

Talke's explosive mining past

Talke's mining past is the most popular aspect of Talke's long and varied history. There have been many pits that have given Talke Pits its name, being on top of the North Staffordshire Cold Field. For example there is Jamage pit where the Freeport shopping mall is now, the Talk O'Th'Hill Colliery on which the Coppice is built, and the Rookery just down the road in Red Street. There are lots of on-line resources for learning about the mines and their workers.

Coal mining began in Talke around the 1600s to support the flourishing iron and nail industry. Workers began by digging holes in the ground to mine the surface coal, but as this was exhausted deeper tunnels and more danger became involved to power the Industrial Revolution with its insatiable need for coal.

Most of the coalfield area was owned by the Sneyd family of Keele, but in the 1790s mining grants were granted to John Gilbert of Kidsgrove, and also to Kinnersley of Clough Hall in 1809. In 1872 North Staffs Coal and Iron works were opened, but it was only a year before 91 people were killed in the 1873 explosion, the youngest being only 10.

The technical stuff

The North Staffordshire coal seam is made of soil, loam and an under stratum of sand, gravel, mal and grit stone rock

Mining Disasters

Everyday work at the mines had a yearly toll of death from accidents, but pit explosions ripped entire communities apart. For mining disasters see the following two web pages

http://www.healeyhero.co.uk/rescue/individual/john_lumsdon.htm

<http://www.healeyhero.co.uk/rescue/pictures/reminise/talke.htm>

For Miners in see WWI <http://www.healeyhero.co.uk/rescue/jl/WW1-1.htm>

See also <http://www.stokecoll.ac.uk/NSCFWEB/Disasters/disaster.htm>

They cover the explosions of

Talk'O'Th'Hill, Banbury Pit- 1866

Talk'O'Th'Hill-1873

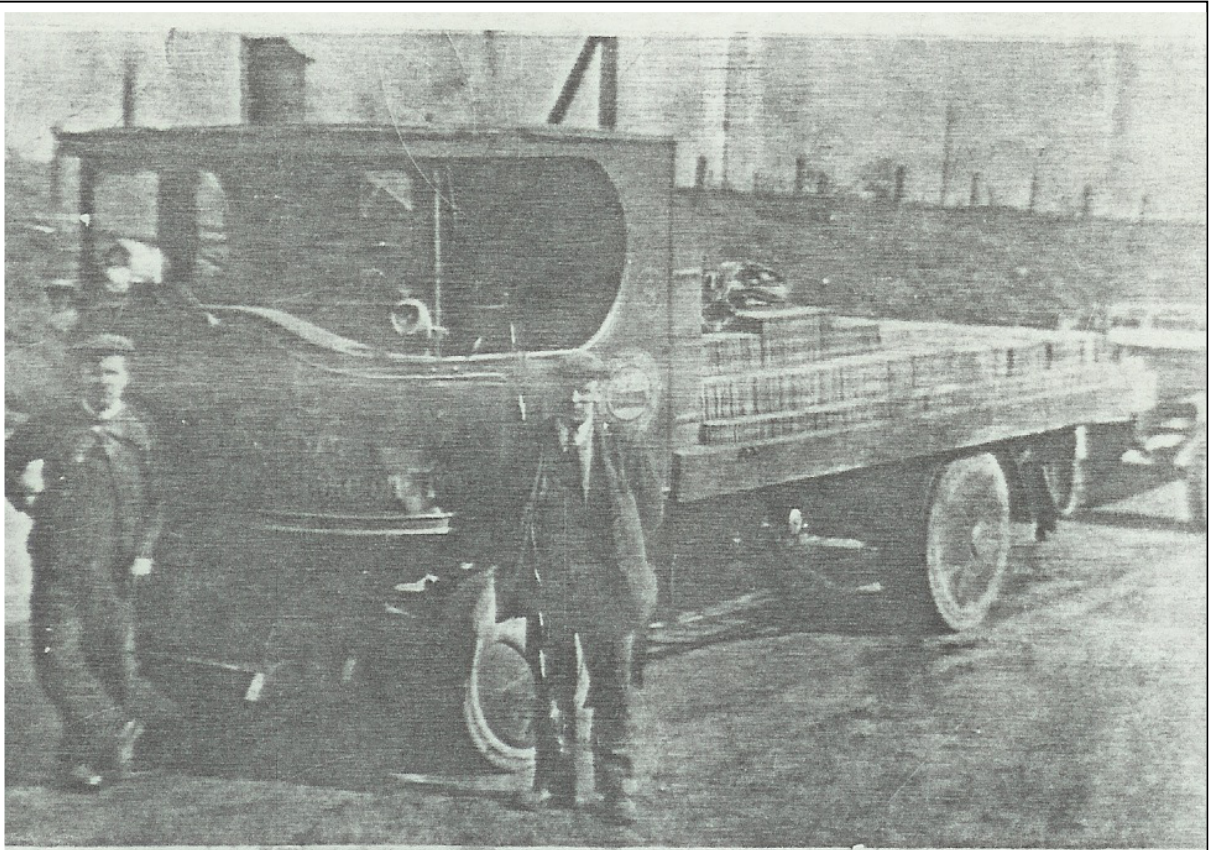
Talk'O'Th'Hill-1901

Jamage- 25 November 1911

Jamage- 5 January 1876

Bunkers Hill- 30 April 1875

The earliest explosion occurred in 1785 when 43 people died- does anyone know anything about it?



This is an account of the 1866 explosion

'Thirteen men and boys were rescued alive, two of whom died later. By Friday morning 58 bodies had been recovered and removed to 'The Swan Inn'. Two rooms had been provided there for the reception of bodies and identification by relatives. There were terrible scenes as people searched for their loved ones, many of whom were dreadfully mutilated. The cause of the explosion was never established, but several home made keys to the safety lamps were found in the pockets of those who died. Evidence was also found of miners smoking underground. A collection ordered by Queen Victoria raised over £16,000 for the widows and children.'

However, none of these sites give details of an explosion at Talk O'Th'Hill in 1884, where naked lights caused the death of 17 people. Does anyone have any information?

These are on top of the many near misses that frequently occurred. In 1900 at the Talk O'Th'Hill Colliery a wave of coal gas came up the pitch shaft and was ignited by an unprotected torch, although just this once, no-one was in the area or hurt.

These terrible explosions brought out the village community and the generosity of the nation. £16,000 was raised by public subscription, with Queen Victoria's donation of £100 being second on the list. £300 was added to this by committee of Talke relief fund that had been set up following the 1782 explosion. 170 widows and orphans claimed from the fund, 5shillings for widows and 2shillings to orphans up to the age of 14. Some of this was left over to form a permanent relief fund for those who not only lost their men-folk but their income.

A Short History of Jamage

Jamage pit was opened at the beginning of the 19th Century but it didn't reach its height until 100 years later at the start of the 20th Century. The opening of it was at the corner of Lyn Avenue and Walton Way, and the trucks used to run down what is now coppice bank on rail lines to the canal near Lindley on the way to be washed, and legend has it that the noises these trucks made going over junctions lead it to be called nibble and clink.

The pit was opened by Robert Rigby, and we get a feeling of pit life in a poem titled perseverance, by a mine worker called Thomas Heath

The triangle at the bottom of Coppice bank is known as Rigby's triangle, which I have read was named after an old pit pony buried there called Rigby. Maybe the pony had been named after Robert Rigby, or maybe the area was named after the mine owner and not the pony.

The mine expanded and in the 1870s an iron blast furnace was added. In the 1890s a coking station, slack works and chemical works were built so that money could be made out of the by-products.

However, the thriving coal industry was not to last and the pit closed in 1928, putting thousands out of work. Many of the pits rail lines remained until they were removed in 1975 to make way for the A500. The slag heaps were landscaped and the coppice estate was built on top. Despite its name, the Jamage industrial estate was built on Talk O' Th' Hill Mine, not Jamage.

Everyday life in the mines

The best account of this is "Goodbye old Pick", a collection of the memories of Charles Lawton by his granddaughter Anne Goddard, available in Talke Library.

Life in the mines was hard; the days were long and the conditions cramped, dark and dirty. Many miners developed lung conditions from breathing in the sooty air, and many a miner became prominent in the trade union movement because of mining injuries.

The 19th Century saw a flood of laws trying to improve the conditions of miners. In 1842 women and children under the age of 12 were banned from working underground, although this did not affect Staffordshire as women only worked on the surface here. However, safety restrictions were not always welcomed. Families often relied on the income provided by young children in the mine, and sending them to school sometimes meant that they would have to go hungry for the privilege. Also many of the regulations about adequately shoring up the tunnels were ignored by the workforce as they were paid not by the hour but by the ton of coal, and time spent shoring up would leave their wages short and their large families hungry.

One corrupt practice removed was the paying of mine workers in the pub, often owned by a friend of the mine-owner, or even the mine-owner themselves. It would seem unfriendly not to have a drink with friends, and many a miner went home with a good deal less of his wages than he should, with the mine-owner getting much of his money back through beer sales.

Life in the mines was continually haunted by the fear of explosion, not just to those below ground. Tremors would run through the ground and the entire village would run to the site of billowing black smoke to see if their loved ones had got out alive.

Thanks to the trade union movement, miners were suddenly able to do something about their poor working conditions, low pay and lack of security. The now peaceful Walton Way was once the site of miner's strikes who fought for the minimum wage. Many famous Union faces began their work at Talke, for example Enoch Edwards began work at Hollinswood Colliery for 6d a day, aged only nine.