

THE NEWENT COALFIELD

Coal is concealed beneath the undulating countryside of North West Gloucestershire and outcrops in a narrow band extending from the flanks of May Hill as far as a point about a mile east of Dymock. The occurrence is of geological and historical rather than economic interest, for although many attempts at mining were made from the eighteenth century onwards, almost nothing has been done for many years and its existence is largely forgotten.

In this description, only the two main centres of working will be dealt with, the first of which was at Great Bouldson, being indicated as 'coal works' on Isaac Taylor's map of 1777. Here a Mr. Noarse, who occupied the property, seems to have started mining about 1760; the venture failed after about six years (1,2). The appalling state of the roads as mentioned by Rudder, probably hindered development and nothing more happened until 1790 when the promise of a canal linking Gloucester to Hereford via Newent provided a stimulus.

According to the Gloucester Journal 'the stratum of coal at Newent exceeds the warmest expectations formed of it. The depth - - - is only 41 yards; and though the workmen have sunk six feet eight inches in coal, they have not yet passed through the bed. A body of coal of this thickness is rarely met with. By means of the intended canal, these coals will be constantly and regularly delivered in this city, at 8s 6d per ton' (3). Further similar insertions followed but it seems that the reports of coal prospects 'now ascertained beyond all doubt' expressed hope rather than conviction (4). Both the canal and the colliery owners were looking to each other for salvation.

The pits did not turn out successfully, but another attempt was soon made. In 1803, two shafts had lately been sunk and coal was being raised at the rate of seven tons per day (5). The works were certainly active in 1805, by which time the Bouldson Coal Company had probably been formed (6). This concern was the one mentioned by Sir Roderick Murchison, writing in 1838, 'At Bouldson, 6 shafts were opened about 30 years ago by a Joint Stock Company. Here, as at Lower House (see later) there were 4 seams of coal lying nearly all together, the first being 1ft 6ins, the second 10ins, the third 10ins, and the lowermost 2ft 6ins in thickness. The shafts were from 63 to 80 yards deep; the faults were very numerous, and the enterprise was abandoned owing to the great influx of water - - -' (7). During the Bouldson Coal Company period, the ground belonged to the Hon. Andrew Foley. In 1810/11 the directors were a Mr. Capel, John White (Gloucester), J.S. Morse (Newent) and a Mr. Hartland of Bouldson who acted as treasurer. There was also a Mr. Pruen of Cheltenham, described as 'very obstinate'.

From a statement of Morse on March 1811, the concern was clearly in serious difficulties - 'I am in hopes Mr. Foley will take into consideration our heavy loss and will make some abatement'. The particular issue involved a £144 bill for poles (pit proprs) (8). According to a later writer, 'the workings were abandoned in consequence of the bad state of the roof above the coal, requiring large quantities of timber for support'. A trial pit sunk 600 ft. to the south, found

nothing of value (9). The Bouldson company probably collapsed soon after 1811 since when mining seems to have ceased. Thirty years later however, fields on the west side of the road were known as 'coal ground' (10). Even today after ploughing, the area is quite black with coal. Local information reveals that a spring in the one field issues from an old level driven into the coal beds. Several old shafts close to Great Bouldson have been swept away by bulldozers recently, but the green mound of one shaft remains by the roadside.

The second and perhaps more interesting portion of the Newent coalfield lies between Lower House and White House, $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles west of the town. It is shown on the appended sketch plan. The former part of the district was situated in a detached portion of Pauntley (later transferred to Newent parish) and the latter is in Oxenhall parish. By observing coal particles in the fields, the outcrop is seen to take a line from the Kilcot Inn to Hill House. It again appears curving round White House and everywhere forms the western boundary of the seams.

Pits at Lower House were 'working with good profit' according to Bigland's county history, published in 1791, so presumably they were at least being sunk, if not actually producing, in April 1791 when the Herefordshire & Gloucestershire Canal Act was passed. Resulting from the impetus of this Act, prospecting intensified and 'great exertions are now making to establish collieries on the estates of the Hon. Andrew Foley at Oxenhall' (11). These exertions included a boring, begun on 20th December 1790, which in a month had reached a depth of 71 feet after passing through four coal seams aggregating nearly 8 feet in thickness (12). The site is not known.

Towards the end of 1793 canal construction was well under way from Gloucester to Newent. The canal company began to think seriously of mining the coal themselves and were considering the use of 'fire engines' for pumping (13). A few months later the committee was able to report a very satisfactory boring in the land of Mrs. Phillips, owner of the pit at Lower House, and had gained permission to sink a shaft (14). Judging from descriptions in the canal company's minutes books, and from the geology of the area, the spot was most probably west of Lower House on low lying ground. It is called 'Part of Coal Field' on the 1841 tithe map although by that time had reverted to pasture (15). Sinking the shaft to the seam took five months but the coal 'not promising from its present appearance to be fit for any other purposes than lime burning and the like', it was determined to sink another, more on the dip of the seam, whilst still continuing the existing pit (16). Terms of one seventh were agreed with Mrs. Phillips on the price of coal at the colliery, the small coal being worth only about three shillings per ton (17). In January 1795, ten waggon loads of coal went to the poor in Newent, at Rev. Foley's expense.

At this time a seam over six feet thick was reached at a depth of 31 yards, but the coal was apparently of no better quality, so in May 1795 a pit was sunk on the land of a Mr. Wood at Hill House 'between the present pit and the brook' (18). This became known as Hill House Colliery and we can be pretty certain that the grass-grown and bramble-covered hillocks midway between Lower House and Hill House constitute its remains. (Surprisingly, the brook did not form the boundary between

these properties.) Meanwhile the Lower House pits were still raising coal and in June 1795 an agreement was drawn up with Robert Niles to haul 200 tons to the canal at Newent, for 2s 6d per ton (19).

At this point the canal company had a chance of handing over its colliery interests which had yet to become profitable, to a Richard Perkins of Oakhill, Somerset. The opportunity was quickly taken and as an inducement it was decided to build a mile-long branch to the pit from the main canal at Oxenhall (20). In return, Perkins agreed to supply the company with up to 4,000 tons of small coal annually for brick and lime burning, also to pay 2d per ton for coal carried on the branch, and to guarantee 70 tons per day if it could be raised and sold (21). His first action was to dismiss all the colliers including John Webster the foreman who, with wife and family, had come from Nailsea near Bristol. Four guineas travelling expenses were allowed for their return home.

Nearly a year later, nothing much had happened though the branch was largely finished. The anxious canal company advised Perkins to hurry with 'sinking your new shafts - - - - - as a disappointment in this instance will be big with consequences the most disagreeable to yourself and the company' (22). By the end of 1796 Perkins was said to be erecting a steam engine. Coal had been raised but was too poor for the canal company's use and in the following February it suffered the bitter irony of a request to supply a boat to trade on the newly opened canal from Gloucester to Newent, for the purpose of bringing 'foreign' coal to the town (23).

In 1798 Hill House Colliery was being managed by a concern trading as Perkins, Moggridge (of Boyce Court) & Perkins, which also dealt in stone and lime, and had at least one other pit in the vicinity. The coal traffic on the branch had still not developed although Perkins & Co. were understood to be raising a considerable quantity. The canal company thereupon issued a strong reminder about the agreement. Some improvement in traffic must have resulted since Moggridge, Junior, applied for a reduction on coal tonnage from the colliery to clothiers on the Stroudwater canal (24). After 1800 the canal company, whose minutes have proved so useful in compiling this account, held very few meetings until 1829. There is however an entry in 1817 which referred to 'The land cut, to make the branch to colliery' (25). The branch had presumably been isolated and drained.

In 1833 the Hill House pits had been closed for several years at least, when it was reported that 'The seven ft coal was the bed principally worked; but it was much disturbed and dipped rapidly, or two ft in a yard to the N.E. or E. In 300 yds, four faults of considerable magnitude were encountered and the coal contained a large quantity of sulphur'.

The section was as follows (26)	Clay and Rock	102 ft
	COAL	7 ft
	Clod	4 ft
	COAL	2½ ft
	Clod	15 ft
	COAL	4 ft

Sir Roderick Murchison writing in 1838, noted that all the Newent pits had then been 'abandoned many years and the information now to be derived from a few old workmen is scanty and imperfect - - - . At Hill House Colliery - - - - the coal strata were found to be so highly inclined, that the works were soon abandoned, though not before the ruin of those concerned' (27). However, Hill House Colliery was at work in a small way in 1839 (28). It had closed again by 1842 but was going in 1846 (29). William Perks was engineer at the pit, and he gave some details 30 years later when a further reworking was being considered (12). Unfortunately his evidence was garbled and unreliable - for example, Mr. Perkins had 'realized a fortune' and the ground was 'altogether favourable for working'.

The pit may have been reopened for exploration, for in 1957 Mr. Baldwin of Pool Hill, aged 74 years, told me that he could remember an open shaft and a winch at the site. This renewal of interest which took place in the 1870s notwithstanding the record, had one considerable consequence; the formation of The Newent Colliery Company, being the last serious attempt at mining in the area. Pits over 400 ft deep were sunk near White House, to the north of Hill House, and it is interesting to learn that between these two forms various borings and trial shafts had been put down in the 1800-1840 period without much result (30). No signs remain of these trials.

The Newent Colliery was a determined attempt to exploit the tiny coalfield but regrettably the management had to cope with a bad slump in the trade, heavy pumping problems and a sulphurous coal. The enterprise collapsed and the plant came under the hammer in 1880. The position of the colliery is marked by an oval brick-lined shaft and grassy spoil tip on the side of the lane from Oxenhall to Gorsley.

Apart from a few trial broings in recent years nothing has been done subsequently, nor are any developments likely, unless centred to the east, well away from the faulted and unsettled ground. Nevertheless, in these wiser days, we ought not to forget the old miners, following those beckoning seams of coal that only led to ruin.

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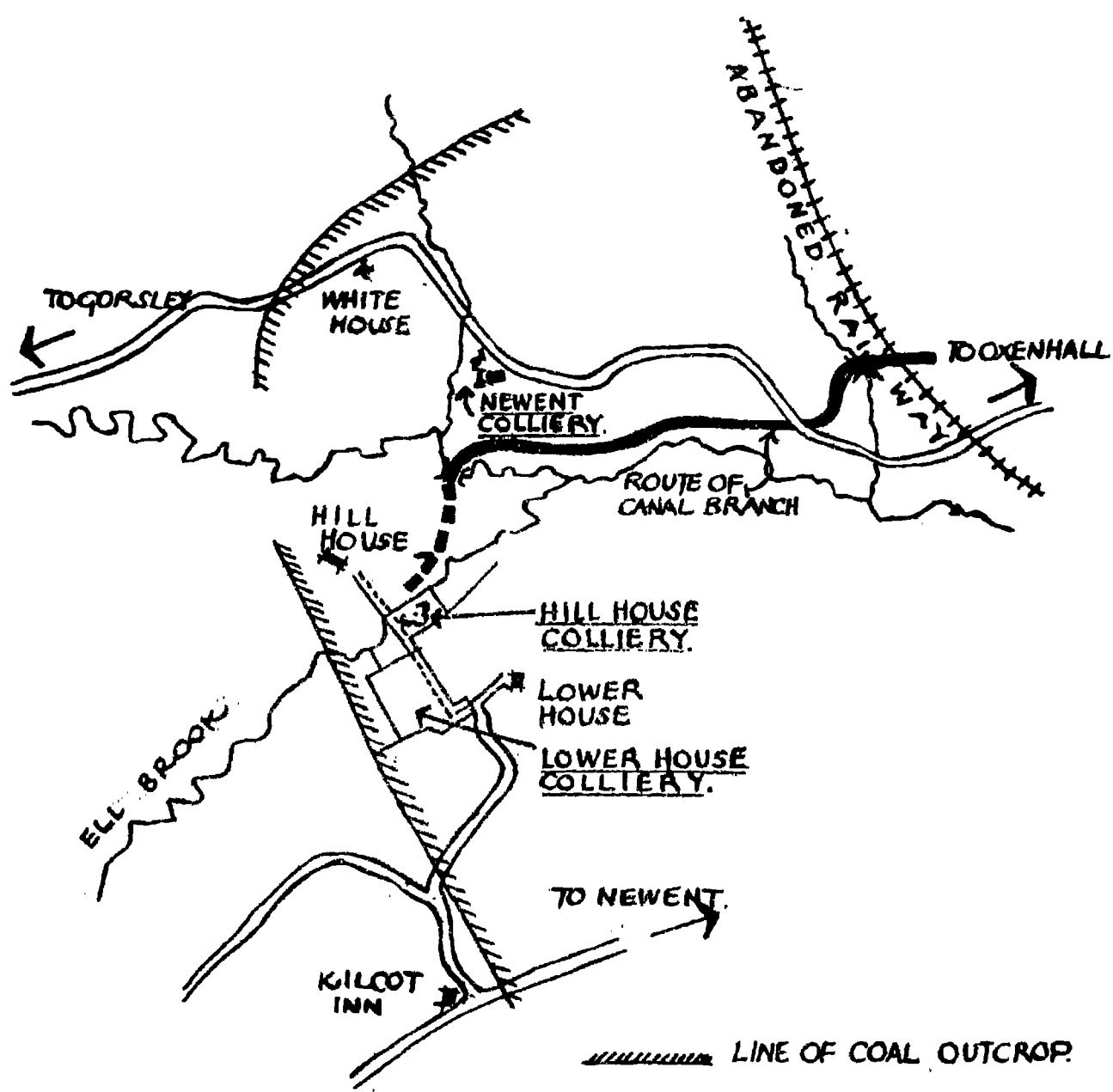
References

Note: H.G.C. = Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal

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SKETCH OF PART OF THE NEWENT COALFIELD GLOUCESTERSHIRE



scale 6 inches to 1 mile.
 drawn. mg jones. march '71.