

## Mining in Hunthouse Wood, Mamble, Worcestershire

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### Introduction

The parish of Mamble in Worcestershire lies on the Wyre Forest Coalfield and has seen mining from at least the 17th Century. The largest complex of mines is located close to the village centre, along the Marlbrook valley. However, coal has been worked at other locations in the parish including Hunthouse Wood, which lies to the south and is bordered by the Dumbleton Brook on its east and south sides. The name Hunthouse Wood is now applied collectively to a series of dense woods which clothe the steep slope of the brook and its tributaries and today is largely owned and run as a nature reserve by the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust. However, it has had an interesting industrial past, as will be reviewed below.

### Geology

Hunthouse Wood lies on the edge of the southern basin of the Wyre Forest coalfield and coal seams outcrop along its southern edge. In this basin, known as the Mamble Coalfield, only Upper Coal Measures (the Highley Beds) are present and lie unconformably on the underlying Old Red Sandstone. Two important coal seams occur in Hunthouse Wood which have been worked commercially as household coals as well as the more traditional uses such as hop-drying and brick-making. They lie in an east-west belt of measures stretching across the Mamble Coalfield, in which the coal seams thicken appreciably and improve in quality. The Hunthouse Wood area also sees an improvement in floor and roof conditions in the higher of the two seams, the Main or Five Foot, in which most of the working has taken place. The lower seam, the Hard Mine Coal, is, as its name implies, rather hard and difficult to work. Both coals attain a thickness of about 6ft, including bands of parting.

The main stratigraphic feature in the sequence is a band of sandstone, 100ft thick, known as the "Thick Sandstone". This, along with a thin band of limestone rich in the fossil *Spirobis* and a band of purple and red mottled clay, the "Horseflesh Clay", provides a useful marker in interpreting the

geology of the locality. The most significant tectonic feature of Hunthouse Wood is that it is located in a trough fault, with a throw of about 50ft. This means that the Hard Mine coal outside of the fault is almost on the same horizon as the Main Coal within it. This was elucidated in the Second World War by Geoffrey Bramall, managing director of the Bayton Colliery Company, and has had considerable implications for the history of mining.

### **Pre-Mining History**

Hunthouse Wood formed the boundary of the Saxon manors of Sodington and 'Broc'. In the 13th Century some of the woodland was granted to one Wynwaru as part of a farm or 'wic', hence the name Winwick's Wood. For a period Hunthouse Farm (perhaps the manor of Broc) may have been a hunting lodge. Subsequently the names have lost their meanings and become transposed, leading to the presence of Winrick's Wood Colliery in Hunthouse Wood.

By the end of the Middle Ages the wood had become part of the lands of the Blount family of Sodington and Mawley Hall and it was to remain in this family until well into this century. Little is known of its use for much of this period. The land is wet and slopes steeply, so was of little agricultural value. Most retained its semi-natural cover with only some coppicing until felling took place between the wars.

### **Historical Evidence for Mining**

The first records of mining in this part of Mamble which have so far come to light are the notebooks of the geologist Sir Roderick Murchison, who visited the area in 1833. He noted the presence of shallow mines at Hunthouse. In 1842 Berrows Worcester Journal reports the death of a boy who fell down a pit shaft at Frith Common, a settlement about ( mile west of Hunthouse Wood. It is likely that these mines were the fore-runners of the large late-19th century complex that was known as Buckets Leasow Colliery, and which worked the coal from the outcrop south of Hunthouse Farm almost towards the ground of the Mamble Colliery itself. Both of these were owned by the Blount Family and were subsequently leased to the Aston family. Buckets Leasow remained a primitive colliery with handwinding until its closure in 1907, employing about 20 men in its latter

years. It is important to note that it did not include any part of Hunthouse Wood in its workings and it is not certain whether Murchison's colliery in 1833 was within the wood or close to the farm. Thus there is no certain documentary evidence for pre-20th century mining in Hunthouse Wood.

Matters become much clearer with the founding of the Bayton Colliery Company, registered in December 1914. Although this actually took over a mine in Bayton village, known as Bayton No.1 on the Sakenhurst Estate of the Guerne family, the real target was to lease the minerals of the Mawley Estate; 1500 acres including Hunthouse Wood. The First World War meant that this was not achieved until 1921 but almost immediately the company began to sink a shaft just to the north of Mamble village; Bayton No. 2 or the "Eggbox Pit", so-called because of its square-section, timber lined shaft. Unfortunately it was not a success and it closed in 1923, shortly followed by No. 1, where reserves had been exhausted. The Bayton Colliery Company was left without a working colliery to its name and was forced to do some rapid prospecting. It was decided that the outcrop in Hunthouse Dingle was the best prospect for rapid coal production and in April 1924 a pair of drifts were driven in an outcrop of the Main Coal. The mine exceeded expectations and so the site was developed in a more extensive way. In 1925 a tramway was laid to the mine from the road and in 1926 a third drift was opened further to the south in the woods.

In 1928 the workings were so extensive from the first two drifts that it was decided to sink shafts down to them, to improve ventilation and working efficiency. In the event, it was necessary only to put down a single shaft and, on completion of this, a road was laid out to it, allowing the company's own fleet of lorries direct access to the pit head and eliminating the need for the tramway. The mine was now known as Bayton No.3 or Winwick's Wood. At some point a shaft was also sunk to the more southerly drift in the wood.

In the early 1930s, the company's interests lay elsewhere, with a trial sinking at Stildon Manor (Bayton No.4), the purchase of the small Hollins Colliery in Pensax and a rather unsuccessful colliery nearer Mamble Village (New Mamble or Bayton No.5). However, No.3 remained the mainstay of the company and in April 1936 a start was made on a fresh pair of shafts to extend the workings further to the north. These were to be Bayton No.6, or

Hunthouse Colliery. This went well but in August 1937 water broke through a small fault and flooded the existing workings of No.3. Given that this was shortly to be abandoned in favour of No.6, no attempt was made to pump the old mine dry and the miners were transferred to New Mamble (the other mine of the company then in operation) until No.6 was finished.

This finally opened in June 1939, and the expectation was that New Mamble would soon close. However, the Second World War intervened to make this a very protracted process. It was not possible to secure the promised electricity supply at No. 6, leaving it short of power. Furthermore, Government permission could not be obtained to close down New Mamble, even though it was making a loss. The power shortage was eventually solved by the purchase of two gas engines. These drove the compressors to supply the compressed air picks used at the face. However, the Ministry of Fuel and Power still refused permission to close New Mamble until the company agreed to reopen the drifts to provide work for those men too old to cope with No.6. Thus in 1944 one drift was driven parallel to those of 1924 and another closer to that of 1926, to clean out the coal that had previously been left. A lorry road was also put down to these.

At the time of sinking of the 1944 drifts, Geoffrey Bramall of the Bayton Colliery Company became convinced that the best coal lay to their north-east. A detailed survey of the geology of the brook valley suggested the presence of the trough fault and he proved this by driving a trial level at 45( from the mouth of one of the 1924 workings. This, starting out in the Main Coal, passed through the fault into the Hard Mine, proving Bramall's conjecture. Bramall then turned to the area east of the trough fault and explored the outcrop of the Main Coal with a series of trials. Arising out these, a production drift was started in November 1946, following the draining of a bog which lay in its path. The first entrance to this mine was on the outcrop, close to the brook and was served by a tramway. This was subsequently used for drainage, with a cross-measure drift being driven to the surface further to the west to meet up with a surface road for lorry access. Subsequently a shaft was sunk into its workings, presumably to aid ventilation. Sometime between 1947 and 1950 a further production drift, No.9 Drift (not to be confused with No.9 Shaft), was opened alongside the

brook, midway between the 1924 and 1946 drifts. This worked the Main coal previously proved by one of the trials referred to above.

After the war, electricity finally arrived in November 1945, although an electric winding engine was not installed until some years later. The coal industry was nationalised in August 1947 but at first the Bayton Colliery Company retained its independence, working as a small mine under a series of temporary licenses from the National Coal Board. However, operations at Bayton were too large for the company to escape the NCB's clutches and, after an uncomfortable 18 month relationship, the Bayton Colliery Company abandoned the struggle and made the mine over to the NCB. They continued to operate a brickworks and coal haulage business until the 1960s. The NCB seem to have made a sorry mess of running the pit and closed it in February 1950. As a small and isolated mine, it stood little chance of survival in the new order.

Although the NCB had no interest in working the Worcestershire half of the Wyre Forest Coalfield, others were not so easily discouraged. The Mole family of Clows Top had worked at the local collieries since the previous century and had made several attempts in the inter-war period to open mines in the area. With the withdrawal of both the Bayton Colliery Company and the NCB, they took their chance and obtained a license to work the coal in the vicinity of No. 8 drift as a small mine. Rather than re-use the drifts, they sank two new shafts, (officially Bayton Nos.10 and 11, following on from the nomenclature of the Bayton Colliery Company), although the mine was always known as Hunthouse. Production began in 1954, using a mixture of largely second-hand plant driven by compressed air or electricity. As a licensed mine, usually 30 men were employed underground. In 1963 an additional shaft (No.12) was sunk and fitted with a pump to improve drainage. The mine closed in 1972, nominally because of flooding. Attempts to re-open it as a going concern came to nothing, although the site was not cleared until 1979.

### **Surface Remains**

As noted above, documentary evidence for pre-1924 working is insubstantial and inconclusive. However, there is clear archaeological evidence for earlier mining. Along most of the outcrop are traces of coal

digging, with signs of spoil tips and drift mines in several places. Old workings were discovered when No.8 drift was being opened out in 1946, where the coal had been taken from the upper part of the Main Coal seam. In the east of the site, the workings seem fairly haphazard, but in the west they seem to have been laid out to a plan. Along the valley-side are two parallel lines of shafts, each on its own terrace, which also carry access tracks. The shafts are laid out at approximately 50 yard intervals. Exact details are difficult to recover, as the area has been affected by ground slippage and was of course partly re-worked in the 1920s. However, there are perhaps up to 5 or 6 shafts in each row. On the level ground by the side of the brook there are substantial spoil mounds, perhaps arising from the shafts .

The area of the 1924 drifts is well preserved at the eastern end. There are the foundations of the haulage engine, still with holding down bolts, and the office. The mouth of No.2 drift is discernible, and No.7 cross-measure drift put down in 1944 can be followed for some distance to where it has collapsed. When the drifts finally closed here the mouths were sealed by bulldozing and so the western end of the site is harder to interpret. A number of artefacts remain, including a vertical boiler and the base of a wooden tub in the brook, a steel arch, a wheel set, and numerous lengths of rail. The tramway incline that served the 1924 mines is well preserved for most of its length and at the top of the bank there are brick foundations of unknown function; perhaps part of a brake-drum assembly or a creeper. Further along is a bank made up of the bodies of steel tubs, now badly corroded. These are perhaps more likely to date from the 1940s.

At the site of the shaft of No.3, there is no sign of the shaft itself. At some point, the stream which ran alongside the pithead has been culverted and perhaps at this point the site was tided up. However, the site remains as an obvious platform, with large mounds of burnt ash. There are signs that this has been quarried for hardcore at some time. There are a quantity of concrete arches on the site, that are probably left over from culverting the stream, and also two much rusted A-frames of unknown provenance. The lorry road down to this site is obvious, as is its continuation to the 1924/44 drifts. The lowest section of this is distorted by land slippage and the main track now curves away to the east, cutting through the line of the 1925 incline.

At the site of Hunthouse No.6, there is a prominent spoil tip and, adjacent to it, the foundations of the land sale screens. The shafts have been capped and most of the site built over. However, nearest to the lane which originally served as the tramway and then road to the earlier mines are the brick-built compressor and gas engine house and the stables. These have survived by being converted into a house and garage. The roofs have been raised but the original walls are quite distinct. Further along the track, buried in conifers which screen the saw-mill, is a horizontal boiler almost completely sunk in the ground. At the site of No.8 drift, the incline of c.1946 is well preserved for most of its length. It is associated with several large lengths of approx. 9" flanged pipes and rail sections. At its base, the first drift entrance is obvious as a line of subsidence. Just off this is a (filled) brick-lined shaft, shown on all plans of the workings, perhaps put down either for exploratory purposes or to aid ventilation. The later entrance to the drift is marked by two low brick retaining wall and a short length of subsidence. The access road is largely visible, but seems to have been washed away by a stream close to the drift mouth.

Further north in the wood is the site of No.9 shaft, sunk to ventilate the workings. This is now marked by a flooded hollow but lying besides it are the remains of a hand windlass. This consists of an iron roll supported on two wooden frames, and was formerly encased in a sheet-iron hut. This was apparently purchased secondhand and never used. The site of the Mole Brothers' Hunthouse Colliery was completely cleared, except for No.12 shaft set in the wood. The Pulsometer Pump was left in situ and the flooded shaft used as an emergency source of water for the sawmill which replaced the mine. A steel gantry stands over the shaft, carrying an electric motor which was used to move the pump up and down. The gantry itself may have been purchased second-hand from the Rockmoor Coal gassification experimental site, set up in 1951. Close by is a sinking kibble. Hunthouse Colliery was salvaged by Bewdley Museum before its demolition, and this now has a number of artefacts in store, including a cage and tub.

There is an enigmatic collection of remains close to the entrance to the nature reserve, in the north of the site. These essentially consist of a number of deeply worn holloways leading south-east down the hillside to Dumbleton brook. They may well have been formed over a considerable

period as part of a route through the wood to Pensax and perhaps also for timber hauling purposes. Some are overlain by the 1946 incline to No.8 drift. However, one cuts through this, showing the route was re-established post-1947. At the top of the bank is a brick and concrete foundation of some kind of building of unknown function. Next to this are a compressed air receiver and a water-tube vertical boiler. These can be identified on a 1946 inventory of Hunthouse No.6 colliery. A little further north are another series of holloways leading down the hill, their lower ends now obscured by land slips. In one of these are the remains of pipes and rails suggesting it had been associated with coal mining. Detailed records of the activities of the Bayton Colliery Company survive but less is known of the NCB period or the early days of the Mole Brothers' operations. It is possible that the tracks may have been pressed into service during these times, perhaps as access to No.9 or other drifts. The remains of No.9 drift have not yet been positively identified but, together with the associated trial drifts, they are probably at the northern edge of earlier outcrop working.

## **Conclusions**

Hunthouse Wood has had a long history, being exploited both for its timber and coal. Plans to extend the workings into areas yet untouched came to nothing in post-war years and much coal remains. An attempt to resume mining in 1990 failed in the face of local (commuter) opposition and County Council policy.

There are good remains surviving from all periods of mining history. The coal mines are well documented during the interwar period but much less is known about activities outside this period. Further study of the physical remains may help to shed light on this. Although Hunthouse Wood Nature Reserve is open to access at all times please note that many of the remains of Hunthouse Colliery (Nos.8-12) lie on private land and the goodwill of the landowner depends on the respect of his privacy.