

Betws New Drift Mine

John Dorian Evans BA, BA Hons, MA, MED, PHD, PGCE

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SINKING THE PIT

Betws new drift mine was the last pit to be sunk by the National Coal Board and work began in 1974 on its construction. The main reason in sinking it was that since nationalisation in 1947 there had been massive pit closures due to the exhaustion of coal. Some pits needed massive investment to make them viable and working conditions in some pits were unacceptable. During the early years after the coal industry was taken into public ownership there were mergers of pits to improve production. In the Amman Valley between 1947 and 1976 a total of 14 collieries closed and were redeployed at other pits. In the early 1970s there was an energy crisis when the price of crude oil quadrupled and King Coal was back after a decline in its product market.

SINCE THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In 1947 there were 214 pits in Wales employing 114,823 personnel and producing 22,707,000 tons. Exports stood at 1,062,000 tons. By 1973 there were 51 pits employing 34,000 men with a saleable output of 10,8008,000 tons and an export level of 657,307 tons of coal.

In the Amman and Gwendraeth Valleys new pits were sunk at Abernant, Cynheidre, Cwmgwili and Lyndsey, the first two being long life pits sunk in the 1950s while the latter were sunk in the 1960s.

The old Betws colliery (called Ammanford number 1 pit) was sunk in 1899 on the site where the new Betws mine would be sunk in 1974. This is where Jim Griffiths worked who later became deputy leader of the Labour Party and the first secretary of state for Wales in 1964.



Image 1: Old Betws No. 1, opened circa 1890, where the late Rt. Hon. James Griffiths, Secretary of State for Wales, worked as a miner.

Work began on Betws New Mine in 1974 and meant tunnelling drifts 3,200 metres beneath Ammanford Colliery under the Betws Mountain. The depth of working the surface ranged from 150 to 800 metres and the work was carried out by Jim Williams, a company from Neath. To support the roof steel arches were erected at one metre intervals. The cycle of work involved: boring, firing, clearing the rock with Emco machines, and erecting arches. The rate of advance was 50 yards a week for two and half miles of roadway with one in five gradients. The work took two and a half years and 400,000 tons of rock were extracted.



Image 2: Construction of Drift Entrance May 1974



Image 3: Sinking the Drifts



Image 4: Construction of Drift entrance June 1974

The cost of the development of the pit was £8 million and the pit was expected produce 12 million tons of anthracite coal, mainly from the Red Vein. At the time of sinking it was the most modern mine in Europe with the latest technology, such as computer-controlled conveyors and electronic devices to detect methane gas.

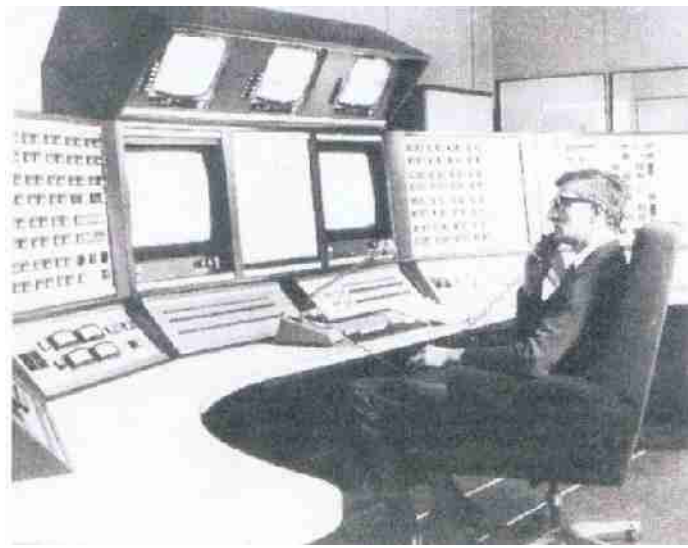


Image 5: Entrance Room in 1976-1977



Image 6: Intake Drift Spake



Image 7: Return Spake Intake



Image 8: Surface Boarding Station

The pit has 14 coal seams but the main ones are the Red vein and the Peacock. The Red vein is 1.5 metres thick with a sandstone/siltstone roof and clay floor. At the time of sinking the pit, two coal faces were to operate on a retreat mining system with an annual production of 500,000 tons of coal. A third face was to be held as a standby. It was estimated that there were 5 million tons of Red vein coal at the pit and 7 million tons of Peacock coal.

A further feature of the mine was that it had the longest drivages in the country and the design went into sinking the big Selby Pit in Yorkshire. The men earned £67 basic per week with £250 bonus advancing 22 metres a week, double shift. They hit the coal in 1977. After the main tunnels were completed, underground roadways had to be constructed to access the coal.



Image 9: Underground Roadway



Image 10: F1 Gate Road January 1999



Image 11: Gate Road with a conveyor belt to carry the coal

All of this work took four years to complete, including the surface buildings, and in 1976 Jim Callaghan, then prime minister, visited the pit.

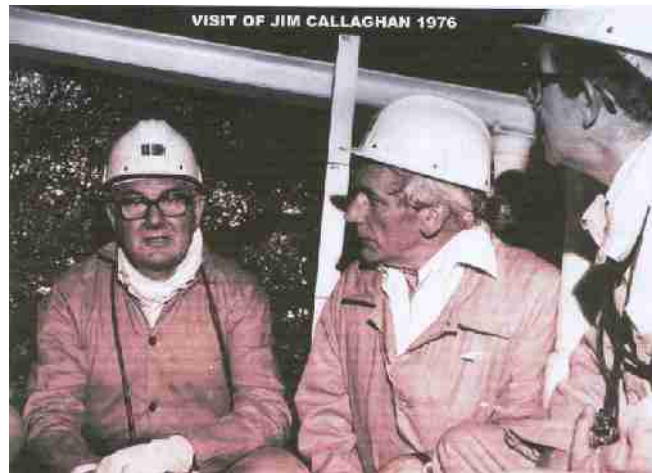


Image 12: Visit of Prime Minister James Callaghan 1976



Image 13: Jim Callaghan visiting the pit

Coal extraction at the pit was a long wall face using a Shearer cutting machine and hydraulic roof supports were used.



Image 14: Shearer coal cutter at work
on a face with hydraulic face supports

The official opening of the pit took place on march 1st 1978 by Prince Charles. He was informed that in the construction of the pit there were two square miles of reserves of coal at the pit and the main tunnels to the bottom of the drift were over two miles, with an additional 10,000 yards of smaller tunnels to access the coal.



Image 15: Prince Charles visits the pit



Image 16: Commemorative plaque
when Prince Charles visited the pit



Image 17: Intake Drift Entrance

THE PIT IN ITS HEYDAY

During the 15 years when the pit was in public control 600 tons of coal were leaving the pit every hour on 7 miles of conveyors. Between 1978 and 1993 a total of 21 long wall retreat faces were mined, each 200 metres long.

In 1983 £12 million of investment was made at the mine to access new seams beyond the Gardners Fault. In 1984/85 a further £3.9 Million was made to sink a further drift and an air shaft to improve ventilation at the mine.

By 1989 the colliery was losing £5 million a year due to geological problems, even though the manpower had been reduced through redundancies.

In January 1993 coal production ended under British Coal ownership and Betws colliery was placed on a care-and-maintenance basis until 1994 when the management buyout took place.

THE MANAGEMENT BUYOUT

The management buyout meant that the directors had to secure a £3 million lease. Around 90 men would be employed at the pit producing 100,000 to 150,000 tons of coal each year for 10 years. The system of working changed from long wall to pillar and stall and involved three men clearing the coal by shovel, spread over three shifts. The cycle was: boring, firing, clearing the coal, and erecting steel bars. Output was 12 tons from each face per shift. Around 2,000 detonations per week were used. Between the buyout and the year 2000 a total of 380 coal stalls were worked and, in distance, 35 miles of roadway.

In the year 2000 the mine experienced further geological problems and the manpower was reduced to 50 men while development work took place to access the Wigan seam. Between the year 2000 and 2003 the mine received £4.9 million of investment from the Department of Trade and Industry but, despite this, costs were rising, in particular Employment Insurance, which rose from £125,000 to per annum to £450,000.

In July 2003 the mine ceased production.



Image 18: Men handing in their lamps on the last shift, July 2003



Image 19: Last day at the mine, July 2003

Work commenced to seal the drifts and the site is now being reclaimed with a housing estate built on the site.

TO CONCLUDE

According to the Department of Trade and Industry there is an estimated further 2 million tons of anthracite coal still available at the pit not mined. Yet its coal could be used in the four corners of the world because of its properties.