

# RECORDS OF THE NEWENT COALFIELD

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In recent years the ill-fated little coalfield at Newent has attracted at least two articles (1) (2) but many gaps remain concerning its history.

The most determined efforts to develop the resources arose in the 1790's, and the optimistic forecasts were largely responsible for promotion of the Herefordshire & Gloucestershire canal via Newent, a branch being made to Hill House Colliery(3).

Unfortunately the coal proved of indifferent quality, and insurmountable geological difficulties were encountered so that seams of 7 or 8 ft thickness could not prevent an eventual cessation of activity. Hill House Colliery did, however, continue spasmodically until about 1847 and probably raised in aggregate a good many thousand tons, mainly for brick and lime burning and other industrial purposes.

To the north of Hill House the seams gradually decline in thickness and peter out about a mile from Dymock. It is this area, between Hill House and Castle Tump on the Newent-Dymock road, with which this account is concerned.

## 1 HISTORY

The chief landowner of the district from the 1840's to 1879 was Richard Foley Onslow of Stardens, Lord of the Manor of Newent. In spite of an unpromising past there were those still willing to risk capital and in December 1875 Onslow leased his minerals to William Aston of Newent. The NEWENT COLLIERY COMPANY was formed in the following year with a nominal capital of £7,000, most of the money coming from the Black Country (4).

Operations commenced a few hundred yards to the south-east of White House, and the mine became known as Newent Colliery. The company reformed in December 1877 as the NEWENT COAL & IRON COMPANY with a nominal capital of £50,000; its registered offices at 48 Ann Street, Birmingham. Major shareholders were Joseph John King of Stourbridge and William Ridout Wills a solicitor of Birmingham; F.W.Clark being the secretary. (5)

Eventually 8ft of coal was struck at a depth of approximately 450 ft (6) but rapid increases of nominal capital to £60,000 and then to £63,000 by the enticement of Preference Shares, reflected desperate attempts to keep the company afloat in the face of unsurmountable problems associated with excessive inflows of water and badly faulted strata. (7)

In addition, the venture was burdened with a rental of £1,200 per annum for a property upon which no profitable coal had ever been proved. The company therefore attempted to negotiate an abatement of terms but deadlock resulted in June 1880. Meanwhile R.F.Onslow had died, and his trustees refused to consider any concessions until full arrears of rent had been paid. The company forthwith resolved to wind up, whereupon the trustees distrained for £2,266 rent due, and proceeded in October 1880 without reference to the

company to advertise a sale of the plant and machinery. W.J.Clark brought an injunction and an action against the trustees but lost, with costs awarded against the company. (8)

There was also a slump in the coal trade which could not have come at a worse time, and thus brought to a tragic end the most serious attempt to prove commercially viable coal at Newent. The sale advertisement appended here gives a good idea of the scale of operations, the auction finally taking place on 4th November, 1880.

Nevertheless the Onslow trustees still determined to realise something of their minerals, and on 16 March 1882 a prominent mining consulting engineer Thomas Forster Brown submitted a report (9). Though somewhat garbled in places, it is valuable in covering an area about which very little documentary evidence has come to light. In a slightly abbreviated form the report is reproduced below.

#### NEWENT MINES

Memoranda made in going over the ground with Mr Greenwell, Mr Maule (10) Self and Jones (11), also Captain Onslow and his Agent.

A Castle Tump Mrs Hoghetts. Good Coal in well about 23ft deep about 1 foot thick, dipping S.E. Depth of well 36ft, coal found 10 or 12 years ago when sinking deeper for water. Coal worked and burnt and found very good.

Red Sandstone Ironstone crops out in road quite near to well shewing the Red Sandstone is not far above the coal.

B Hillend Green Charles Jones the blacksmith says outcrop of coal proved here by Aston 7 years ago. Coal about 1ft thick dipping S.E about 12 inches per yard in a pond by the side of the road near blacksmiths shop. Coal was also seen in mine hole 70 yards S.W of shop, at C.

C Iron Mine Where ironstone is lying upon ground and slope was driven down to south 40 to 50 yards about 16 or 18 inches per yard dip, but flattens.

A road driven west out of slope about 30 yds down 14 yds and a fault met with and coal found about 18 to 20 inches thickness about 5 or 6 yards from slope but did not continue as coal was lost, again having gone through coal, only found coal on dip side of road, got  $\frac{1}{2}$  ton of coal out, this was done in 1872.

D Holder's Farm An old pit 33 yds deep and filled up was reopened and bored down to ironstone by Aston 8 yds further. All Red Sandstone in this pit, found water which stopped boring.

E Oxenhall Court Old workings of 30 years ago (1852) by Mr R.F.

#### NEWENT COLLIERY COMPANY.

Within one Mile and a Half of Newent.

**Bruton, Knowles, & Co.**

WILL SELL BY AUCTION,

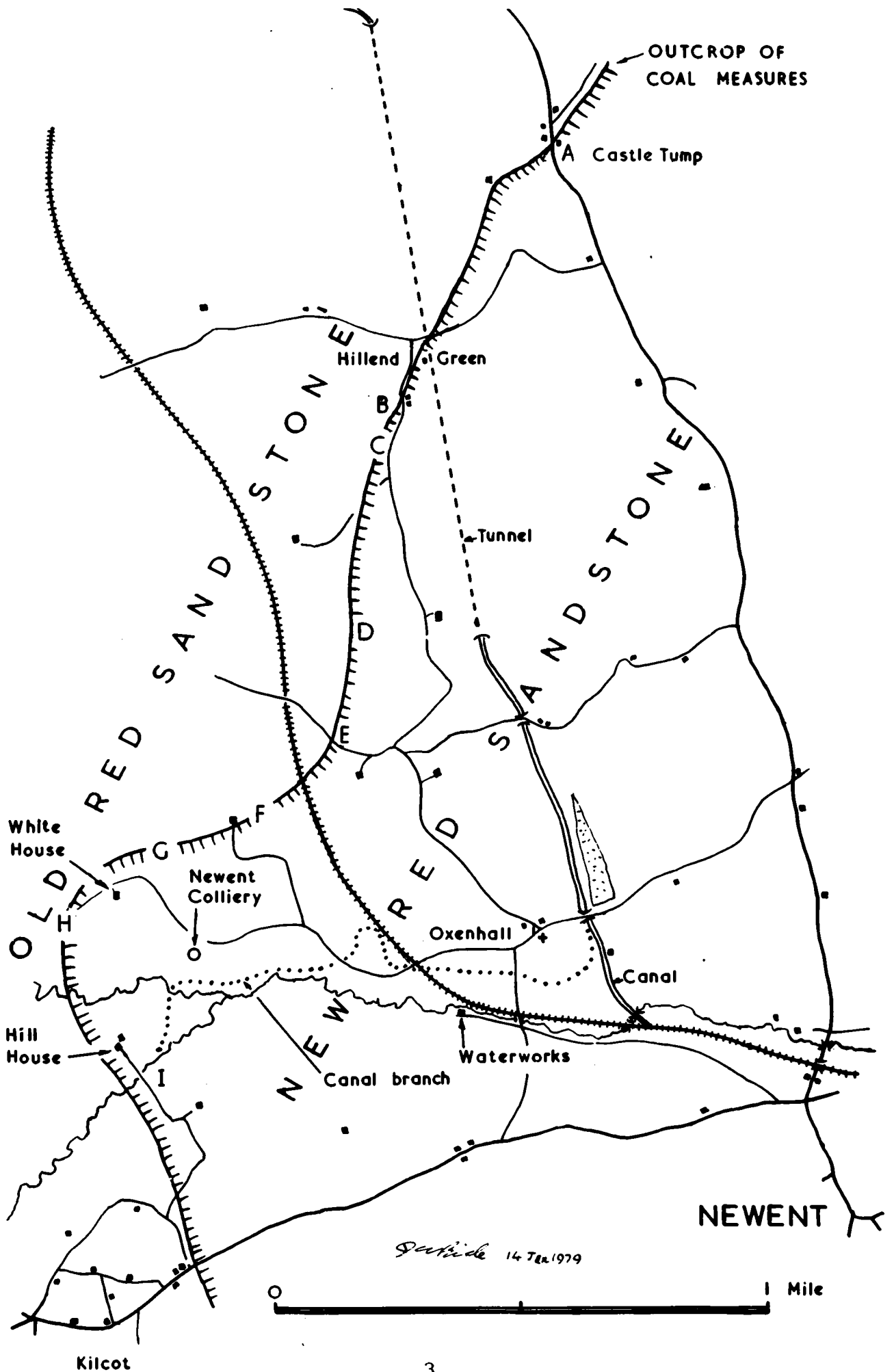
(Under a distress for rent.)

At the WORKS, on THURSDAY, the 7th of October, 1880, at 12 o'clock punctually,—

**T**HE Valuable MACHINERY PLANT, TOOLS, &c., including a pair of high-pressure horizontal expansive pumping Engines, cylinders 20 inches diameter, 5ft. stroke by B. Barker and Co., pair Tangye's Patent Winding Engines, cylinders 10 in. diameter, 20 in. stroke, Horizontal Engine for working pump with plumber blocks &c., Savory's improved traction and winding Engine, Cornish Boiler 7ft. diameter, 30ft. 6in. with 2 flues, 2ft. 6in. diameter fitted with Galloway's patent tubes, 3 hemispherical boilers, respectively 26ft, 27ft, and 35ft in length and 5ft diameter, Boiler fittings complete Cameron's patent pump, Giffard's patent Injector, massive cast iron bell cranks, pumping spears, Shilton's weighing machine, plumber blocks, new steel wire ropes, Pit Gins, by Bryan and Johnson, large quantity flange rails and piping, wrought and cast iron plates, iron buckets, pitch pine timber, &c.

The Enginee and Machinery are in first class working order.

Catalogues may be had, a week prior to the Sale, of the Auctioneers, Gloucester. 4496





Onslow. Found shale just above Court Hill Colliery on road from Cold Arbour to Shaw Green.

F Peter's Slope Mr Onslow opened the slope here 35 years ago (1847) and worked coal and used it in his own house. Drove slope down 27 yds. Aston reopened, in 33 yds met with 3 distinct coals, pitching steep, bottom coal 2ft, dirt 4, coal 4 inches, dirt 6 ft other coal 15 inches above. Coal thickened as it went down. Not so good a section near crop. Inclination 1 in 3. Company (12) sank a pit here to work coal for engines and used it. Aston sold 119 tons before company took possession.

G Aston's Slope Slope driven down by Aston in coal measures driven last but not to coal. Light coal measures shale with argillaceous ironstone about 12 yds to south sunk 12ft and proved coal 2ft thick. Coal dipping S.E. 1 in 4 or thereabouts, also proved ironstone about 12 to 15ft above coal seam.

H White House South of White House in road, coal crop proved and clay worked by coal company. Coal under shale 2ft thick.

I Hill House Colliery Worked for many years near bridge over brook. Information as to this to be obtained as to plan and workings. Worked 80 or 90 years ago (1792-1802). Extensive tip.

Three years later, on 23rd January 1885 a letter was sent, almost certainly by Forster Brown, to a Mr Hugh P. Davies who apparently had an interest in the property. The writer referred to the abortive Newent Colliery as follows. (13) 'As the workings extended eastwards from the pit the continuity of this Coal was cut off by a Fault & sufficient works were not executed to prove if the Coal extended beyond the Fault under the bulk of the property to the Eastward...

The only practicable mode of facilitating the future letting of the Minerals in the property, or on the other hand at all events satisfying the owners of the property that there is not sufficient workable Coal to be found in the property to induce any Capitalist to come forward, would be by putting down one borehole somewhere near Oxenhall Church, this borehole to go right through the coal measures if they exist into the Measures below. If such borehole proves one or more workable Seams of Coal it may be desirable then to consider whether a second borehole should not be put down at some other point to prove the continuity of the coal and its dip. It is no doubt problematical whether workable Coal does or does not exist eastward of the Fault referred to. I am disposed to think that it does and at all events if it does it would be to the material advantage of Captain Onslow and his Trustees to have it proved. It may be necessary to put down the Diamond Bore Hole referred to to a depth of 1200 to 1500 feet below the surface.

I append particulars of the cost of such a borehole and if Captain Onslow and his Trustees decide to expend the requisite sum of money I should have much pleasure in visiting the ground with the Agent of the Diamond Boring Co and superintending the boring.'

Probably as a result of the vast quantity of water encountered at Newent Colliery, in 1894 Gloucester Corporation promoted very successfully a well sunk to a depth of 168 ft about  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile

south-west of Oxenhall Church. It is still in use as Newent Pumping Station.

Also in 1894 on behalf of Gloucester Corporation the Diamond Boring Company made a borehole 100 yards east of the well to a depth of 290 ft. The Onslow trustees then put Forster Brown's recommendations to the test by extending the drilling in hopes of proving coal. However, the attempt was hopelessly abandoned at 1190 ft, the whole boring being in New Red Sandstone (14). What further depth would have been needed to resolve the matter is a question which I believe has never been resolved.

Finally, we come much closer to present times when in 1948 a Mr. Marshall of Mitcheldean encountered coal at Castle Tump when carrying out civil engineering work. He applied for a license to mine the seam to an incredulous N.C.B. who were quite unaware of a coalfield at Newent, but the venture appears not to have proceeded much further.

Since then, boreholes have been put down near White House and in 1974 Cambridge University conducted exploratory seismic surveys in the area (15). Even after several centuries of disappointment this geological ignis fatuus of north-west Gloucestershire has not lost its allure, and I should be pleased to hear from anyone interested in carrying out further fieldwork. (Address: Pound House, Newent)

## 2 INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

These notes give a brief guide to remnants visible. The order is from north to south, see appended map. Sites are mostly on private land.

### A Castle Tump

A road widening operation in the autumn of 1977 dramatically exposed both coal and iron ore. A well was also cut into, probably Mrs. Hoghetts. Two old levels or tunnels driven into the ore were also uncovered, but from an exploration it appeared that the workings were never of much extent. The levels had been driven from the road-side opposite the entrance to Woodbine Cottage and were close to the well; all traces have now disappeared. Regrettably, a splendid geological section exposed by the road works has since been obscured by a high retaining wall, but prior to its construction the following observations were made (6th November 1977).

### Roadside Section in front of Cottage at Castle Tump

Earthy pale red sandstone	4-5 ft
Purple sandstone heavily charged with iron ore	1-3 ft
Yellow clay	6 ins
Red and Blue-grey mottled clay	2-3 ft
Coal, in large detached masses	1-1½ft

The nearly horizontal section was exposed for 20 or 30 ft. The excavations did not descend deep enough to ascertain whether or not the coal had been bottomed. It is tempting to speculate whether this occurrence of coal and iron had any bearing on the location of Castle Tump itself.

According to Murchison, writing in the 1830's (16) coal has also been dug further to the north. Close to Castle Tump, coal was also said to occur in a pond or hollow south of the lane to Castle Farm.

### B Hillend Green

A hollow near the old smithy is still evident and there can be little doubt that such depressions on the outcrop indicate old opencast workings filling up with water. Mr. Hough of Wisteria Cottage adjacent to the smithy tells me there is coal at 22ft depth in his well. Mr. Hough's wife is the daughter of the late Charles Jones, blacksmith of Hillend Green, referred to by Forster Brown.

### C Iron Mine

In 1950 I explored and surveyed this mine (17) but it has been filled in for many years now, the spot being discernable by ore and much iron sandstone in the field. Some yards to the north and west, grey and yellow clay with coal smut mark the coal measures. In a field on the other side of the road the ground is quite purple with iron-staining.

### D Holders Farm

Grey and black clay with coal specks and iron ore at a corner of a field (Grid ref. 706277) may indicate the site of the pit.

### E Oxenhall Court

The location of this colliery is a mystery unless it corresponds to a piece of waste ground on the north side of the road where a cottage stood until a few years ago. Iron ore occurs in the field above.

### F Peter's Slope

All traces bulldozed some years ago.

### G Aston's Slope

This is in rough ground, choked by brambles and fallen trees. Both the level (slope) and shaft can be discerned.

### H White House

A very tall chimney once stood here, but the most conspicuous feature is now a grassgrown waste heap, the only surviving tip of any consequence in the coalfield. The site was cleared of its remaining buildings about 25 years ago, but the openings of two shafts can still be traced, one near the tip and another in a hedge below. (18)

Bricks were made from a claypit nearer White House on the opposite side of the road. There was much prospecting between White House and Hill House in the 1790's (1)

### I Hill House Colliery

Remnants consisting of grassy mounds and tips were levelled a few years ago; coal particles occur in the bank of the Ell Brook, close by.

Vestiges are also visible to the south at Bouldson, but this area lies beyond the scope of the present article.

## REFERENCES

- 1 D. EBICK The Newent Coalfield Gloucestershire Historical Studies 1971

- 2 B.S.SMITH The Origin of Newent Coalmining.G.S.I.A. Journal 1976.
- 3 D.E. BICK The Oxenhall Branch of the Herefordshire & Gloucestershire Canal, G.S.I.A. Journal 1972. The author is currently preparing a history of the canal, to be published in November 1979 by The Pound House, Newent. An article including the geological aspects of the coalfield is to be submitted for publication by the Cotswold Naturalists Field Club.
- 4 P.R.O BT 31 2234/10599
- 5 P.R.O BT 31 2389/11879
- 6 Shaft section in possession of North Gloucestershire Water Board.
- 7 L. RICHARDSON Wells & Springs of Gloucestershire 1930 Pg 129. At a depth of 450 ft an inflow of 700 gallons/minute would have required well over 100 H.P. pumping capacity.
- 8 THE TIMES 21st October 1880, P.R.O. J 15/1491
- 9 Gaveller's Office, Coleford, Glos. T. Forster Brown was related to the north country lead mining engineer Westgarth Forster, author of the classic Treatise on a Section of the Strata from Newcastle upon Tyne to Cross Fell 1809.
- 10 Maule appears to have been a Newnham solicitor.
- 11 Presumably Charles Jones the blacksmith.
- 12 Presumably the Newent Colliery Co.
- 13 Gaveller's Office, Coleford.
- 14 L.RICHARDSON Wells & Springs of Gloucestershire 1930 pg 130-131.
- 15 Cambridge University, Dept. of Geophysics, correspondence with author.
- 16 R.I.MURCHISON The Silurian System 1839.
- 17 The plan made in 1950 is deposited in Glos. Records Office. The iron ores of Newent occur mainly north of Hill House and overlie the coal. In the 19th century they were generally too poor and siliceous to pay the cost of working, although it is possible that better quality ore was mined in earlier times. Rich haematite is fairly abundant south of the canal tunnel, although this lies well east of the coal measures.
- 18 The plans of this colliery were latterly held by the Cardiff firm of Forster Brown & Rees, and apparently were taken over by the N.C.B on Nationalization. I have been unable to trace them.

### Acknowledgements

I am much indebted to Jeremy Wilkinson for information relating to the legal battles of the Newent Colliery, and to Mr. Howell for permission to peruse material deposited in the Gaveller's Office. I must also thank Mr. Hough of Hillend Green for local details and Messers Farnham, Cummins and Goulding for permission to explore their land.

D.E.BICK ©  
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