing the fire and the rescue work is being vigorously continued in the hope of getting to the area where the men are cut off.”***



Interview: Gilbert Tarran

“There was crowds of people huddling around in the teaming rain just trying to find out any information what was happening, nobody could tell you anything.”

News photograph – watching crowds

Harold Bent

“We come up and we went to go down again and people was grabbing us asking us what - was there any chance?”

News photograph – crowd by rail line, then woman and young boy

Robert Edwards

“They must have been there first thing in the morning and they were there all afternoon, waiting for and every time they seen the pulleys coming up, they’re waiting to see what would happen, like, you know.”

Harold Bent

“My son’s down there and this, you know all like begging, tears in their eyes. So we just said ,oh aye you know, we just said they could be up be uh anything.”

Gilbert Tarran

“All these different people, all different relatives or whatever they were they were around swarming around all the while and I said I couldn’t do anything so I said to Billy, no use stopping here I may as well go back, else I’ll be in trouble. If I don’t go to work, I might have the sack. If I don’t go”

Albert Rowlands

“There’s police, I remember the RAC and the AA on the road. There was traffic arriving,

News photograph (RTP) shows vehicles, police etc

I remember a big van from Courtaulds loaded with fire extinguishers, just the normal fire extinguishers but they were unloading them and all that, there was all kinds of things happening.”

Family photograph of Mrs Tarran

Voice over, Gilbert Tarran

“I said to my mother I said we don’t know what’s happened at Gresford Mum,

Interview: Gilbert Tarran

but I said it looks to have been a very serious accident and nobody could tell us anything there. Oh dear she said, So I said, there’s only one thing I can suggest. I’ll have to go again this afternoon after I’ve gone to work.

Family photograph of Mrs Tarran

She never said much, she was very calm.”

Interview: Gilbert Tarran

I got into work about uh half past 9 quarter to 10 and I went into the boss and I said to him, I'm very sorry sir, I said, I've been in a awful job this morning.

"What's the matter?"

I said as far as I know my dad's been working in Gresford pit and there's been nasty accident and it looks as if everybody down the pit's been killed.

And all he said to me was - I'm very sorry to hear it .He said go and get your work and take some chores on, And I was there to about half past 12 to 1 o'clock, and that's all he told me.

He wouldn't say no more, he didn't say about go and look after your mother or nothing.

That's all he said, no in interest at all in you, only in money, that's all."

Archive film and photograph of men with cloth caps in rain.

**ARCHIVE NARRATION** Stuart Hibberd

***"We would like to express on behalf of our listeners our profound sympathy for the relatives of those involved in this terrible disaster."***

Harold Bent

"We went to the canteen. We had a - a cup of tea and we come back out and the inspector of mines was there...

(Still of Sir Harold Walker)

...and he stopped us all going down.

If we'd have gone down we'd have been dead. About another 20 of us."

News photograph – Rescue men with breathing apparatus

**ARCHIVE NARRATION** Stuart Hibberd

***"The work is tragically difficult and already three members of the rescue party have lost their lives."***

Gresford wheel and caption

**Only six men working in the Dennis pit escaped.** {Look at}

**Cyril Challoner was one of them.**

*Sound track – Ewan MacColl*

*'The gas in the Dennis deep section,  
Was buried like snow in a drift  
And many a man had to leave the coal face  
Before he had worked out his shift.'*

Caption

**Mrs. Irene Challoner  
Miner's wife.**

"It was five o'clock in the morning. My husband came home on his bike to New Broughton. He rang the bell and I thought 'Oh, he's an hour early' I went to open the door and he collapsed.

News photograph – Cyril Challoner, his wife and baby

The newspapers were after him all the while. We'd got a baby hadn't we. She was just turned three weeks old. These men were all asking questions how he got out.

They were really a pest."

*Caption/Gresford wheel*

**Sunday  
23 September 1934**

ARCHIVE NARRATION (Stuart Hibberd.)

***From abroad, as well as at home, condolences on the terrible happenings at Gresford have been coming in.***

News photograph, scene at pithead.

***"It is feared that the casualty list may still be heavier than the estimates published yesterday evening."***

Interview: Doris White

My grandfather waited there, he, he stood there for two days, I believe one of the days it was raining, he, they stood there in the pouring rain just waiting and hoping

News photograph pithead, crowd, man and bike

that some of the workers would be brought out.

Indeed he waited all day on the Sunday. On the Sunday it was his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday as well.

Interview ; Doris White

We never sent him a birthday card.

We never acknowledged his birthday, because he had spent his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday waiting for news at the pit head at Gresford ,and for him, he didn't want to celebrate his birthday after that.”

Robert Edwards

“I came up on the Sunday afternoon , George Holmes and me, and the Salvation Army was out there playing ‘O God Our Help in Ages ’ - broke me heart. Place just crowded, on top of the coal wagons, everywhere, there was people. What have you seen, everybody asked. ‘I haven't seen anybody.’ Terrible.”

Archive film – 1930's scenes of people using coal, trains, ships, power etc.

**ARCHIVE NARRATION** Stuart Hibberd.

***It is with the very deepest regret that we have to give you this statement.***

***The Mines Department has been notified by the Chief Inspector of Mines at Gresford Colliery that in view of the grave and increasing risks of continuing the rescue operations and being satisfied that none of the persons now left in the mine can still be alive, His Majesty's Inspector of Mines, the representatives of the colliery management and representatives of the workmen employed have decided to abandon the operations and all persons engaged in them have been withdrawn from the mine.”***

Caption/Gresford Wheel

Soundtrack – Brass band plays ‘Gresford: The Miner's Hymn’

**The Dennis section of the mine was sealed and the miners there were entombed.**

**265 men had been killed.**

Music continues

Photograph of the three-man Inquiry team – zoom to Sir Henry Walker

Caption

**A Court of Inquiry was set up under Sir Henry Walker**

Change caption

**It took two years to report.**

Caption – Top right  
**Enactment**

“As regards general management and supervision of the mine...”

Caption  
**The report of Sir Henry Walker**  
**H. M. Chief Inspector of Mines**

“...it is right in fairness that I should first draw attention to the fact that the average killed and injury rate at Gresford Colliery during the five years ended 31<sup>st</sup> December 1933, was lower than the rate for the remainder of mines in North Wales and the rate for Great Britain” [Report page 111]

Archive Film

Top right Caption  
**‘Coal Face’**

Music & sound effects

### **ARCHIVE NARRATION**

*Every working day four miners are killed and over four hundred and fifty injured and maimed.*

*(Pause – music & effects)*

*Every year in Great Britain one in every five miners is injured.*

Robert Edwards

‘When you are in a pit like that and you had a job. Then you don’t think about danger or anything.

(Pause)

Archive film shows miners eating sandwiches underground.

Voice over and interview –  
Robert Edwards

“Twenty past two on the Friday night. That’s when it happened – at twenty past two.”

Archive film continues – Sir Henry Walker - voice over

“It is often difficult to state the exact place of origin and the actual cause of an explosion even when inspection can be made of all the workings.”

(Actor as Sir Henry Walker)

“But when as in this case, no inspection is possible, the place of origin and cause become matters of conjecture not capable of proof.” [Report page 105/6.]

Caption – top right

**‘Coal Face’**

### **ARCHIVE NARRATION**

***“The Davey safety lamp. When gas is present, a blue cap of flame appears around the lamp and warns the miner.”***

Emily McGregor

“My father was adamant and told me in later years, in fact, that the management knew that there was gas down the Dennis pit. ‘Cos they used to take canaries in cages down there to test the gas and they lost quite a few of them.”

Sir Henry Walker

‘Some of the deputies said if they found gas and cleared it, they did not report it in their report book. All findings of gas should in my opinion be reported in the statutory report book.’ [Report page 109.]

Caption.

**‘Robert Edwards encountered gas at Gresford.’**

Robert Edwards

“All of a sudden I see me flame had gone out me lamp and I was in the dark”

Fade out to black screen – caption is held on screen

“ I didn’t know where I was, it was pitch black.”

Sir Henry Walker (Actor)

‘When he was asked if he had had any trouble with gas in that area, the manager replied ‘Never’.

Photograph of William Bonsall, mine manager

[Walker continues voice over]

“Further asked “Not even in the headings/” he answered “No”.

Sir Henry Walker (Actor)

This last evidence is in direct conflict with that of Mr. J. T. Shaw, Sub-Inspector of Mines.” [Report page 21/2.]

Robert Edwards

"And when the next man came out he said to the chap like- right to him. There's someone in here, in the dark,

Fade to black

in the dark, and his lamps gone out. So there's gas somewhere in the face..."

Fade up from black

Interview: Robert Edwards

"...Go fetch the fireman as soon as you can. When the fireman come up there "Bye you were lucky he said" Lucky you came off that coal face 'cos if I hadn't come off the coal face I'd have been gassed."

Sir Henry Walker (actor)

"The air measurements, said to have been made monthly, as required by Section 29 of the Coal Mines Act, 1911, were entered into the prescribed book.

Some eighteen months later in June 1936 – the assistant surveyor, when giving further evidence, said that that on the instructions of the manager he had not made any measurements since June 1934; that the figures in the note-book for July and August were imaginary and that he had concocted them because the Manager had told him to do so a day or two after the disaster." [Report page 11.]

Caption/Gresford Wheel

Soundtrack - Brass band play 'Gresford – The Miner's Hymn'

**'As the Inquiry dragged on, the families of 265 miners dealt with their loss.'**

Photograph of Doris White's grandparents

Voice over & interview

Doris White

'My grandmother used to talk a little bit more about things, than my grandfather did.

Before the Gresford disaster she used to have long hair which she used to wear swept up on top of her head, and um, after the disaster she had her hair cut off, or she cut it off."

Albert Rowlands

"These days you read about counsellors and I'm sure they're exceptionally good for people ,but I had counsellors. I had my aunties, my grandmother, all the aunts, I used to just go from one to the other. I used to just go from one, round to another, round to another, I had quite - quite a big family, my father."

Archive film -1930's pit village and countryside

Voice over & interview

Claris Davies

“She must have had a breakdown. She used to go and put the kettle on always go into the kit, the back kitchen and putting the kettle on, you know. It was like she was expecting somebody all the time.

Dad used to cycle to work. And er she used to stand there and she could see him coming, and she'd start preparing the meal or get the tin bath out for washing purposes - you know he he'd be black as coal when he come home.

So she was doing that all the time till Doctor Melia, that was her doctor he said Mrs Jones, I can't do any more for you he said, the only solution is to move from here. And that's how we moved from the house.”

Family photograph of Norris & Marry Williams

Voice over & interview

Doris White

Norris and Mary had been married 10 months before the disaster. They lived in Llay, a village near Wrexham, and I think my grandmother and Mary shared many interests together.

[Film of Doris White's grandmother's needlework box]

Voice over & interview

They both had a love of needlework and this was one of the things that they occupied themselves with after the disaster, as they were trying to come to terms with, with their loss.”

[Film of 1930's needlework book, inscribed 'Love from Mary, 1935]

“I have a book that Mary bought for my grandmother, a book of needlework and I know that my grandmother always treasured this book.

She did actually make a little stuffed dog called, that she called Peter.

[Film of the stuffed toy dog]

She always had him on, on the sideboard in her room and she used to say that he was sewn with tears.”

[Poster showing portraits of dead miners –published by the Wrexham Leader.]

Voice over & interview

Emily McGregor

“When they put this photograph up, with all the miners who had been in the explosion. They put it up in the local little village shop, they put it up in the



barbers which most men in the village used, they put it up in the shoe repairer's shop and you couldn't get away from it."

[Poster showing portraits of dead miners –published by the Wrexham Leader.]

Caption/Gresford wheel

**The use of explosives in coal mines, shot-firing, was regulated by law.**

*Soundtrack- Ewan MacColl*

*"A fortnight before the explosion,  
To the shot-firer Tomlinson said  
If you fire that shot we'll be all blown to hell,  
And nobody can say that he lied."*

Sir Henry Walker (actor)

"Shotfiring in the 14's district was carried on with little regard for the requirements laid down in the Explosives in Coal Mines Order, and the workmen were just as keen to get shots fired speedily as those who were firing the shots if they were under the necessity of firing them quickly – if they were to get through their shift's work." [Report page 72]

Photograph of John Tarran

Voice over & interview

Gilbert Tarran

"He was a secretary for the miners and he got black balled. Because he disagreed with some of the things that the management were doing and they black balled him. They stopped him working in any local pit in Buckley. So he went to about five different collieries before he could get a job"

Sir Henry Walker (actor)

"It is, I think of importance that a large proportion of the persons employed at the Colliery were not effective members of the North Wales Mineworkers' Union. That was advanced as a reason why the Union was inactive, and no doubt it was a reason why no inspection of the mine on behalf of the workers had been made for many years." [Report page 88/9.]

Archive film 'Coal face' – shows men using brute force using picks and moving wagons

Caption – top right

'Coal Face'

**ARCHIVE NARRATION**

***"A seven-and-half hour shift begins..."***

Sound effects and music

Sir Henry Walker (actor)

“There was a considerable amount of evidence that men were allowed to work and did work longer hours than permitted by the Coal Mines Regulation Act, 1908 – generally known as the Eight Hours Act.

In fact, the provisions of that Act were to all intents and purposes ignored. [Report page 86]

The Manager, in his evidence on this matter, said he knew this practice was a breach of the act but “ many of the men liked it and they asked for it.” [Report page 87]

Photograph shows the members of the Inquiry team.

Caption – Align centre under Sir Henry Walker

**The Inspector’s report was rejected by his two co-assessors.**

Caption align left under John Brass (Mining Association of Gt. Britain) highlighted

**\*The employer’s representative objected to criticisms of the employers and the endorsement of trade unions.**

Caption – align right under Mr Joseph Jones (Miners’ Federation) highlighted

**The Trade Union representative blamed the employers and H. M. Inspectors of Mines.**

The Gresford Disaster memorial today.

*Soundtrack – Brass band plays ‘Gresford – The Miner’s Hymn’*

Caption

**In March 1937, the employers were charged with 42 offences. They were convicted on 8 counts and fined £140.**

Pan down poster from Wrexham Leader

*Music & lyrics Ewan MacColl*

*Down there in the dark they are lying;  
They died for nine shillings a day.  
They’ve worked out their shift and it’s now they must lie  
In the darkness until Judgement Day.*

Continues under end credits

*Farewell our dear wives and our children*

*Farewell our dear comrades as well*

*Don't send your sons in the dark dreary mined*

*They'll be damned, like the sinners in hell*

End credit card:

***Sir Henry Walker***

David Collins

**The Gresford Disaster**

Sung by Ewan MacColl

**Gresford: The Miner's Hymn**

Played by Fishburn Band

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End credits –roller caption

**Historical Consultant**

Stanley Williamson

**Archive Sources**

BBC Worldwide

BritishMovietone News

Illustrated London News

Liverpool Daily Post

Ted Mackay

Eric Meacock

Catherine Rathbone

Royal Mail Film Archive

Wrexham Leader

**Production Consultants**

Mike Dibb

Denysse Edwardes

Imogen Sutton

**Camera**

Benedict Smith

**Rostrum Camera**

Chris Shelley

**Dubbing Mixer**

Andrew Sears

**On-Line Editor**

Dominic McMahon

**Editor**

Shelagh Brady

**Producer**

Martin Smith

(Fade caption)

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(Fade in end card)

A  
Starlock Pictures  
Production

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Running Time: 28 minutes 3 seconds