

Ayle Colliery

Clive Seal

The present Ayle Colliery was began 1932-33 by Mr & Mrs White of White Lea's Farm, who formed the Ayle Colliery Co Ltd. Coal had previously been worked by the "old man" and from time to time these workings were broken into. The first drift was started off behind White Leas farm, working towards the dip. Stan Shepherd managed the colliery for the owners. A native of Prudhoe, he had moved to Alston some years before to work at Barhaugh Colliery, which he managed until its closure in 1933. The first drift at Ayle was not a great success, it ran to the dip and eventually the water won the battle so a new drift was began in a different county.

The pit was now under the ownership of Frank Heads, still trading as the Ayle Colliery Co Ltd. The second drift was commenced about 100 yards east of Clargill Colliery and now in Cumbria. The main drift ran parallel to Clargill's and the two pits holed at regular intervals to form a ventilation circuit. The day of the commencement of the new drift coincided with the birth of a son for Stan, he wished to name the drift 'the John Pit' after the new arrival but Frank would have none of it. Haulage in the new pit was via wire rope with the hauler situated on the opposite side of the Moscow/Lipsic road to the drift. Tradition has it that the occupant of one of these farms was brought off his motorbike more than once by the haulage running.

In conjunction with the pit, limestone was quarried out of the new quarry at Ayle. This was commenced from the banks of the Ayle Burn by Stan and his wife and the lime burnt on site in a new kiln. The main roads within the colliery were only low, about 4ft high, and the men had to walk all the way in with their gear then walk out again at night. The coal was anthracite from the Little Limestone seam, which averaged 18". As the drift was becoming worked out, further drifts were driven in the field to the north east but these kept hitting very old workings. Things were getting crucial as reserves began to dwindle so the owners ventured back across the Ayle Burn into Northumberland to drive the East Drift in the early 1950s. Anderson shelters were used to keep the roof up until the drivage got inbye of the Ayle Burn vein and back into shale. By this time, Stan's middle son John was actively running the pit and decided not to repeat the old ways of low haulage roads, the new drift was driven high enough to incorporate locomotive haulage.

The east drift worked on until the mid 1970s, winning coal by pneumatic picks (windy picks) and from time to time AB 12" cutters were installed to undercut the stone beneath the coal. The coal was fired and loaded into tubs, which were then hauled to the surface in tubs. There they were tipped onto a conveyor, which crossed the Ayle Burn and deposited Northumbrian coal into the screens in Cumbria. The cutting and firing method was all right as long as the coal was for

industry, which at that time it was with the bulk going to Newcastle Breweries. Coal for the domestic markets, however, had to be mined the traditional way with the windy picks, so as to keep it in lumps. 1975 saw the collieries first fatal accident when John Heatherington was killed by a roof fall. John was filling his last tub on the last day before they broke up for New Year Holiday. Needless to say, this had a profound effect on a small colliery and a tight community, so much so that a new district was opened out not long after the accident and the old one abandoned.

During the working of the East Drift the pit had hit financial difficulties, so much so that Frank Heads told John Shepherd that if he could 'turn the pit around' on his retirement he could have it. John did just so but Frank Heads didn't appear to want to retire. However, after the unfortunate accident, Frank called it a day and the Ayle Colliery Co Ltd passed into the hands of John and Sheila Shepherd. This was a boom time for the coal industry as coal prices kept going up and up, winter time would find between 15 and 20 picks employed. It was very hard to get a job at Ayle Colliery as so many wanted to be there, indeed it was also the only Alston pit to have pithead baths, even if the shower water first of all cooled the generator. Development underground was restricted to the East by a 30ft fault, whilst the working to the West were getting to such a point that coal clearance was getting difficult. To rectify this a new drift was driven above the now closed limestone quarry and new surface installations built as the old East Drift now became a fan drift only. Production now was purely for the household markets with only the slack coal going to Weardale Cement works.

Times change both in industry and society, not only in Alston but across the country the private mines were finding it difficult to bring young lads into the collieries. The work is very hard and attitudes change, now it is more fashionable to 'do nowt' than to want to be the best hewer. The demise of the nationalised industry also brought changes, which usually meant the cost of operating rose. In 1991 there were 5 collieries operating in Alston, one by one they all closed. Clargill was reopened but, like Ayle, struggled to get men and finally closed when all the men cleared off to work on the foot & mouth. The waiting list at Ayle was no more and by 2000 there were just 5 hewers, one got bad wrists and went on the loco then another handed in his notice. The arithmetic was plain for all to see; the colliery couldn't pay with 3 hewers in its present business structure. John offered the pit to the men to take over the underground operations, eventually 2 more packed in and Clive & Gina Seal formed C&G Mining Co Ltd to lease the underground, selling all it's produce to Ayle Colliery Co Ltd. A few more hewers were found in dribs and drabs but, after 12 months, one month after Sept 11th, it was insurance time again! All the claims put in throughout the mining and construction industry (mining comes under construction for insurance purposes) meant that insurance premiums doubled, even though there had been no claims from Ayle, there was no way the pit could be now run at a financial profit. No body was going to make a loss and the Government certainly wasn't going to help.

Several ulcers later I asked the men if they would like to become self employed. Only one did! We said bye bye to the others and set up the first mining Limited Liability Partnership in the UK. The C&G Mining Company Ltd joined Brian Thompson to form Alston Mining Company Ltd. For many months just Brian and myself worked underground (Gina not too good a hewer, finger nails etc) and did our best to keep as many merchants supplied as we could. We were joined by Jez Cooper who ran a farm in summer and had worked for me the previous winter. On Blenkinsopp Colliery's closure we inherited Keith Richardson and now we are 4. All partners and, as we employ nobody, we don't need any insurance, except what we can get personally. A sharp intake of breath? Well as I said to the inspector, 'it's better than sitting on the market cross taking drugs', which is about the only other occupation on offer in Alston Moor. Next battle is the picks as the only ones that will touch our coal are deemed too dangerous by the powers that be..... Even though I've been using one for over 20 years!!

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