

REVIEW

Worth a Thousand Words: mining picture books

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When the two centuries of mining as a dominant factor in large areas of the British landscape, and in the economy, comes up for archaeological re-appraisal, perhaps in the next century, it seems likely a, or even the, major single source will be the rush of "picture books" which has been emerging in the last few decades.

Mining has attracted artists for a long period - several illustrations are available of both Greek and Roman mining. Surface landscapes and, less frequently, underground, are relatively common from the sixteenth century onwards (of which Agricola's are just the best-known examples), whilst mining plans and sections often incorporate pictorial elements. In Germany, which has a Society devoted to "Art and Culture in Mining", a range of publications (see, especially, the well illustrated tomes of Winkelmann *et al*, 1857 and Slotta and Bartels 1990) has been devoted to the subject and there is a permanent exhibition at the Deutsches Bergbau Museum at Bochum. In this country relatively little attention has been given to systematic exploration and publication of pre-photographic illustrations, despite an exhibition on the subject a few years ago. The major published source of 19th century illustrations is probably T.H. Hair's well known *Series of Views of the Collieries in Northumberland and Durham* (1844), supplemented by the recent publication of (some of) Hair's original watercolours on which the *Sketches* were based (Glendinning 2000). From personal experience in libraries and archives, and from isolated published examples, the writer has no doubt there is scope for a major research project here and, what one would hope, will be a delightful and informative book..

Surface photographs of mining began relatively early - it was a popular subject with the Americans in the 1850s and surviving photographs from Europe including Britain seem to be extant fairly frequently for the 1860s onwards. According to Chris Howes, in his *To Photograph Darkness*, the first underground photograph taken of a mine in operation in Britain (and in the World) was in 1865 at Millclose Mine at Darley Dale, Derbyshire (Howes 1989 p.43 - but it was preceded by exposures in the Blue John Caverns). An account was published in the *British Journal of Photography* (Grant 1865). Difficulties in coal mines were, at first, less the risk of ignition of gas, than of getting sufficient light on the subject. Magnesium was very expensive and in a famous occasion to produce photographs for the New Orleans Exhibition, at the Kohinor Colliery at Shenandoah in 1884, electric arc lights were used, the installation of an underground engine and dynamo being preferred to the extension of the wiring (Howes 1989 p.163-5). Magnesium, however, generally remained the lighting of choice, though few photographers had connections or influence enough to receive permission for underground photography in coal mines.

The best known early underground photographer in Britain, from his first activities in 1891, was J.C. Burrow, examples of whose photographs, taken in the tin mines of Cornwall, are widely available, and whose methods were adapted by Herbert W. Hughes in collieries in the Midlands (Howes 1989 p.168-80). From then underground photography as well as surface in all types of mines became fairly frequent. The well known series taken in the Clay Cross Collieries around 1908 and used on postcards for advertising being one of the first major contributions for collieries. From the mid 20th century the majority of surviving pits seem to have their quota of photographs surviving.

On a world basis, perhaps the most awe-inspiring early photographs of mining at surface were those of the men and equipment, travels and travails on the Klondike gold rush of 1897-99, many taken on 14 x 11 glass-plate cameras and developed in the field. These have been presented in an award-winning "coffee table" photographic essay by Pierre Berton (1983), marred, perhaps, only by the omission of the actual names of the photographers who took the plates. Its production sets a standard to which we should, more often, aspire.

One of the first professional photographic mining surveys was that by the Geological Survey. Their Cornish and Devon Series was utilised by Stanier 1998, who added a commentary to pictures taken by four photographers between 1903 and 1945. The photographs are of high quality.

The rise in industrial archaeology in the 1960s onwards led to photography as the major tool in recording both site remains and on features due to be lost due to closure or reconstruction. Almost any reputable book on mining history is likely to incorporate some of these, but specialist photographic publications, which use text to complement photographs rather than vice versa, are somewhat rarer. Amongst these are the two volumes by Richard Bird, a professional photographer, who produced *Britain's Old Metal Mines* (1974) and *Yesterday's Golcondas* (1977). Both were high quality, black and white publications, of his own photographs with short and informed commentaries to each picture. All areas of Britain with metal mines were covered. No other works of equal merit to these seem to have emerged for more than a decade.

From about 1980, printing costs for photographs within publications began to decline, at least for less than high quality work. The writer's own (joint) publications (Parker and Willies 1980 and Willies, Gregory and Parker 1989), both fit into this pattern as do many others by authors on their own particular mining areas: Hickling (1989) in the Black Country, Joy (1989) in Yorkshire, Griffin (1981) for Nottinghamshire, Raistrick and Roberts (1984) for the North Pennines, Williams (1980) for metals, and Kelly (1990) for coal, in North Wales. In Cornwall, Jack Trounson's two volumes (no date) opened up the huge photographic potential of that area. Better quality required a much higher circulation than was usually available and probably some form of sponsorship. Important in this category amongst good quality volumes which did appear were those supported, by the National Union of Miners or their regional affiliations: in 1989, for example to celebrate the hundred years since the Miners' Federation of Great Britain was formed, the NUM produced *A Century of Struggle: Britain's Miners in Pictures 1889-1989*, and the Derbyshire Area celebrated the centenary of its foundation in a similar way (Williams 1989). Others were

produced in other areas. As well as preserving substantial evidence of the archaeology of the industry, there is also a valuable social and political flavour in NUM books which is nowadays almost as remote as the physical evidence of the industry itself. Nottinghamshire, often the maverick in Trade Union affairs produced a pictorial counter-view to the mainstream viewpoint, in its *County Under Siege* by Griffin (1985).

The demise of the industry also led to local picture-based publications being produced. Picture postcards figure in many compilations, but *Reflections of a Bygone Age* at Keyworth, Notts have produced a number of good quality slim volumes which include coal mining Ellis (1995) for South Yorkshire and Bown (1992) for South Derbyshire and North West Leicestershire. The "demise category" could also include vanity publishing, for instance Haigh's (1989) a centenary volume for Bolsover Colliery and souvenir publishing, such as Thomas' (1990) guide to Big Pit at Blaenafon. Others are sometimes linked to local newspaper publishing: *The Barnsley Chronicle*, for instance, published (and reprinted) its popular *Pits: A Pictorial Record of Mining*, in two volumes (Threlkeld 1989). The journalistic approach includes important aspects not always remembered in local histories, though not usually forgotten by the archaeologist whose nose is usually closer to the ground: Threlkeld, page 65 (1989 Vol. 2) reveals residents of the mining villages of Goldthorpe and Bolton-on-Deerne did not know how to use lavatories! The abundance of photographs in this important collection included many from private sources: it is to be hoped the original photographs or, at least, the photographic copies have been carefully preserved, since the paper quality is far from high.

The information which can be derived from more recent photographs is immeasurably greater where colour photography has been used and where it has been used in reproduction. The cost of colour has been at least some four times as high as good quality black and white, though it seems now to be falling. Thus the outlay for publishers has been a severe deterrent, though overseas there seems to have been an earlier willingness to use colour than in Britain. One of the best examples of this is a souvenir volume for the salt mines of Wieliczka in Poland (Hanika and Klimowski 1988). To economise on paper costs the pictures have been gathered together on a series of plates at the rear, with over a hundred photos, many full page (A4) in size. The compromise was certainly worth while.

The first mining history book to use substantial and sufficient colour to fall in the present category, in this country, appears to be Hardy's *Hidden Side of Swaledale* (no date, but c. 1990). This attractive production was, however, marred by its sometimes unreliable text which was not well received by local specialist historians. Colour was also used in Carr and Schone's (1993) *Pigs and Ingots*, which seems to have been produced more for artistic than historical purposes.

What spurred the present commentary was the spate of mining history picture books which have appeared in the last few years, and in particular the last few months. To the diverse traditional categories of commemorative and industrial publishers, mining historians and mining photographers, is added a further category, of specialists employed by what was formerly the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of England and its Scottish and Welsh equivalents. It can be expected that they have brought and will bring a deeper and wider perspective of the task of recording a largely disappeared mining industry. There are too many published to list even those within my own

library, but the following probably represent the most important, with due respect to those missed out.

The term "images" has become important: perhaps it is a more impressive term than "pictures". One of the first to bear this word in the title was David Bellamy's *Images of the South Wales Mines* (1993), an area which has been particularly impressive in bringing out picture books. Bellamy's is a series of beautifully presented colour and black and white drawings, sketches and paintings, with double-spaced text which seems to indicate it is essentially an art book.

In contrast Robin Thorne's *Images of Industry: Coal* (1994) represents a five year programme by the RCHME to try and capture an industry which was suddenly seen to be near extinction. It presents a range of rather formal, but high quality pictures, architecturally inclined, with the nearest to underground being a training gallery. The muck to money nature of much of the industry is not really represented, nor its tremendous diversity both within a colliery and between collieries. It would hardly be expected that its aerial companion, Gould and Ayris (1995) commentary on aerial photographs, most again taken by the RCHME, would get any closer to the ground, but it probably does, though the less-than-sparkling photographic reproduction leaves something to be desired. Most of the sites must already have had aerial photography available via the counties involved, so a new survey had only slightly added value and it is not fully clear why this was the favoured approach. Both these books are useful and well-produced, but less inspiring and informative than might have been hoped. Hughes, *et al* (No date but c.1998), in a similar official record of engineering and architecture for the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales have succeeded in producing a more inspiring work, which does also include a few underground views.

Images of (whatever/where-ever) was then seized on as a title by Tempus, in this country based at Stroud. By now almost all readers of local history must be aware of their cream and sepia-paper-backed books, which use a formula for authors with specialist knowledge of a subject, and not less than 200 reasonably diversified photographs to produce a photo-and-text based account. Mining has been a particularly strong area, Willies and Parker 1999; Goodchild 2000, Carpenter 2000, Davies and Hudson 1999; with two (Brown 1999 and 2000) and even three (Trousoun and Bullen 1999; 1999 and Bullen 2000) volumes. Other books included in similar "formula" by various publishers often include a substantial mining content: e.g. Williams (1995), Buxton (1994). Authors to such volumes have very much their own approaches, so the actual format is more variable than the above comment on "formula" may indicate, but the great value is in putting forward at modest cost a huge range of pictures which is presumably of interest to purchasers and will be of considerable value to researchers. The main drawback is picture quality which is sometimes less than excellent, even by comparison with cheaply produced volumes such as this journal. Recent issues seem to be somewhat better with more interesting covers (e.g. Brown 2000). Cost is usually £9.99, but look out for remainders.

The Durham and Northumberland coalfield has been covered in two publications, each of two volumes, by Tuck (1993) and Temple (1994), produced in similar formats on glossy paper by the Trade Union Printing Service. Both titles are intended to emphasise the engineering tradition which was being, or had been lost but, not un-naturally defer to the Union tradition of mining - a good thing too - the first Durham volume in

consequence containing the splendid figure of Thomas Ramsey, one of the "sacrificed men", complete with crake in hand.

Small mines seem to have a particular fascination, perhaps because access to surface was often very easy and the casually appearing photographer was welcome. Booth, under the auspices of the Industrial Railway Society, has produced four volumes, two on the South Wales mines (1995, 1997) and on *British Mines in the North* (2000) and *British Mines in the south* (2001), both of commendable picture quality, and which are particularly valuable in recording what are usually very ephemeral workings with less "official" impetus to provide some record.

The two most recent publications, and by far the most expensive (double or more) appeared at the end of 2001, both published by Landmark, fortunately allowing them to be bought for me for Christmas. The most beautiful of the two is undoubtedly Stovel and Williams' *Images of Cornish Tin*, produced in association with English Heritage. Mainly in full colour, it contains well over two hundred images, a few of which are old, but most were taken for the former RCMHE (now part of English Heritage) as a "snapshot" of the industry in its final stages. It is a loose and eclectic assemblage rather than a formally arranged sequence, in which powerful emotions were a factor in the choice of picture. And in most respects it works and is undoubtedly the best-quality mining picture book produced for British mines to date, and for cost conscious purchasers, it is probably better value in pence per pic than any others described above. But I do have slight reservations. Sites with a depressing landscape even to mining historians (see p30 and 36 especially), let alone local eco-vigilantes, are so beautifully photographed here, it is untrue. Beautiful scenes such as on p56-57 and 62 might even have opened the pockets of English Partnerships to rapid refinancing of South Crofty had they happened to visit on that date equipped with suitable blinkers. The images are wonderful, but even enthusiasts will wonder if it was ever, in reality, really quite so good!

Which brings me to John Cornwall's first volume (of two?) of *Collieries of South Wales*. 275 photos of 39 collieries, all in black and white. The quality is just a little better than the Tempus *Images* series and well below that of *Cornish Tin*, but the cover picture shows what might have been. Nevertheless, this is a series of photographs which actually shows coal mining as I remember it: untidy but organised, muck and dirt everywhere (unless especially "bulled-up" for a publicity shot), no glamour, tons of craft and engineering skills apparent, plenty of underground shots. John has developed a technique for painting his scenes with an ordinary caplamp - I remember being astonished when I first saw his colour slides for which he had used this method - which removes most of the safety difficulties of underground working coalmine photography. This is probably the best picture book in Britain so far, and if Landmark improve the reproduction quality on the deserved re-printing, I'll buy that too.

This list of picture books is far from comprehensive, but within them must be some ten thousand or more "images of mining". Obviously there is a wide quality gradation and much repetition: not so much the same picture as the same type of scene. However these combined sources must represent the most accessible large body of archaeological data about the industry in the twentieth century, and a very substantial body for earlier times. But how often is an image cited as the source in an academic work?

What is also now possible, and highly desirable, is to locate the original photographs on which the books are based - nearly all the authors are still alive, or their collections are still available. Many, if not most, deserve to go on to the National Monuments Record at Swindon or obvious other repositories. English Heritage, in associating themselves with *Images of Cornish Tin* have taken an important step: may we look forward to John Cornwall's colour images in a companion volume. And Paul Deakin's? One thing is necessary for this to happen - we need to buy the books if sponsors or publishers are to produce them.

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To Peak District Mining Museum, who, for over twenty years, have unfailingly pointed out new books arriving that I might wish to buy.

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