

# A mine of information



Men at work.  
Photos courtesy  
of Bristol  
Records Office

Our region once boasted a thriving seam of coal mines, which fuelled Bristol's industrial revolution for centuries. **David Clensy** finds out more about this forgotten slice of our history.

been busily fuelling the region's industry since as early as 1228AD.

"It's an enormous slice of the region's history that all too often tends to be forgotten about," Steve says.

"That's why as a group we thought it was important to create a publication that would make the industrial archaeology more accessible.

"We wanted to bring Matt Southway's work to life, so we've taken a lot of new photographs to illustrate the piece.

"But we also had a tremendous amount of assistance from the Bristol Records Office, who were wonderfully helpful, and were able to dig out all kinds of pictures from the city's mining past."

The book covers the area from Cromhall in the north to Bedminster in the south. Collieries at Yate, Coalpit Heath, Easton, Kingswood, Emersons Green and Hanham all played an important role in fuelling Bristol's industrial revolution.

"The great strength of the book is that it goes on to provide a gazetteer of those sites that have survived into the 21st century," Steve adds. "So it brings everything up to date."

TV archaeologist Dr Mark Horton is one of the research group's biggest fans. "Most people don't even know Bristol was surrounded by coal mines right through into the last century," he says.

"This new book opens up the story to everyone. You can't possibly read this book without it changing the way you see our area.

"The countryside that now looks so green was once a maze of shafts, mines and great steam engine houses. I'm itching to get out to look at some of the sites."

● *Kingswood Coal*, priced £6, is available from [www.sgmrg.co.uk](http://www.sgmrg.co.uk)

**D**RIVING around Kingswood today, Bristol's coal-mining heritage may not be immediately apparent.

It's hard to imagine the great seam of pits that once stretched out along the skyline into South Gloucestershire.

The mining heritage hasn't been preserved in visitor attractions as it has in other parts of the country, and there are few chimneys left to act as monuments to the men who spent their lives toiling below ground.

But the clues are still there – if you're willing to spend a bit of time looking for them.

For Steve Grudgings, growing up in the area was an opportunity to explore the district's rarely trodden paths; to find the stones and even the occasional shafts that would betray the locations of the empty mines deep below the ground.

His bible on these walks has always been a series of articles written by Matt Southway, published by the Bristol Industrial Archaeological Society (BIAS) in the Sixties.

Now, as chairman of the South Gloucestershire Mines Research Group, Steve has turned once again to the Southway reports to try to encourage more people to dig deeper into the region's mining heritage.

"These articles have never been beaten," says Steve, who now lives in Hampshire, but often makes trips back to the city to explore its industrial archaeology.

"As a group, we wanted to produce a book that would help people to find the remnants of the mining in Bristol and South Gloucestershire.

"After giving it some thought, we realised we couldn't improve upon Southway's own words.

"We've worked out that if he



was still around today, he'd be about 120 years old. But his writing is just as useful today as it was 50 years ago."

*Kingswood Coal*, which also includes pieces by David Hardwick and Steve himself, has now been published.

"Southway's writing style appears quite dry at first, but it's very precise, and it's excellent to use while walking around the area.

"He points out details that you might not otherwise notice, and he's then able to bring to life how the mining system would have worked."

The South Gloucestershire Mines Research Group has about 100 members, ranging from archaeologists to cavers – or simply those who have an interest in the subject.

For management consultant Steve, exploring the mining system is a very different world from his office-bound working life.

"It may sound a bit nerdish walking around mining sites," he laughs, "but it's a great way of getting out and about, meeting like-minded people, and learning more about the industrial history of the area.

"There are some places where the industrial heritage is clear – with shafts still clearly visible in places like Trooper's Hill Road, but often even the well-trained eye can struggle to make out the remains of the industry. So we're discovering things all the time."

Steve became entranced by the subterranean world of coal mines in the Seventies, when he



was invited down a shaft to look at the workings of the coal mine.

"It was fascinating," he says. "Of course, by then the Bristol and South Gloucestershire mines had all closed – but it helped me to imagine what they would have been like.

"The last of the Kingswood coal mines, Frogmore Lane, finished work in the Forties. But they had been closing one-by-one for decades.

"That means that there are very few people still with us who remember actually working down the mines.

"So for our next project we're hoping to create an oral history – interviewing anyone who can recall working down or around the mines in the Thirties and Forties."

The area's coal mines had