

# THE ORIGIN OF NEWENT COAL MINING

BRIAN SMITH M.A. ©

In the muster roll of all able-bodied men compiled by John Smyth of Nibley and printed in 1902 as Men and Armour for Gloucestershire in 1608 are listed a coal miner and two colliers in Newent. 'Collier' is an occupation which in some parts of the county certainly means 'charcoal burner', and this could apply to the two men recorded at Kilkot and Boulton. However, the presence of John Hodges of Kilkot, described as a coal miner, suggests that at that date there was already a mine in the area of Hill House and Peters Farm on the Newent-Oxenhall boundary, not marked on a map until 1775, (1) and the other two colliers were therefore also likely to have been miners. Boulton and Kilkot were the main sources for coal at the peak of interest in the Newent coalfield in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

New evidence discovered among the consistory court records adds to the sparse information of Men and Armour. The episcopal consistory court had jurisdiction over a wide range of matters including matrimonial and probate cases, adultery and slander, and cases relating to more obviously ecclesiastical affairs such as church repairs and payment of tithes. In 1607 the vicar of Newent, Dr. Nathaniel Dodd, brought a case of non-payment of tithes against John Beach, who in Men and Armour is described as a bailiff of Boulton. The vicar contended that Beach had been mining coal but had not paid any tithes on the product of his mine. Statements were taken of three witnesses on 21 October. (2)

The most detailed is that of Edward Leese, a farmer who had lived at Newent for four years who said that since the previous All Saints Day (1 November), he had been one of the workmen helping to dig sea-coal out of the pit lying in John Beach's field called Wheat Croft. (3) In the course of the previous twelve months about 60 loads had been dug and sold at 4s. a load together with odd bushels sold together at £1.6s.8d. He supported the accuracy of his statement by adding that he helped to sell the coal and had kept accounts for that reason. Two other witnesses, Richard Holbrook and William Belloes, provide little further evidence for they had joined the enterprise at Whitsun, since when 38 loads had been raised. (4)

After clearing their production and transport costs the profits were divided, John Beach taking one-fifth, plus 20s. annual rent for the field, and four named workmen 'with others' receiving the remainder. The impression is that no more than four men were employed at any one time in mining and selling the coal. Certainly the men do not seem to have stayed long since the names recorded in the deposition book are not the same as those who were summoned to the muster a year later, and Holbrook and Belloes both admitted that they had only been mining for six months.

This is one of the small clues suggesting that it may have been a new venture to mine coal at Newent, although presumably outcrop coal had earlier been collected to supplement wood for fuel. Edward Leese specifically stated that he had been mining at this pit for just a year. He was a comparative newcomer, having lived in Newent for only four years, his birthplace being Brewood near Cannock in Staffordshire. Even more significant is the fact that his two fellow miners were both Somerset men from the Mendips where they could have had experience in the lead mines. It seems less likely that they were casually attracted by employment prospects at Newent than that John Beach, starting up a new enterprise, sought skilled men from a long-established mining district.

There are many examples of other new ventures in early 17th century Gloucestershire, such as iron-working, glass-making (nearby at the foot of May Hill), tobacco and flax-growing, and there were less likely projects, such as coal mining at Berkeley in the 1620s (5) and gold mining at Malvern in 1582. (6) It is not therefore too fanciful to suppose that John Beach was also launching a new enterprise in mining on a commercial scale at Newent.

1. Gloucestershire Record Office, Photocopy 5.
2. Gloucestershire Record Office, GDR 100.
3. The field was presumably at Bouldon. It is not so named on the tithe map of 1838.
4. The measures are difficult to convert accurately into tonnage. A load of grain contained 40 bushels, the bushel being the traditional measure of capacity weighing half a hundredweight. The annual product of the mine was therefore about 66 tons.
5. Berkeley Castle muniments, General Letters I.
6. B.S.Smith, History of Malvern (1964), 174.