

COAL MINING AT DYMOCK

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Coal mining in the Newent area is known to have been undertaken from at least the early 17th century,(1) continuing intermittently into the late 19th century.(2) Pits existed at Bouldson, Kilcot and Oxenhall, but it has not previously been emphasised that mining was undertaken further north in Dymock parish as well.

The Newent coalfield consists of four seams of coal outcropping at the surface in a crescent, extending from Taynton in the south to Oxenhall in the north-west.(3) Rarely is the outcrop more than 300 meters wide. Evidence for the extension of the coalfield into Dymock parish was noted during road widening at Castle Tump (SO 713294) in 1979.(4) The coalfield appears to extend through the southern part of the parish, progressing in a north-easterly direction. This area coincides with that of the manor of Little Dymock.

In 1814 an arable field of four acres, part of the customary lands of the manor of Little Dymock, was called "Coalpitfield".(5) This appears to refer to the existence of a former colliery within the field. In 1778 in Bouldson manor, Newent, were two fields known as "Colepitfields".(6) These seem to indicate the site of collieries which were begun c.1760, but had been abandoned before 1770.(7) Further evidence for mining activity or interest in it within Dymock parish is provided by an early 19th century survey of the lands of Walter Honeywood Yate in Dymock.(8) Amongst these lands was Callow Farm; the following summary was appended to the valuation of the property.

"An experienced & celebrated mineralogist Mr Wm Smith of Bath engineer to the Duke of Bedford Lord Somerville etc. has given his opinion decidedly that there is a vein of coal on the Callow Farm & it has been bored and sufficient proofs appeared to confirm this opinion - its distance from any other Collieries and the contiguity to great towns & water conveyance with increasing demand for coal at the neighbouring lime kilns & the advantage of a water wheel to save the first cost and expence of a steam engine renders this a most desirable situation for a colliery and consequently must much increase the value of the property."(9)

Whether the supposed potential of this site was realised is doubtful as there is no indication of any coal mining activity in the area between Callow Farm and the River Leadon. In order for water power to be utilised, it is within this area that the colliery would most likely have been located. If a pre-existing water-wheel was to be used then the shaft would have been adjacent to Callow mill.

It would appear that any attempt to mine coal in Dymock parish c. 1800 involved small speculative enterprises of limited duration.

This was typical of the Newent coalfield as a whole, where the enthusiastic appraisal of the field's potential was never matched by the actual returns of the collieries. For example, the branch of the Herefordshire & Gloucestershire canal constructed in 1796 to encourage and profit by the production of the Hillhouse and Lower House collieries, was abandoned by 1810 due to low returns. (10) About the same time a colliery at Bouldon closed due to financial problems.(11) Although such enterprises were failures, they vividly illustrate the desire to exploit fully local resources, which was fundamental to the expansion of the industrial revolution. Unfortunately for some speculators, the evaluation of some resources was unrealistic, as was the case with coal deposits at Dymock.

Richard Newman 1984

REFERENCES

- 1 Smith B, "The origin of Newent coalmining", GSIA Journal 1976 3-4.
- 2 Bick D, "The Newent coalfield" in Gloucestershire Historical studies, 1972, 75-78.
- 3 GRO P225a M11/12.
- 4 Personal communication from David Bick.
- 5 GRO D185(IV)10.
- 6 GRO D1938/2.
- 7 Bigland R, "Historical Monumental & Genealogical Collections Relative to the County of Gloucester" Vol 1, 1791. He lived at Bromsberrow Place.
- 8 GRO D1142/2.
- 10 Bick D, "The Oxenhall branch of the Herefordshire & Gloucestershire canal" GSIA Journal 1972.
- 11 GRO D245 I/25. Amongst the longstanding debts of the Bouldon Coal Company was money owed to Andrew Foley, lord of Newent manor, for coppice poles.

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