

Wearmouth Colliery

It was deemed a risky venture sinking a pit at Wearmouth as the received wisdom of the time said that coal was not to be found beneath the magnesian limestone which formed the surface beds in that area, the proprietors were of a different opinion and had the funds at their disposal to back their judgement. So they sank a shaft.

In May 1826 pit sinkers started. At first it was called the Pemberton Main, after one of its promoters. It is also sometimes called Monkwearmouth Colliery

By 1835 it had reached the Maudlin seam and in the book "History and Description of Fossil Fuel," p. 187:

"The shaft at present sinking at Monkwearmouth Colliery, near Sunderland, has attained a considerably greater depth than any mine in Great Britain, (or estimating its depth from the level of the sea, than any mine in the world.) The upper part of the pit is sunk through the lower magnesian limestone strata, which overlap the south-eastern district of the great Newcastle Coal-field, and which, including a stratum of 'freestone sand' at the bottom of the limestone, extended at Monkwearmouth to the thickness of 330 feet, and discharged towards the bottom of the strata the prodigious quantity of 3000 gallons of water per minute --- for the raising of which into an off-take drift, a double-acting steam-engine, working with a power of from 180 to 200 horses, was found necessary. The first unequivocal stratum of the coal formation, viz., a bed of coal 1½ inches thick, was not reached till August, 1831, (being about 344 feet below the surface,) after which the tremendous influx of water, which had so long impeded the sinking operations, was 'stopped back' by the metal tubbing, which extended from the above bed of coal to within 26 yards of the surface. The sinking now proceeded with spirit --- still, no valuable bed of coal was reached, although the shaft had passed considerably above 600 feet into the coal measures, and much deeper than had hitherto been found requisite for reaching some of the known seams. It became evident that the miners were in unknown ground. A new 'feeder' of water was encountered at the great depth of 1000 feet, requiring fresh pumps and a fresh outlay of money. The prospects of the owners became unpromising in the eyes of most men, and were denounced as hopeless by many of the coal-viewers! Coalviewing, however, had as yet been limited to some 200 or 220 fathoms; and the views of the Messrs. Pemberton (the enterprising owners of the colliery) were not to be hounded by such ordinary depths; they considered that the thickness of the coal formation might be vastly greater where protected by the superincumbent limestone, than where exposed to those denudations which, in the neighbourhood of the 'rise' collieries, had probably swept away the strata through which their own shaft had hitherto been sunk; that they were, therefore, justified in anticipating the larger and known seams at greater depths; and that, in case those larger seams had (as was intimated) been split into smaller strata, the same causes which in other places had produced their subdivision, might, at Monkwearmouth, have effected their junction. They continued, therefore, their sinking, and in October, 1834, reached a seam of considerable value and thickness, at the depth of 1578 feet below the surface; and presuming that this newly-discovered seam was identified with the Bensham seam of the Tyne, (or Maudlin seam of the Wear,) they are rapidly deepening their shaft, in anticipation of reaching the Hutton, or most valuable seam, at no distant period, but which (if their anticipations are well founded) will be found at a depth approaching 800 fathoms from the surface. The outlay of capital in this spirited undertaking has been immense --- it is said not less than between £80,000 and £100,000." (Quoted in McCutcheon 1960)

As a result of several years sinking with no coal to show for it and a very deep shaft developing, there was much talk of the project being a waste of money. Pemberton was not impressed and was quoted in 'The monthly chronicle of North-country Lore and Legend' as having said to one of his sceptics;

"Well, we'll go on till we sink down to hell, and then, if we don't get coal, we'll get cinders!"

12th July 1833 "Great rejoicings took place at Monkwearmouth in consequence of a seam of coal, 2 ft 10 inches thick, and of excellent quality, having been won at that place. The shaft of the pit was 180 fathoms (1080 ft) deep, and had been seven years in sinking, at an enormous expense to the proprietors, Messrs. Pemberton and Thompson. (Latimer 1857)

In October 1834 it reached the Maudlin (Bensham) Seam at 1578ft below surface. This was a good seam and was opened out while shaft sinking continued in anticipation of reaching the Hutton. (McCutcheon 1960)

April 18th 1837. The rope of the shaft at Monkwearmouth Colliery, 528 yards in length, suddenly broke, and fell upon three boys at the bottom of the pit, killing them on the spot. (Latimer 1857)

June 13th 1835 The first cargo of coals was shipped from Monkwearmouth Colliery. The workmen were liberally regaled on the occasion. (Latimer 1857)

1841 - sinking started on B Pit (DMM online)

In April 1846 the Hutton was reached at a depth of 1722ft below surface.

Jan 21st 1849. Mr John Elliot the under viewer at Monkwearmouth colliery, accidentally fell down the shaft of that pit (a depth of 1,800 ft) and was dashed to pieces. (Latimer 1857)

July 14th 1853. An explosion of gas occurred in Monkwearmouth colliery by which four persons were burnt to death. (Latimer 1857)

1857 according to Fordyce's "History of Durham" the coal owners were W Bell Esq. and Partners who had also invested heavily and the pit was raising 1700 tons of coal daily and employing over 1200 men and boys. Unlike other mines in the district, which worked a pillar and stall method, Wearmouth worked the long wall system at this date.

1864 the shaft was down 317 fathoms 1 ft 3 3/4ins to the Harvey seam. (McCutcheon 1960)

April 1869 Strike at Monkwearmouth.

1906 - C Pit sunk (DMM online)

1937, 28 Jan - Main seam abandoned (DMM online)

1947 Vesting day ownership transferred to NCB

1955 - sinking started on D Pit (DMM online)

In the late 1950s and early 1960s there was a big investment program made at Wearmouth to exploit undersea reserves of coal. Winding towers with electric winches replaced the old steam winders and headgear. New cages guides and ropes were installed. New locomotive roads were driven to the undersea reserves and on surface a new washery was constructed.

By 1960 the output was 11,500 tons per week, all of which was machine mined. There were approximately 2000 men employed and only 42 pit ponies remaining. There was no hand putting done at all. The most distant of the working faces was 3 1/2 miles from shaft bottom and there were nearly 40 miles of underground roadway. (McCutcheon 1960)

The colliery finally closed on 24 Nov, 1993 and the winding towers were demolished in 1994. Part of the site is now occupied by Sunderland Football club's new ground, sadly nothing of the colliery remains to be seen.

References and further information:

John Latimer Local Records (or Historical Register of Remarkable Events 1832-1857)

Thomas Hair Sketches of the Collieries 1844

John E McCutcheon A Wearside Mining Story 1960

<http://www.dmm.org.uk/colliery/w001.htm>

The Northeast Institute of Mechanical and Mining Engineers have a good selection of negatives of Wearmouth Colliery in its NCB period see;

<http://www.mininginstitute.org.uk/library/specialcollection/NCBNegs2.html>