

Tragic record that made me weep

IN this first Wigan World of the new year, I take you to foreign places. To West-houghton.

And without shame, I admit that I wept when I read this report in a new book which details the life of the district and the terrible disaster at a pit there.

I had known of the explosion at the Pretoria Colliery, but - locally overshadowed by the disaster at Abram's Maple pit - I had never considered it in depth.

What caught my eye was a report that after the disaster in West-houghton, there were so many funerals that one bride and groom had to be married at five in the morning.

Doesn't that just bring it all home?

The disaster underground happened 90 years ago and between Christmas 1910 and new year's day 1911, different cemeteries in West-houghton presented "appalling sights."

The words of Rector Coelenbier of Sacred Heart on January 1, 1911.

He was to add: "No-one will ever

forget the sights ... the hearses, the mourning coaches, the long funeral processions, then throngs of bereaved widows and orphans, relatives and friends, the hundreds of visitors, all of them making their way to the last cold resting places.

To see the people in tears, to hear the sobbing and sighing of the wives and children, brothers and sisters, was something beyond human endurance."

In all there were 336 deaths and an eye-witness at the time said the explosion caused "smoke and fumes to belch like a living volcano out of the two shafts, flinging the timber and debris into the air, some to land on the adjoining winding house, followed by a huge cloud of dust which settled over the surrounding area.

"The ground around the pithead vibrated and the dull, heavy roar which was heard for up to four miles around."

At the time, almost 500 men were working under ground - only four bodies were unidentified.

Britain's worst pit disaster - in Wales - claimed 439 victims.

But what did we REALLY want?

And without hearing the answer I know most folks would wish for the unattainable...

Me? I long for my lost family.

Dad laughing in the pub with his sister, my Auntie Harriet, getting in some more drinks. My Auntie Lizzie making tea in her terraced house. The New Year's Eve hot pots when all and sundry arrived, merry and bright. All laughing at nothing as the fire went out.

I would have liked to re-experience the amazing early days in journalism, walking foggy streets in Wallgate and Scholes and having hot coffee and cream crackers and jam in the old Minorca pub after Coroner J Hopwood Sayer had recorded another verdict.

A friend, rosy on red wine, said he would give a king's fortune to re-live a family holiday in Blackpool in 1966 and to see his Dad growing vegetables and his mother up to her armpits in lavender polish at their old home.

But ours are nostalgic cries. And we have to look forward. But to what?

As one relative said ... it's so easy and so comforting to look back, even if we do have to recognise that even though life goes on, it'll never be the same.