

A VERY ORDINARY HOUSE

by L F R ANSTIS



Albion House 1840

When my wife and I moved to Albion House in Coalway in the Forest of Dean three years ago, all we had been told about it was that it had been built in about 1840 and had been a pub. The architect who surveyed the house thought that part of the building dated from the 18th century, but the earliest date mentioned in the deeds was 1932.

With this meagre information we started to learn what we could about the house and the people who had lived in it. We hunted for documents and maps in the Gloucestershire Record Office, and in the Public Record Office at Kew. Anything that related to Coalway and the surrounding Forest area was devoured. We also talked to the oldest inhabitants of Coalway to hear what they could remember about Albion House when they had been young. One of the first discoveries we made from a map (1) was that Albion House was practically sitting on an old coal mine - the Gentlemen Colliers - which had been first worked in 1735.(2) Its name immediately struck a chord and we soon remembered that this was one of the three coal mines which the Forest Mine Law Court discovered in the 1770s were being run by 'foreigners'.(3) An old miner giving evidence to a Commission many years later said that it had been so named because "they were all gentlemen who had to do with it".(4) The Mine Law Court had existed since before the 16th century. It was rather like a trade association, and governed the conduct of the free miners in all aspects of their work. It ensured that only free miners could operate coal and iron mines and that only qualified foresters could become free miners. When the Court discovered that the Gentlemen Colliers and the two other pits were being run by 'foreigners', a great debate ensued, and the free miners' policy of refusing to allow 'foreigners' any part in mining in Dean was strongly and passionately re-affirmed. The response of the 'foreigners' and of the officials who wanted to allow 'foreigners' to operate Dean's mines was made manifest, so the free miners claimed, when one night in August 1777 all the Court's documents were stolen from the chest in which they were kept at the Speech House in the heart of the Forest. This action prevented the Court from operating and gave officials the opportunity of abolishing it. It never sat again. (5) That night in the summer of 1777 was indeed a black one for the Forest of Dean miners.

Sixty-five years later a Government Commission awarded the Gentlemen Colliers pit to Charles Fox, a 'foreigner' from Monmouth, and Peter Teague, a forester and free miner.(6) So right at the beginning of our researches, we found that much Forest history lay beneath our house.

As far as the house itself was concerned, we soon found out that in the 19th century it had been within the boundaries of the Forest, the boundary line passing just down the road at the village cross-roads.(7) This meant that it was almost impossible for a two-storey house, so well constructed, to have been built before about 1840. Until the passing of the Encroachments Act in 1838, (8) practically everyone living and holding land in the Forest was doing so illegally. In spite of half-hearted attempts by officials to prevent them, they encroached into the Forest during the 18th century, slowly at first and then with increased speed and urgency as poverty and population pressures forced them on. They fenced in land and put up houses that were, in the main, little more than hovels, single-storey and without windows, built of loose stones and with roofs of stone or turf, the whole not exceeding 10 feet in height. In 1803 there were nearly 3,000 men, women and children squatting in the Forest in about 600 dwellings, snatching there what meagre living they could.(9)

One such family of encroachers was the Baglin (or Bagland) family who, at least by 1787, were living in a turf-roofed encroacher's cottage on the site of the present Albion House.(10) The head of the household was named Daniel, and had been born in 1744.(11) In this cottage he lived with his wife Sarah and their children, who included 3 sons - William, Isaac and young Daniel. The cottage stood in 2 acres of ground which his predecessors had fenced in many years before, on the side of the rough road (now Parkend Walk) leading from Coalway through the woods to Parkend. The boundaries of this land are the same now as they were then. While researching for another project we discovered that one member of the Baglin family, Thomas (probably a cousin of William, Isaac and Daniel) took part in the Forest riots of 1831 and was sentenced to 6 months in the House of Correction at Littledean for his pains.(12)

By 1834 old Daniel was dead and his son Isaac was living in the cottage with his family, which included his sons John and another Daniel. In about 1840 the Government gave Isaac legal possession of his house and the 2 acres of ground, and he and his family continued to live there. Within a few years, however, Isaac had knocked down his hovel, built the present house and opened it as a pub.(13) In 1842, to pay for its construction, he raised a mortgage with Thomas Birt Trotter, a Coleford businessman; (14) but how he persuaded Trotter to lend him the money is not known, for Isaac had humble origins and was described in the census returns as a labourer. That the house was not designed as an ordinary dwelling house is shown by its construction; 3 rooms downstairs, 1 big room upstairs with a fireplace at each end, and a cellar where the beer was kept. The family lived in a smaller house next door.(15)

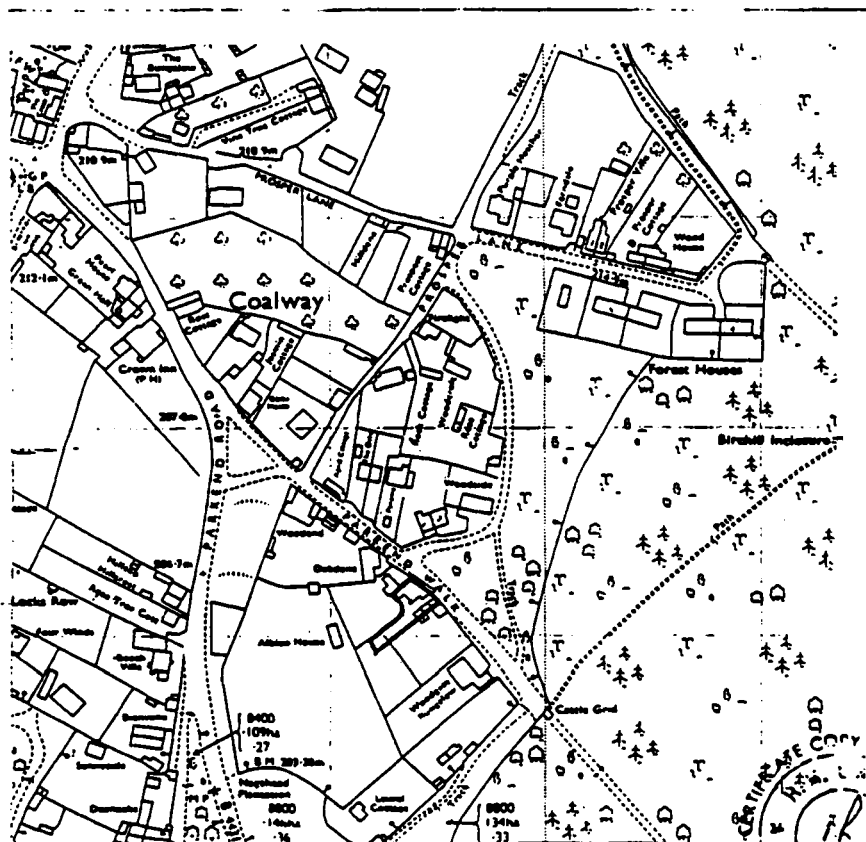
A forester has told us that when he was a lad he had known an old man who, when he himself was young, knew Isaac as an old man. He said that he was a tough, unpleasant character who (when he knew him) was blind, but even so no-one could deceive him over payment for the beer purchased, and he was as adept at counting change as any sighted beer-house keeper!

The place had a variety of names during existence, including The Albion Inn and the Old Albion; but it almost certainly was not an inn in the usual sense of the word. Apart from having no accommodation for visitors, it had no licence for wines and spirits, and was in fact a common beer-house.

Beer-houses in the 19th century had a lower status than inns, where wines and spirits were also sold. Gentry and farmers would frequent inns, but usually not beer-houses. In the beer-houses, workingmen could feel free to express their feelings about their employers and political masters without fear of being overheard, for any stranger would be immediately spotted. One will never know, but can imagine, what conversations must have gone at times of crisis in the Forest in the sawdust-floored tap room of the Albion (now the sitting room). What despair must have been manifested there during the slumps in 1874-5, 1883 and 1895, when coal and iron mines and tinsplate works in the Forest closed down, leaving the workers unemployed and destitute.

In more prosperous times the atmosphere must have been more relaxing, with laughter and good company and, perhaps, cockfighting, and skittles upstairs. No archives can yield hard facts on this matter, but it is easy to envisage miners and woodmen coming through the woods on their way home from work, knowing that the first house in the clearing would be a welcoming hostelry, lively and bright, where they could slake their thirst with a glass of beer at a penny a quart.

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Scale 1/8 mile

Periodically sheep sales were held in the open outside the pub. Later the venue was transferred to the Crown just up the road, and sheep sales are still held there.(15)

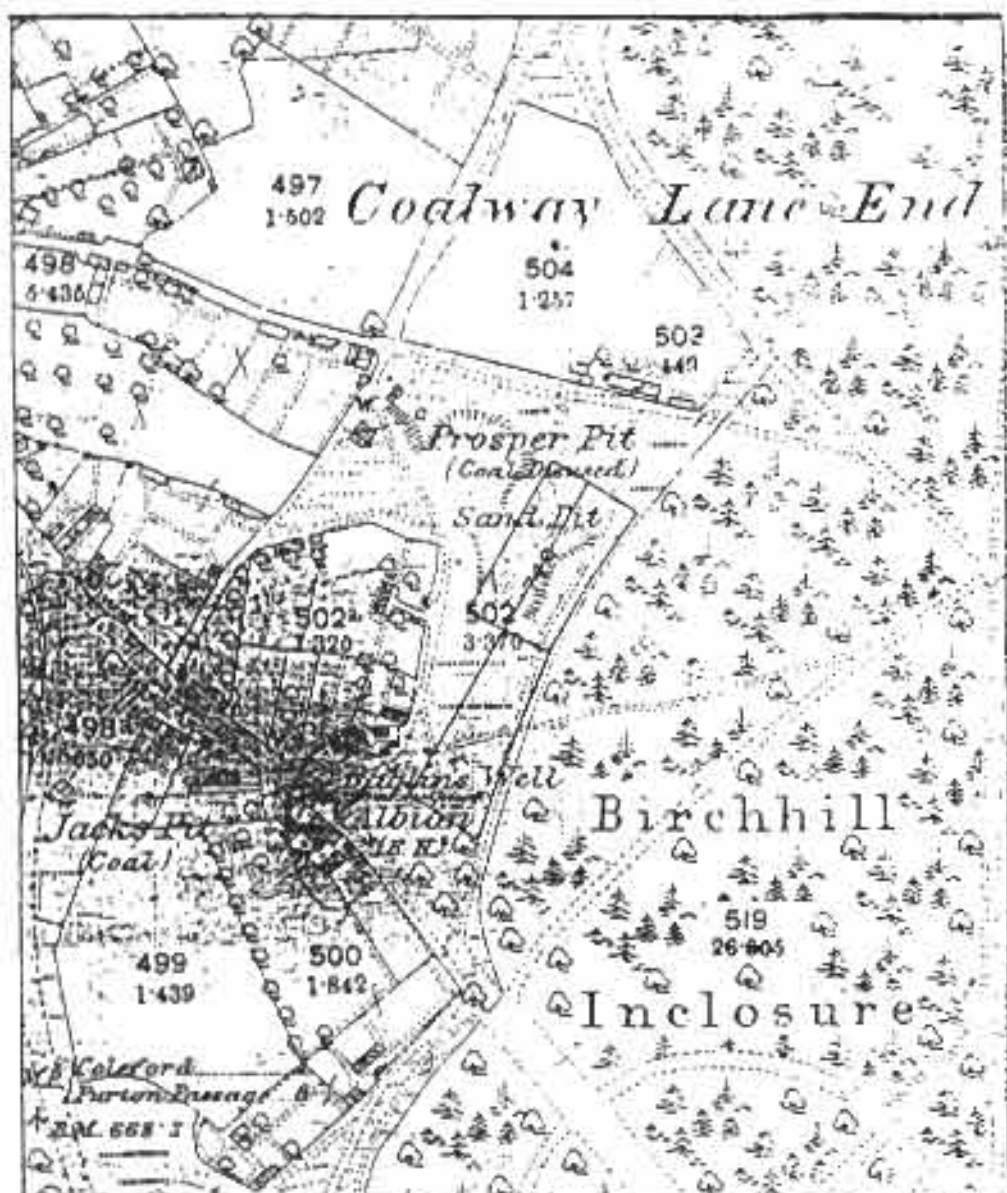
Old Isaac Baglin died in the 1860s. He was well over 80, and had seen considerable changes in the life of the foresters in his time. He had begun life as a poor encroacher, despised, feared and suspected by people from outside the Forst, and ended as a respectable member of his community with a prosperous business. He was succeeded as innkeeper (or beer-house keeper or beer retailer, whichever term one prefers) by his son Daniel, until his death in 1872, when Daniel's wife Mary Maria continued as beer-house keeper. She was followed by their son Oliver who, by all accounts, had inherited his grandfather's dexterity in handling coins. He is still remembered in Coalway for his ability to produce the exact change from his pocket without looking.

Oliver carried on with the pub until 1899 when at the age of 57 he retired. He mortgaged the premises to Messrs Lloyd & Yorath Ltd. of Newport, who were brewers and wine and spirit merchants. They put in a manager, Charles Henry Porter, to run the place. The Old Albion continued to do a good trade after Oliver retired. Indeed, in 1906 100 barrels of beer were supplied compared with 77 in the previous year, and an average of 96 pints of beer were drawn a day. This was not a bad performance when one considers that at that time there was 1 beer or ale house to every 196 people in the Coleford district - men, women and children!(16)

But the days of the Old Albion were numbered. At their annual Licensing Committee meeting in 1906 the Coleford magistrates were unwilling to renew the licence. They gave no reason, apart from saying they had "talked over the matter privately". After Lloyd & Yorath objected, however, they did renew it, but in the following year they arranged for the police to object, and when the case came before them a police superintendent said that in his opinion the house was not necessary, and anyway it was badly situated for police supervision. Without retiring, the Committee concluded un-animously that the licence should not be renewed. And that, some- mysteriously, was that. The Old Albion ceased to operate as a beer house on 28 December 1907.(17)

After it had lost its licence Oliver resumed ownership of the house. Since it could no longer be used for its original purpose, and major alterations would be needed to transform it into a dwelling house, he sold the property by auction at the Angel Inn, Coleford, in the following August. Later, after being used for a time as a butcher's shop,(15) the building did become a private dwelling house. In the 1920s a baby was born there, Albert Howell, who was to become deputy gaveller - the Crown's representative in matters affecting the mining of coal and iron ore and the quarrying of stone in the Forest, a post that has existed for centuries.

It has been said that the real reason for closing the Albion down as a pub was that it had become a house of ill-repute during Lloyd & Yorath's regime. If this was so, it would explain the magistrates' unwillingness to say in public why they were unwilling to renew the licence; but it is difficult to accept that the structure of the building would allow anything very improper. Anyway, we have decided to leave this intriguing possibility to other researchers!



REFERENCES

- 1 T Sopwith's Survey Plans of Coal & Iron Mines in Her (sic) Majesty's Forest of Dean, 1835. GRO & PRO, Kew.
- 2 H G Nicholls, The Forest of Dean (John Murray 1858; David & Charles 1966) p 235.
- 3 Fourth Report of the Commission, appointed in 1831, to ascertain the boundaries of the Forest of Dean, and to "enquire into the Rights & Privileges claimed by Freeminers of the Hundred of St Briavels and for other purposes". GRO D3921 V/2 p 7 and Appendix 1 pp 17, 32, 33, 44.
- 4 Ibid p 44.
- 5 H G Nicholls op cit p 236.
- 6 The Award of the Dean Forest Mining Commissioners as to the Coal & Iron Mines in Her Majesty's Forest of Dean 1841. GRO Q/Rum 173/1.
- 7 Blunt's map 1782 (GRO 3921 IV/7), and Sopwith's Survey Plans of Iron Mines in Her Majesty's Forest of Dean, 1835. GRO, and PRO, Kew.
- 8 The Forest of Dean (Encroachments) Act 1838, 1 & 2 Vic c.42.
- 9 H G Nicholls, Personalities of the Forest, (John Murray 1863) pp 180-181.
- 10 Survey of the Forest of Dean, A & W Driver, 1787, F 16/31 and 69, PRO, Kew.
- 11 The dates of the Baglin family have been taken from Newland Church records, in GRO. Other details of the Baglin family have been taken from legal documents in the possession of a previous occupier of Albion House.
- 12 Keeper's Day Book, Littledean House of Correction, GRO Q/Gli 3/2.
- 13 The house is shown on Atkinson's map of 1842 in GRO.
- 14 Cyril Hart, Coleford (Alan Sutton, 1983) P 218.
- 15 Information supplied by local residents.
- 16 Dean Forest Guardian 14 June 1907, and Dean Forest Mercury 8 February 1906.
- 17 Dean Forest Guardian 2 March 1906, 14 June 1907, and 7 February 1908.

