

Coal Nationalisation 50 Years On

David Coxill (SCMC Journal No.5)

Following the passing of the Nationalisation of the Coal Industry Act 1946, after it was initially delayed by opposition in the House of Lords, valuation reports of the coal industry's assets for each coalfield were prepared in order that the appropriate level of compensation could be paid to the private owners. The report for the East Shropshire Coalfield (Coalbrookdale, Shrewsbury and Forest of Wyre) was written by George Price. He was a mining engineer from Sheffield and the report gives us a valuable insight as to the state of the industry at that time. It also allows us to reflect on expectations for the future and how it all turned out. The Oswestry Coalfield is not included in this report as it formed part of the North Wales Coalfield for convenience.

Centred on the new town of Telford, coal seams from the Productive Coal Measures have been heavily worked. For brief details on the geology see Coxill (1995) and the review article on the IGS Telford Memoir in this Journal. The two major companies were the Lilleshall Company in the north and the Madeley Wood Company in the south-east. In addition, there were a number of companies who worked small mines.

The ownership of mines before vesting day (1st January 1947) was as follows. Only Granville, Grange and Kemberton were major producers.

Mine (with Grid Reference)	Owner	Year Closed
Brandlee (SJ678076)	J A Smallshaw	1956
Castle Place	Castle Place Co Ltd	Not known
Common	Common Colliery Co (Dawley) Ltd	1956
Farm	Farm Lane (Lawley Bank) Colliery	1950s
Good Hope	H S Pitt & Co Ltd	Not known
Grange	Lilleshall Co Ltd	1979
Granville (SJ725120)	Lilleshall Co Ltd	1979

Huntington	Huntington Mining Co Ltd	1956
Kemberton (SJ712055)	Madeley Wood Co Ltd	1967
Moors	Moors Colliery Co Ltd	Not known
Wellington	H A L Price	Not known
Old Park (SJ685088)	E Harris & Sons	Not known
Plants Farm	Dawley Mining Co Ltd	Not known
Princess End & Lawley	Unknown	1948
Rock (SJ680092)	J Jones & Son	1964
Shortwood (SJ658096)	Shortwood Co	1970
Shrubbery	J H Woodfin	1950s
Smalley Hill	London Fields Colliery Co Ltd	Not known
Stoney Hill	Doseley Pipe Co Ltd	Not known
Woodside	Woodside Mining Co	Not known

The output for the small mines was quite small, although they made a useful contribution to the local economy. Output figures for 1936-46, for those still open on Vesting Day, are as follows :-

Owner	1936	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	Total tons
Wrekin Coal Co Ltd	9,170	6,601	6,962	5,740	5,786	7,103	8,166	8,446	8,564	7,325	7,465	81,328
J H Woodfin	2,811	436	820	1,249	951	1,406	1,377	1,928	1,870	1,156	664	14,668
J Jones & Sons	1,606	1,811	1,837	1,921	2,061	1,712	1,714	1,661	1,475	1,391	1,524	18,713
Commo	4,42	6,30	7,73	5,25	4,81	5,45	5,42	7,12	6,81	3,74	3,32	60,44

n Colliery Co (Dawle y) Ltd	3	8	1	5	4	0	2	2	9	5	5	4
J A Smallsh aw	-	3,51 7	4,78 6	2,48 5	2,72 1	1,40 4	3,59 3	5,00 8	2,40 2	2,18 8	2,64 9	30,75 3
Hunting ton Mining Co Ltd	-	-	1,06 7	2,55 5	4,03 4	4,14 6	3,61 5	3,24 9	3,55 4	3,66 1	2,95 4	28,83 5
Farm Mine (Lawley Bank)	-	-	675	2,32 7	816	1,59 5	2,02 8	675	4,40 0	5,06 1	5,68 0	23,25 7
Shortw ood Co	-	-	-	959	909	4,21 9	7,60 8	9,03 5	7,79 1	11,2 13	12,0 77	53,81 1
Moors Colliery Co Ltd	-	-	-	1,88 8	3,33 9	3,48 7	3,85 3	5,21 8	6,03 0	5,78 2	8,15 9	37,75 6
H A L Price	-	-	-	275	3,39 7	3,50 4	1,59 0	2,06 6	2,52 0	2,29 8	118	15,76 8
E Harris & Sons	2,17 2	2,33 6	1,95 1	1,72 9	-	-	339	1,62 5	2,54 0	2,99 5	3,20 3	18,89 0

TOTAL	54,300	51,568	54,144	46,225	42,150	52,642	56,049	58,882	58,475	58,856	60,675	587,916

The last small private drift coal mine closed at Shortwoods near the Ercall in 1970. The total estimated reserves per coal seam were estimated as follows :-

Seam	Tons (total)	Tons (small mines)
Fungous or Marquis	22,653,000	-
Deep	24,741,000	-
Top	41,332,000	27,000
Double	46,389,000	193,000
Yard	33,365,000	211,000
Flint	37,928,000	380,000
New Mine or Vigar	38,928,000	945,000
Clunch, Two Foot, Best	54,342,000	1,820,000
Randle, Clod	51,666,000	1,634,000
Little Flint	20,156,000	1,236,000
TOTAL	371,563,000	6,446,000

The production for the Coalbrookdale and Forest of Wyre Coalfield combined was only just over 500,000 saleable tons in 1946. That would suggest reserves sufficient to last about 740 years but 19 years later Brown (1965) estimated the Coalbrookdale Coalfield to still contain 120 million tons. This was sufficient to last until about 2165 AD. Deep coal mining actually finished in 1979.

Madeley Wood Co Ltd

This company operated Kemberton Colliery (SJ112055) and the shafts were completed at a depth of 1,092ft in 1864. In 1946, three seams were being

worked viz. the Yard, Big Flint and Vigar. During the Second World War output varied between 148,675 (1944) to 173,132 (1941) tons per annum and in 1946 the annual output was 190,000 tons. The old Halesfield Colliery (SJ704051) was closed in 1925 and joined underground to Kemberton in 1939. It was used thereafter for pumping, ventilation and emergency egress. During 1946, 558 men were employed but after nationalisation the colliery prospered and the workforce increased to nearly 800. Unfortunately, to the north-east the coal seams were being progressively cut out by Symon unconformity (see Stonehouse 1950 and Coxill 1995). This severely limited the mine's future and, with a possible north-east extension of the Coalport syncline east of the Madeley fault not proven, the mine closed in 1967.

Lilleshall Co Ltd

When miners returned from the First World War, management of the coal mines was returned to the private owners. Although not nationalised during that period, the war required coal mining to be nationally planned. The Lilleshall Company had several deep mines working at that time but, due to adverse trading conditions, all but two closed, viz. Stafford in 1926, Freehold in 1928, Woodhouse No.1 in 1931 and Woodhouse No.2 in 1940. A borehole programme commenced in the 1920s/30s to prove coal reserves in the Lilleshall / Sheriffhales area was quite promising and justified further investment at Granville Colliery, despite heavy losses experienced in the 1930s. It was also expected that a new mine would be sunk in the Sheriffhales area (to be called Woodlands Colliery - E Wood per communication) after the war at cost of £45,000. Originally the new mine was to have come into production at 500,000 tons per annum but an obvious manpower shortage prevented this. The Lilleshall Company were paid £10,498 as a repayment of capital for proving the concealed extension in the Lilleshall / Sherrifhales area.

The new mine was in fact never sunk and the proven reserves were added to that of Granville. It was forecasted that the existing coal reserves were sufficient to maintain existing outputs at each of the three main deep mines (Alveley, Granville/Grange and Kemberton) for over 50 years. It didn't work out like that. Reconstruction led to the merging of Granville and Grange into one single unit in April 1952. Grange was not allowed to cross

the A5 (Watling Street) until after World War Two, where it worked in a small area until it met a fault that upthrew the coal seams to the south, where they had previously been worked by Woodhouse Colliery. A roadway was also driven to connect Granville and Grange collieries underground. After merging, the shafts at Grange were used for ventilation, emergency means of egress and for training purposes. It was regarded as somewhat of a primitive mine by some miners for having flat ropes.

Granville prospered in the post-war years with production often around 300,000-350,000 tons per annum. It reached a peak of around 600,000 in the 1960s, when a new manager went for peak production. He was considered by some local people to be inferior to the previous manager, Mr Blower, who always had a new face prepared to replace an existing one that finished when it hit a fault, a regular feature in this mine.

The mine was severely faulted, which almost led to its closure in 1972, but was given a last minute reprieve due to the energy crisis caused by the Arab /Israeli war of 1972-73. There was an underground shaft to assist in developing faces in seams affected by significant faults, eg Abbey Wood and Great East. One of the shafts was deepened from 1,227ft reached in 1860 to 1,332ft in the 1950s, penetrating the Carboniferous Limestone and becoming the deepest shaft in the coalfield. Curiously, as mine worked coal seams in an eastwards / north-eastwards direction only, it was not affected by the Symon unconformity, an advantage its neighbour Kemberton did not have. Following the closure of that mine in 1967, men transferred to Granville and almost 900 men were being employed. This number quickly fell to about 600 men in the 1970s.

Faulting was the main problem at Granville and by the Second World War coal faces extended to Sherrifhales Manor. During the 1960s, Lilleshall Abbey was undermined in the Top and Double coal seams. This resulted in 2ft of subsidence causing the size of the pool to double and the Abbey walls having to be shored up. Workings in that direction extended to about the Lilleshall Golf Club pavilion and close to Hugh's Bridge. It wasn't the major faults that interrupted production but the smaller ones and the NCB's insistence on working a few long faces instead of several short faces that could more easily accommodate small faults. The high risk / high reward

strategy was costly and led to production decreasing in the mid-1970s to around 250,000 tonnes per annum.

The proven reserves in the Sherrifhales area were little worked and remain to this day, where they could prove a source of coal bed methane. This is obtained by pumping water down boreholes into coal bearing strata that has been deliberately shattered by blasting, where the water absorbs methane. On return, the gas is separated from the water as it is under lower pressure. Old mine goaf workings are also a source for coal bed methane since the workings, even if flooded, are still gassy. It is worth remembering that gas was deliberately collected from Granville and sold to the Gas Board from 1957, the methane drainage plant being attached to Grange Colliery. In the 1970s, the plant was discharging 600 cu ft of methane per minute. Not all coal was cut at Granville for a lot was blasted. The seams were so gassy that the pressure of the methane coming out of a drilled hole on occasions forced the coal face to collapse.

The New Mine seam was abandoned in 1973 and the last face finished in the Heath Hill, near Sherrifhales, in March 1979. The last coal was raised in May and the mine closed in June. An appeal to save the mine was dismissed by the then Secretary of State for Energy, Tony Benn, saying that there was no evidence that the mine would not experience the same problems as had occurred in the past. With the closure of Granville, deep coal mining came to an end in Shropshire.

Perhaps the biggest insult Granville Colliery received was a speech in Telford in the 1980s by Tony Benn to denounce the pit closure programme. It was his decision to deny the necessary investment to develop new districts that led to Granville's closure. Whilst I am sympathetic to the written reply that he gave to Wrekin's then MP, Gerry Fowler, that the mine had suffered heavy losses for several years and that the social costs of its closure had been taken into consideration for some time, I regard Tony Benn to be a hypocrite. The coal industry undeniably has been butchered but Benn supported Arthur Scargill in trying to keep some mines open that were hopelessly uneconomic.

At the time of nationalisation, only one deep mine was working, Alveley Colliery operated by Highley Mining Co Ltd. The coalfield extends from

Bridgnorth in the north to the Abberley Hills in the south, actually crossing the county border into Herefordshire. The Highley Group of the Upper Coal Measures contains thin sulphurous coals which were only rarely worked around Bayton and Mamble. Beneath these, the Kinlet Group of the Productive Coal Measures contained "sweet" good quality coal seams that were widely worked. The principle seams were the Five-Foot (or Broach) Coal, Halfyard Coal, Four-Foot Coal and Two-Foot Coal. Only the Broach was being worked in 1946.

The Highley Mining Company was formed in 1870 and coal production at Highley Mine (SO745830) began in 1874. A second colliery was sunk at Kinlet in 1896 and continued until it was forced to close in 1937 through roof problems and heavy faulting. During the 1930s, it was decided to develop the area east of Highley Colliery and so the Alveley Colliery was sunk on the eastern bank of the River Severn in 1935-37. Production commenced in 1938 and full output was reached six years later at 275,000 tons per annum. The two mines were interconnected and, after 1940, Highley Colliery served only as ventilation shafts for Alveley Colliery. The new mine was modern for its day, being electrified from the start, so there was no need for boilers. Coal face working was fully mechanised and, in 1947, the capital cost of Alveley Colliery was £206,937. There were 289 men working at the coal face, 135 for haulage and another 561 underground making, with the 180 employed at surface, a total workforce of 741 men.

Alveley worked to the north, south and east directions but not to the west, where the Highley mine was. A natural boundary of the prospect to the east was the Romsley Fault but this appears to have been penetrated at a much later date.

The future of Alveley looked promising and it was for about 20 years. At its peak in the 1930s it employed over 1,250 men, producing about 280,000 tons per annum. Then in 1968 the quality of the coal deteriorated dramatically at a time when there was a national over supply and a major pit closure programme being implemented by Harold Wilson's second administration (1966-70) to remedy the situation. Had the quality problem occurred during or immediately after World War II, or during the mid-1970s when there were energy crises through blending, then it might not have

mattered. However, coming at a time of oversupply, the mine was closed as uneconomic in January 1969.

At the time of nationalisation, it was estimated that up to the Romsley Fault the estimated reserves were 22 million tonnes for the Brooch Coal, 10 million tonnes for the New Mine Coal and 15 million tonnes for the Flying Reed Coal, making a total of 47 million tonnes. At most, only 15% of these reserves were worked.