

A Brief History of Mining in Dollar

By Gordon Mack

EARLY MINING/TRADE

The earliest record of mining in Clackmannanshire came from the Church Legate Aeneas Silvus, who was later to become Pope Pius II, during the reign of James I six hundred years ago. On a visit to the area at the beginning of the 15th century he reported seeing 'poor people begging in rags at Church doors given pieces of black stone, with which they went away happy.' This reflects the harsh nature of life at the time, when miners were serfs who were 'thirled' to the pits, which was a state of virtual slavery under which both they and their children were bought and sold at the whim of the landowners on whose land the pits were situated.

These conditions were finally abolished in 1799 at a time of expansion in the coal industry and by the early 19th century Dollar had a large mining population mainly digging the upper seams, meaning that people could hear the sound of picks whilst in their homes. By this time new technology allowed deeper seams to be mined, such as at Pitgober where the use of a steam powered water wheel led to coal being mined from a depth of 20 fathoms (36 metres).

Growing coal production in the 19th century reflected both the increasingly commercial nature of Dollar mining and easier transportation with the arrival of the railways. Although most of the coal was sold within Dollar and its surrounds there were also sales to Perth and the villages north of the Ochils. Developing local industries, such as the Devon Iron Works, bought Dollar coal too, with more being shipped further afield from Alloa and Kennet Pans. As of 1818 the price of household coal in Alloa was 9s per ton.

OWNERSHIP HISTORY

Most of the land in the Dollar area up to the 19th century was owned by the Duke of Argyll. Land was split up and leased in perpetual feu (rent), for payment of a feu duty, which at this time could have been paid in money or grain on an annual basis. The importance of coal is exemplified by the fact that in most of the leased areas of land the Duke reserved the coal and the right to mine it whereas all the other present minerals became the property of the feuars.

The New Statistical Account of Scotland (1841) noted that the reservation of coal led to some expensive law suits as there were disputes over alleged use of the land for mining without paying the requisite damages. This relationship of landowner/feuar ruled out large scale industrial mining on the Duke's land as it would not have been in the financial interests of any of the feuars.

Due to the revival of demand for coal at the outset of World War II the privately owned Alloa Coal Company wanted to expand into the Dollar area and obtained a trial-boring lease for land to the south east of Dollar village. Work began on the West Pitgober site in 1942 and the pits (Numbers 1, 2 and 3) opened the following year with a projected output of 400 tons per day. The nationalisation of the coal industry by the post-war Labour Government led to the coal field coming under public ownership under the auspices of the National Coal Board (NCB), which remained the case until work ceased in 1973.

MINE LOCATIONS/GEOLOGY

The Statistical Account of Scotland of 1841 stated that, 'The Dollar coal field is the west portion of an elliptical basin, the trough or lowest part of which has its greatest length in a line nearly parallel with the face of the Ochils.' The coal found there was of various thicknesses: 'cubical coal, splint coal, smithy coal and anthracite, commonly known by the name of blind-coal.'

It is not known precisely when coal was first mined in the area but the earliest work was likely to have taken place on the coal seam which is found on the eastern edge of Dollar along the path of the Kelly Burn where the seam was close to the surface.

Mass production was focused in the land between south-east Dollar and west Pitgober where, by the 19th century, machinery such as pumps and water wheels allowed for mining to a depth of 15.5 fathoms (28 metres). This site was expanded in the years after World War II and by 1960 five pits were in operation with easy access to the local rail and road systems.

Further pits were in use at Sheardale in the 19th century by use of a day level, which was a drainage tunnel dug with an outlet below the mine's working area, which discharged its water into the nearby River Devon. In the recent past Harviestoun Mine, situated midway between Tillicoultry and Harviestoun House, was in use between 1956 and 1961, and a private draft mine, also called Harviestoun, situated near Tait's Tomb, was opened by James Drysdale & Sons in the 1970s and employed 6 people into the 1980s before its closure.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Mining was a dangerous occupation. An extract from the Stirling Journal & Advertiser of 25 December 1868, describes a fatal accident at the Sheardale Pit in which James Wingate (25) attempted to descend the pit shaft. Instead of adopting the usual practice of getting into a tub or bucket at the pit mouth he,

sat upon a small roller fastened to the end of the windlass rope held by two women and one man at the pit mouth to guide him. It was however not properly secured and being wet whirled off the windlass with fatal velocity crashing through the scaffold to the bottom of the pit.

Mining in Dollar, and elsewhere in Scotland, was not a men-only occupation up to and including the 19th century. A significant proportion of the workforce was made up of women and children, with the near universal practice of women, known as bearers, carrying the mined coal to the surface. In Dollar the bearers would carry the coal up more than 100 feet in large baskets supported by placing belts around their foreheads.

The physical sturdiness required by women performing this manual labour is exemplified in the following excerpt from the Stirling Advertiser from 22 August 1828:

A few days ago, Janet Paterson, a women belonging to Devon Iron Works, engaged, for a trifling wager, to carry a load of coals on her back, at the amazing weight of 5 cwts (254 kg) – which Herculean feat she accomplished, having carried her burden a distance of nearly 30 fathoms (54 metres).

A report by the Children's Employment Commission of 1842 found that of the 39 people employed by the Sheardale Mine near Dollar, 12 were adult women, 5 were aged between 13 and 18 (4 boys and 1 girl), and 7 were under 13 (6 boys and 1 girl). Conditions were tough and hours long, as described by 12-year old Dollar boy John Hyde, who said: 'I have wrought coal for two years with my mother and father, my usual working time is 11 or 12 hours; I have no objection to hard work.'

Child labour of this nature was justified by the then mine manager John Lyell:

As children and women are under control and charge of parents we never interfere. There is no necessity for children being employed, most of the children are well instructed: the parents, if Parishioners of three years standing, can claim a free education for all their children at Dollar Academy.

Despite its long standing use, child labour was being questioned by the mid-19th century, as expressed by the Reverend Dr A. Mylne, the minister of Dollar Parish:

The collieries and manufactories about Dollar cause parents to take their children away from school too early (at very early ages) merely for the paltry wages they can get. It operates much to the children's injury in after life, for they seldom complete their education: indeed they have no opportunity afterwards, except by attending a weekday evening school for a few months in the winter.

Given that few people left their home towns during this period, the children of working miners in Dollar were liable to follow in their parent's footsteps and continue to work as miners, with the cycle continuing for future generations despite conditions described by Robert Bald, an Alloa engineer, in the 1841 Statistical Account of Scotland as being, 'the most cruel and oppressive slavery under heaven's canopy (the African slavery as it was in the West Indies excepted).'

POSTWAR MINING IN DOLLAR

Mining work at the West Pitgober site, Pits 1, 2 and 3, ceased in 1954 when the NCB moved production to Bannockburn, due primarily to output being higher there. The lower level of production at Dollar was partly due to adverse geological features such

as severe gradients and a deterioration of the standard of coal, leading to annual losses of £80,000.

Two years later however the NCB made the decision to reopen and expand Dollar Mine to meet the fuel requirements of the new Kincardine Power Station, which could be easily supplied by rail and road. In addition to the existing three pits, two more, numbers 4 and 5, were dug, dipping at a 1 in 5 gradient to a distance of 1000 yards. Demand for coal for electricity-generating purposes was increasing every year and the South of Scotland Electricity Board was prepared to give a written guarantee that they would purchase the entire output of Dollar mine for the next 15 years.

Production from numbers 4 and 5 pits began in 1960 and the venture started highly successfully: in January 1962 a new all-time record was set when an average of 79.3 cwt per man shift was achieved, comparing very favourably to the Scottish average of 24 cwt. Output continued to rise quickly and later that year reached an unprecedented 107 cwt per man shift.

Despite continuing concerns over the quality of Dollar coal and the partial collapse of the roof of the Number 2 pit in 1963, the mine won the order to supply Longannet Power Station, and around this time a single face produced 10,000 tons in the space of 5 days. As late as 1971 there were proposals to increase manpower to 532 but soon afterwards the poisonous gas Black Damp, also known as Stythe, which occurs when levels of carbon dioxide are high and mixed with nitrogen, was discovered in the mine and the area had to be sealed off.

This was a portent of things to come and in 1973 the mine hit burnt coal, water problems and faulted ground, leading to the NCB deciding to close down production. It was an economic decision as projected losses for 1973 were £761,000. Agreement was reached with the Unions and most of the miners were re-deployed to other local mines supplying Longannet.