

Mamble Colliery

Location - 3 miles south of Cleobury Mortimer (SO690718)

Minerals - Coal

Working Life - Known working life : 17th century-1944

History ("Mamble Colliery", David Poyner & Robert Evans, SCMC Journal No.4)

Mining in Mamble was certainly underway in the mid-17th century, with workings on the outcrop in the neighbouring Sakenhurst Estate. The Blount family owned most of the eastern half of Mamble, centred on their hall at Soddington, and land tax returns suggest that their coal works began some time between 1700-1730. In 1759, Sir Edward Blount was one of three Wyre Forest coalowners advertising in Berrows Worcester Journal. In 1771 the mines in Mamble, as well as those to the north in Bayton, were leased to a local collier Francis Bint. Bint claimed to have spent over £1,200 in constructing adits to drain the mines but, by 1777, he had given up his lease. Shortly after this date, the presence of the coal mines began to feature in the plans of local canal promoters. In 1791, work began on Leominster Canal that was planned to run from Kington in Herefordshire to the Severn at Stourport, via Leominster and Mamble. Heavy engineering works meant that the canal was not finished and actually only ever ran between the latter two places. The Blount collieries were connected to a wharf on the canal by a tramway. Although the failure to complete the canal was a disaster for shareholders, it mattered little to the colliery, which now had a means to send its coal into the heart of the Herefordshire countryside. Here it was able to undercut competing collieries on the Clee Hill.

The first part of the 19th century probably saw Mamble Colliery at its most prosperous. The Ordnance Survey preliminary drawings of 1817 show 11 shafts, concentrated in three areas and linked to the canal by tramways. This state of affairs would have lasted until the middle of the century, when the Shrewsbury & Hereford Railway arrived in Leominster and probably destroyed Mamble's market with cheaper and better quality coal than it could provide. The canal, by now very run down, was finally drained in the 1860s and Mamble had to rely on purely local trade. In 1869, the Blount family abandoned all direct interest in the mines, leasing them to Thomas Aston, a local coal master. The Aston family were to run the mines for the next half century and did rather well from them. Thomas's son, Edward, managed the mines and a farm, as well as being a District Councillor and JP. Not for nothing was he known as the "King of Mamble".

Mamble worked throughout the First World War and into the 1920s. Winding of men and coal was by hand windlass, up shafts about 30 yards in depth. Underground, a collier worked in conjunction with a loader and youth, who

pushed the tram of coal to the pit bottom. The technology had essentially not changed in 100 years and would still have been recognisable to the miners 100 years before that. The end was brought about by a dispute over the lease. The bulk of the Blount estate's mineral rights had been leased by the Bayton Colliery Company in 1921. Aston was working at the very boundary of his area and allegedly took coal demised to the Bayton Colliery Company. When this was brought to light, he abandoned the mine in 1925 and (briefly) worked an entirely new mine on the adjacent Sakenhurst Estate.

The Bayton Colliery did not sink in the immediate area of Mamble village until 1934, when New Mamble (Bayton No.5) was opened. This was never very successful, ironically part due to water seeping out of Aston's flooded workings. Its closure in 1944 finally brought mining to an end in Mamble village.

Surface Remains

The most westerly part of the site that has significant remains is west of Whatehall Farm. Significantly, in the 1770s, this provided the name for the colliery. The Marl Brook cuts a deep valley through here and the ground is very disturbed with the indistinct remains of old spoil tips. A public footpath follows part of the line of the tramway built in the 1790s to reach the canal terminus at Sousnett, about (1/2 mile away. In fact the tramway line appears intact all the way to the canal basin, where the impressive Wharf House fronts onto a stretch of canal turned into fishponds.

Returning to the colliery and proceeding eastwards, the Marl Brook opens out into an extensive flat area, the site of many shafts marked by the Ordnance Survey in 1817. The 1903 OS map showed three of these still open, just to the north of the brook, and one had an intriguingly square section. They have been filled more recently but a collapse has revealed another shaft north of the brook, whilst flattened spoil tips to the south suggest one or two more shafts. There are two cottages by the brook and a third on the hill which are probably contemporary with the colliery. Indeed one called Footrid Cottage proclaims its age as 1812 with a cast iron plaque. It is the hydraulic engineering which is the most intriguing feature of this part of the site. Marl Brook is carried underneath a causeway at the eastern end of the area in a brick culvert about 36" high and 28" wide, originally some 70 yards in length. A curved culvert of similar length but approximately cylindrical in section (now 40" high by 44" wide) carries it to the cottages. A shorter culvert is behind the cottages, and two more much shorter structures act as bridges further down, one carrying the tramroad over the brook. These structures must have taken some effort to build but their purpose is unclear. At the start of the 19th century, this was a key area in the mine as it was the point where the various feeder tramways converged onto the main line to the canal. One possibility is that the culverts were built to drain and protect this area from flash flooding of the Mark Brook.

The name of Footrid given to one of the cottages here indicates that this was also the approximate site of the drainage adits for the mines. Of course, the culverts may be connected with this but the most likely site for an adit is several hundred yards further west, in the deep brook valley. On the south side of the brook there is a strong feeder of ochre-impregnated water. There is no trace of any tunnel but this may simply reflect collapse of the original portal. The site may also have other adits but these are even less obvious.

In the early 19th century, workings extended in a broad north-south band beyond the immediate valley of the Marl Brook. Nothing of these is now obvious, as the land has either been reclaimed for agriculture or covered with trees. However, the wooded area appears to have suffered from considerable subsidence and a number of large pools have been created in it. From at least the 1830s, this area was also the site of a brickworks with associated clay pits. The route of the tramway apparently climbed away from the Marl Brook to intersect a smaller stream which eventually flows north into Bayton Brook. In the pasture land here, there are again impressive remains of grassed-over spoil tips. At the western end, where the tips probably date from the 1830s, they are typically 4-6ft high, forming a circle perhaps 20 yards in diameter around the shaft depression. In the centre of the site, developed in the 1870s and 1880s, they can be up to 10-12ft high and 40 yards in diameter, with the shaft depression at one end. At the eastern end, the 20th century workings have left flattened mounds extending over perhaps 50 x 30 yards, with no trace of the shafts.

Perhaps the most interesting features at this end of the site are the remains of the tramway. There is a prominent embankment, up to 6ft high and 6ft wide, running through a wooded area and then branching into two on entering a field. These branches run to old shafts, with the southern branch dividing again. It is possible to identify short, curved embankments leading from individual shafts to the main lines. One branch of the tramway ends at a shaft which was shown as active on the 1883 OS map, suggesting that the system long outlived the canal to which it was originally connected. In some cases, a tramway leading from a shaft was used for tipping spoil. A basically circular spoil tip has a short northwards extension associated with a tramway embankment. There are also two linear spoiltips. These have depressions in the centre marking the sites of shafts but the spoil has obviously been trammed away along just the one axis.

There are a number of fragments of plate rail to be found on the site, usually associated with the spoil tips. Until a few months ago, a 4'6" section was still embedded in one of the linear mounds. The rails are of two types with flange x bed measurements of either 2" x 3" or 1" x 3". They have holes at either end for fastening to sleepers.