

## Baxterley Pit

Over in North Warwickshire, not far from the town of Atherstone, there is an area known as "Little Brum". It's not that emigres from the Second City have found a peaceful retirement there, or that the streets are full of balti houses. No, this is a name with a much longer pedigree than that.

The nickname dates back at least to the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, when this neck of the woods resembled its larger neighbour in ways we can hardly imagine today. There were the brick-yards, and smoke-stacks, the winding gear and the furnaces, of a place that had industrialised just as intensely as Birmingham had done.

There was, however, one significant difference. While Big Brum relied for its fuel on the mines outside its borders, North Warwickshire had coal to burn.

By the early 1800s there were already fifty or more mine-shafts dotted about the villages of Baddesley and Grendon, not to mention the open-cast gouges into the ground. The Romans were probably the first to exploit the area's mineral resources, and mining only increased as landowners cashed in on their natural assets in Tudor times. Though coal was the star attraction, there was also ironstone buried here, and, to a lesser extent, limestone too.

Those earliest invasions carried the badge of their owners in their names: Willoughby's Pit, Stratford's Mines, Robert's Colliery.

And alongside the pits there were the chain railroads to haul the coal across to the canals, and brick kilns to furnish the linings for the shafts. Across some 25 miles of North Warwickshire coal was king.

Hardly a hint of all that frenetic activity can be seen in Little Brum today. When the last mine closed at Baddesley Ensor back in 1989 – one of sixteen pits to go in a year that marked an escalation in the Coal Board's closure programme- it spelt the end of 400 years of intensive mining here.

Only two winding wheels - one on Baddesley Common and one at Baxterley, by the side of the village pond - remain as a visual reminder of what was once the mainstay of the local economy.

Those wheels, silent and still, and particularly the one at Baxterley, stand as memorials, not only to an industry which has died, but also to those who died in the making it. Every coal district has its tragedy, and for North Warwickshire it was Baxterley in 1882.

The two pits at Baxterley came late to the party, being sunk only in 1850. By that date the surface coal – the low-hanging fruit – had all been exhausted, and the pit owners were having to go deeper and deeper for the seam. At Baxterley the coal was some 840 feet below the surface, and a steep roadway took the Warwickshire miners down to the coal face.

Yet, for the pit's owners – the Stratford Dugdales of Merevale Hall – demand for the black stuff more than justified going that extra (half) mile.

Any mine this deep faces the problem of water ingress, and Baxterley was no exception. The only viable solution, it seemed, was to install a steam-engine deep underground to pump out the water. It's not hard to imagine the risks of introducing fire into a mine 800 feet down, or to foresee the consequences. The engineer's

advice to encase the engine in brick – to prevent the boiler igniting the coal above it – was ignored.

It was on May 1 1882, less than three weeks after the pump had been installed, that the inevitable happened. Coal near to the engine ignited, and all the underground workings were swiftly filled with dense smoke, trapping nine miners. One of them was a boy of just fourteen, by the name of Joseph Scattergood.

Had this been the beginning and the end of matters, it was bad enough, but it was the ill-fated attempt to rescue the trapped miners, which turned an accident into a disaster.

Throughout the night and into the following morning men from the surrounding villages attempted to push the smoke back, using wooden panels covered in fire-resistant cloth. At 8.30 am, however, a huge explosion, probably caused by the ignition of coal dust, occurred, sending a fireball up the road-way and straight into the path of the rescuers.

To the death-toll of the original nine miners could now be added twenty-three of the rescue party.

It was this aspect that made Baxterley not only one of the worst, but also one of the most unusual of mining tragedies, for the subsequent explosion meant that the list of fatalities included the owner of the mine himself – William Stratford Dugdale – his agent and the pit manager, who had all joined the rescue party. Rarely has death in the pit been so democratic.

Many of the dead – pit owner and worker alike – still lie together in Merevale churchyard, both life and death spent underground.

One might imagine that the demise of thirty-two men would be enough to end coal mining at Baxterley for good. Yet, two years after the disaster, the Dugdales were again preparing to re-open the pit. At least this allowed for the recovery of some, if not all, of the original victims.

And so mining operations re-commenced at Baxterley. By the 1930s the North Warwickshire pits were employing some 1,400 men; Little Brum and Big Brum marched together through the Age of Industry.