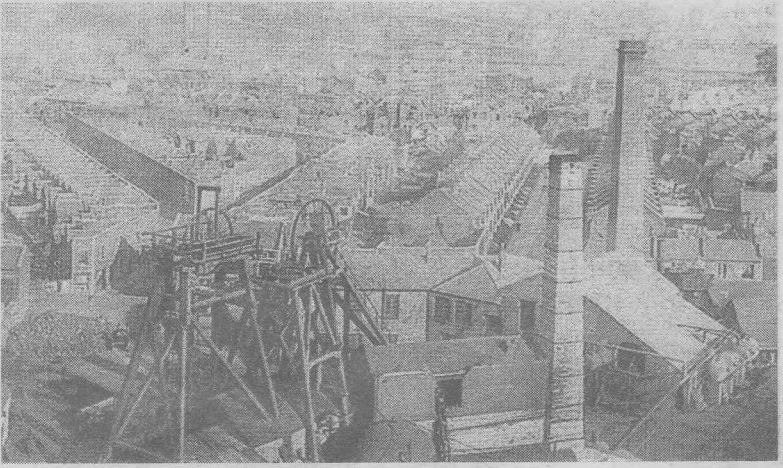


# Bristol Times

## Coal mining in Bristol



# Long-forgotten mining history brought to life

Gerry Brooke takes a look at a new book which reveals all about Bristol's long forgotten coalfield

**B**EDMINSTER'S last coal mine, the South Liberty pit, delivered its final ton of coal in the 1920s. Although many thousands of tons still exist down there, under roads, parks and buildings, it is, at present anyway, just not worth digging out.

Somewhat ironically, perhaps, South Liberty, which once employed nearly 300 men, had been the first mine to open, in the 1740s.

But until now details about the pit – and the many others in the area – have been difficult to find.

Now a timely, well-illustrated and well-researched publication about this dimly remembered coalfield opens up the true history of these busy pits, mines which provided vital fuel for Bristol's industrial revolution.

This could so easily have been a very dull, dry book, packed with statistics and suitable only for the ardent industrial archaeologist.

But stories about the miners' themselves, and the dangers they encountered – plus many first-hand stories and recollections (including a ghost story with a twist) – help bring this rather academic history to life.

Instigated by the Smyths of Ashton Court, who as Lords of the Manor owned the mineral rights, coal mining here started way back in the 18th century.

Some historians and writers are of

the opinion that the earliest mines, as in Kingswood, were open pits, or out-crops, but there is, as yet, no real evidence to support this.

The earliest workings, from the 1720s, would appear to have been not in Bedminster itself, but on the outskirts of Long Ashton, near Yanley Lane.

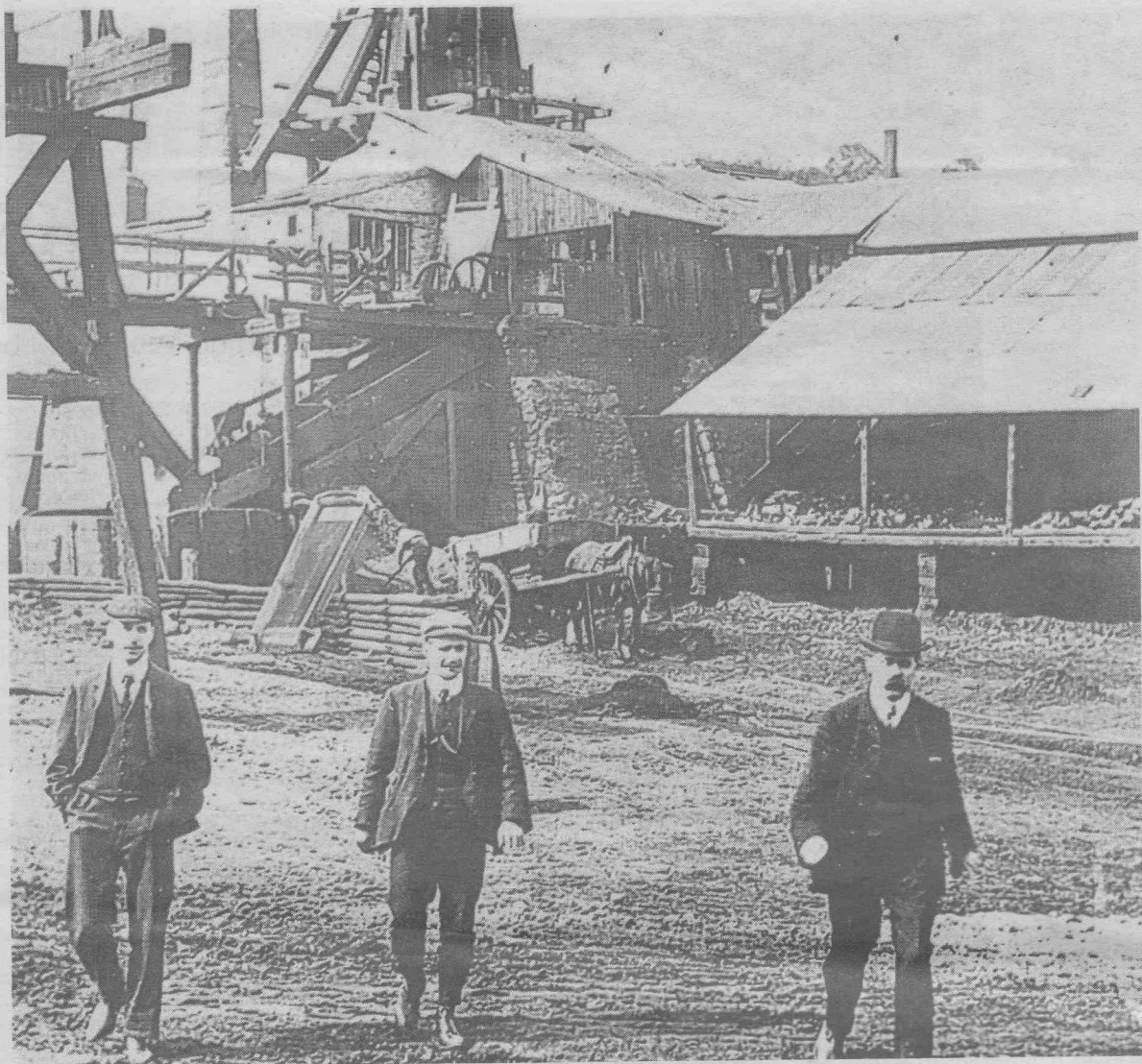
The entrepreneurs behind this venture were the Gore family of Barrow Court, related by marriage to the Smyths of Ashton Court.

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Gores pit, which first gets a mention in 1728, preceded the others, exploited by Sir Jarrit Smith, by almost 20 years. The name is remembered in Gore's Marsh.

Seventy-five square miles in all, the coalfield stretched from Temple Meads in the east to Long Ashton in the west and from Bedminster Down in the south to under the River Avon in the north.



● The gentleman pictured above are probably J M Stone, underground foreman, Moses Cowcill, manager, and Ishmael Hamblin, the secretary of the Ashton Vale Colliery and Iron Works. Dean Lane pictured from the top of the spoil tip, above left, shows the streets beyond and the close proximity of the two shafts

The later mines were worked at greatly varying depths – everything from 250 to 3,000 feet – with the seams themselves being anything from two to more than four feet thick.

In its early days, it's said, the Bedminster pits even rivalled the vast output coming from the well documented Kingswood/East Bristol area.

The best, most experienced miners, known as hewers, could, with luck, cut up to 70 tons a week.

Accidents did happen, as in the Malago Pit disaster of 1891 when ten men died and three were taken to hospital after an explosion.

In 1830, the Ordnance Survey map shows only four working pits, with the same number shown as old pits.

In another 30 years the whole field (16 pits in all) had been developed but

within another 40, the industry was in rapid decline.

The industry evolved, hit a peak and then disappeared in the space of about 100 years. So why did the pits close?

The authors conclude that this was primarily due to the geological structure of the strata which meant that the pits could not be modernised.

By the end of the First World War, in 1918/9, the best of the coal had been removed.

The depression of the 1920s was, perhaps, the final blow – or excuse – for the proprietors to call it a day.

All that remains today are the records, the miners' memories and the Bedminster pub names – the Miners Arms and the Jolly Colliers.

The book includes some coalfield walks, too, and a useful glossary of

mining terms and language.

There's also a chapter on the area's other industries, brick making and iron smelting, plus a fascinating industrial history of the Ashton area.

*Bristol's Forgotten Coalfield – Bedminster* is by Mike Taylor and Maggie Shapland.

Published by the South Gloucestershire Mines Research Group (SGMRS) the book costs £15 (£2.50 P&P). For more details please contact Roger Gosling on 01454 883607 or Steve Grudgings on 01256 896715.

