



DURHAM  
*In Time*

## Blackhall Colliery and Village History

by Dru Trenholm

### Early History

People had lived in the Blackhalls area for centuries. Neolithic Stone Age settlements were near Dene Holme, Crimdon Dene, in an area above the caves at Blackhall Rocks and the nearby Coast Road. About 20,000 Stone Age relics were collected from these sites in the early part of the 20th Century. In 1916, a Saxon grave was found on the cliff tops at Blackhall Rocks. The body of an immature person had been placed in a rough cist (coffin or burial chamber) made up of large slabs of local magnesian limestone and also found were two small yellow beads of fused opaque glass.

The area surrounding Blackhall consisted of small estates run by local gentry. Under the Normans, Hardwick Hall was built and although ravaged by the Scots in 1315, it became the home of the Maire family and for over 200 years maintained Jesuit Priests and a chapel. This was all done in secrecy – a priest's hide is still in evidence today. The Hall became a dispersal point for Catholic priests smuggled along our coastline at Blackhall Rocks, Blue House Gill and Dene Holme from seminaries in France. In 1758 Rowland Burdon III purchased Castle Eden estates which included the Castle at Castle Eden, Hardwick Hall, tenant farms, etc. Hardwick Hall with its links from the past was to become the home of the agent of Horden Collieries Limited in 1910.

After the closure of the Colliery, the Hall eventually became the home of the Bradley family and is now a restaurant and hotel. The Castle at Castle Eden was purchased by





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the National Coal Board and used as their offices. After that it was bought by private enterprise to be made into apartments but to date is still empty.

### Industrialisation

There is evidence that in the 18th century there was a lead mine at Blackhall Rocks – owned by the Crosby family, but there is insufficient proof to show whether or not it was commercially viable. However, geologists from University of Durham confirmed its existence in terms of it being a “Trial Adit”, suggesting an exploratory working.

Over the years, the surrounding area changed. Pits were sunk at Wingate, Thornley, Wheatley Hill and in 1840, Castle Eden Colliery. Industrialisation of the area was very close with nearby pits being sunk at Easington and Horden (1902). However, Castle Eden Colliery (situated at Hesleden) closed in 1894 due to flooding and was then by Horden Collieries Limited. The development of the railway, with a coastal link from Hartlepool to Sunderland brought industrialisation to the area. The completion of the railway viaducts at Crimdon and Dene Holme (Blackhall/Horden) took place in 1905 and Blackhall Rocks Station was opened for passenger trains together with 8 houses for railway workers and their families. This process of growth was the beginning of the linking of Blackhall to the coal industry for the next 70+ years and started the development of our village, as we know it today.

### Sinking of the Shaft

Horden Collieries Limited who owned Shotton, Horden and Castle Eden collieries, completed the sidings in 1908 in preparation for the sinking of the colliery at Blackhall. This took place in 1909, initially to provide water for the village rather than





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to raise coal, there being no other fresh water supply. The first shaft was called “The Staple” and the water pumped to a newly built reservoir near Blue House Farm. As the filter beds were not installed the water was salty and could only be used for washing and cleaning. Water for drinking had to be carried from a spring just below Blue House Farm.

The sinking of the main shaft for mining coal began in 1909. My great-uncle Sam Cadwallender was one of the first sinkers. The sinkers came from different places – some had stayed in the area after sinking nearby collieries, others had been involved with the building of the docks at Hartlepool and the building of the viaducts at Crimdon Dene and Dene Holme. Irish immigrants, tin miners from Cornwall made up the workforce. The first coals were drawn in 1913. The difficult nature of the strata created great problems. The thick cover of Permian limestone was under laid by porous, crumbly sand containing large volumes of water, the depth of the sand being about 16 metres.

To overcome this problem, this section of the strata was frozen when it was reached by the sinkers. Water was to be a lasting problem for the Colliery and was a major factor in its eventual closure. In 1923, water from the old workings of the Castle Eden colliery broke into the Blackhall Colliery workings. To contain the water, pumping engines were employed at the shaft continuously. The Castle Eden shaft was kept open and pumping engines were also used there. The shaft was sunk to a depth of between 440 and 475 metres and passed through at different levels, the Three-Quarter, Five-Quarter, Main, Low Main and Hutton seams. The two main shafts, South Pit and North Pit, when completed would have diameters of 22 feet and a depth of 1200 feet.





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The sinking at Blackhall became the final phase of the Durham Coalfield reaching out under the sea for approximately 3 miles. The sinking method at Blackhall was similar to that used at Horden with wooden head gear and steam power which needed a huge 180ft chimney but this was soon replaced by electric winding gear which could raise 18,000 tons a week. With no need for chimneys to belch out smoke and steam into the air and no need for a spoil heap – the waste was disposed into sea by aerial ropeway – the pit was the most modern in the land by 1916 and Blackhall was a cleaner village than most. The tragedy was that one of the most beautiful stretches of sand in Britain was soon to become a desolate wasteland. Easington and Horden were quick to follow this terrible practice.

This modern trend was not reflected in the initial housing provision, which was appalling. Renting houses at nearby Hesleden was limited and many families lived in huts and tents and even in some of the caves on the beach. The normal monotonous grid-pattern houses were built going up by “numbers” as at Horden – First Street, Second Street, Third Street and so on.

Blackhall employment figures started with 673 in 1914 and in 1980 the number was 1,353.

Employment:	Year	Below	Above	Total
	1914	464	209	673
	1921	1,131	287	1,418
	1930	1,930	515	2,445
	1940	1,784	516	2,300





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	1945	1,841	515	2,356
	1947	1,838	550	2,388
	1950	2,006	484	2,490
	1960	1,676	371	2,047
	1972	1,294	322	1,616
	1975	1,158	292	1,450
	1980	1,115	238	1,353

Information from the Durham Mining Museum Website.

### The Village

Other amenities were limited to a few galvanised metal erections that comprised of the “tin” school in 1911 and also a Church/Church Hall. In the meantime, roads had been built to link the community to the rest of the area, the Coast Road between Blackhall and Hartlepool was opened in 1924 and the road between Blackhall and Horden in 1925.

A new Church (Church of England) was eventually purchased – second hand! It cost £300 and came from Stockton (St. Paul’s) and because the exterior was so dirty, it was rebuilt inside out at a cost of £6,000. It was re-named St. Andrews on 5th May 1930, but it is known locally as “The Inside-Out Church”. In 1929, the Middle Street schools were opened after a temporary school on the same site and by permission of the Horden Collieries Ltd.; the “Granary” building became a school for junior and senior boys.





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In 1929, the Welfare Park was opened; this like many others in the Durham Coalfield was paid for by a weekly levy on the miners' wages, initially 1pence and then later 2 pence.

The pithead baths were opened in 1934. For the miner himself, it meant that he could have a hot shower immediately on reaching the surface. He could get rid of his pit-dirt – leave his pit clothes in his locker and get changed into clean clothes. It must have been more welcome to the mothers and wives of miners. No more filling and emptying the tin bath in front of the fire. No more dirty pit clothes having to be picked up and banged against the back yard wall to get rid of the coal dust. No need for the kitchen or living room to serve as a bathroom and no need for the rest of the family to scatter while the miner had his bath.

In 1936 the railway station at Blackhall Colliery was opened by the Colliery Manager, Mr. E. Chicken, the first train going to Edinburgh on 25th July and the second train to the Miners' Gala at Durham. Between the first and Second World Wars, new housing schemes were developed, some by private developers and others as a result of Council enterprise. The new Council House estates were built to a higher standard than the original terraced "numbered" miners' houses. They were mainly semi-detached with gardens front and back and indoor bathrooms. They were however, always slightly inferior in appearance to the private dwellings which were more likely to be occupied by professional people, e.g., doctors, teachers, etc. This was remedied somewhat by the introduction, on the initiative of the coal companies of "scheme" housing. New dwellings on neat terraced estates were built by private developers and assistance was made to the miners in arranging mortgages.







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From 1927 until re-armament in 1936, the coal trade was in the doldrums with excess capacity and low demand. The fall of France in 1940 brought a collapse in the export market of coal and as the bulk of Blackhall's coal was exported, the pit was put on short time working – sometimes only one week in three. Some of the miners moved their families to the Midlands finding work in the pits and factories there. Others went to work in the shipyards at Hartlepool. However, later in the war, many of them returned to the colliery as demand for coal grew.

### Post war years

The village was heavily dependant on the pit for employment – there was no real alternative employment in the area to mining and its associated industries. Jobs in the service industries were few, and the spending capacity was limited. Blackhall's reserves of good, easily accessible coal and short communications by road and rail resulting in cheaper transport and maintenance costs, gave it a small but significant advantage over the older collieries in the area.

After the war, 1947 brought in the Nationalisation of Coal Mining and in 1952, gas was laid to the pit and to the village in 1953/54. In 1957, a new library was opened in Hesleden Road and the new modern school was built in 1965, also in Hesleden Road, later to be the new Comprehensive School, now Yohden Hall Nursing Home.

The 1960's and 1970's brought increasing competition from oil, natural gas and nuclear fuel. For the first time, doubts about viability of Blackhall, Horden and Easington collieries surviving began to enter the minds of the local workforce. Coal and coke imports were increasing and locally drawn coal was uncompetitive in price and quality. This, together with an overall reduction in demand for household coal





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and coke, led to a rapid decline in fortune of the colliery from 1978 onwards. In 1981, Blackhall ceased production, and the long-standing bond between pit and village life came to an abrupt end. When Blackhall Colliery closed 732 men were transferred to other collieries and 586 accepted redundancy either to find other employment elsewhere in the area, or to seek employment in areas further a field to eke out an existence on Social Security.

In 1986 Blackhall colliery was finally closed and demolished. The land and the large deposits of dumped colliery waste have been processed and transformed into landscape industrial plots for lease to light industry which will relieve in a small way the unemployment problems.

### Full Circle

Since the closure of all the pits in the area in the in the early 1990's, a large regeneration project entitled "Turning the Tide" began the process of restoring pit heaps back to natural grassland. Tipping of colliery waste onto the beaches stopped in 1993 and the natural action of the sea began to restore the spoilt and blackened beaches.

"Turning the Tide", a five year project, is partly funded by the Millennium Commission (£10 million) which has not only restored the coastline after years of colliery waste dumping, but has ensured that information about the area is available, not only for local people but also visitors. There are information panels and artworks at selected sites along the Durham Coastal Footpath.







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Many of the old pastures along the coast were ploughed up to meet increasing demands for food particularly during the Second World War and this destroyed much of the grasslands on the cliff tops. Action has been taken by a number of organisations including Easington District Council, Durham County Council, National Trust, English Nature and Durham Wildlife Trust to recreate the natural habitats from the farmland and reclaimed colliery sites as well as to improve the existing grasslands. The beaches, although not yet “golden sands” are slowly returning to how they used to be. There is a new coastal walk from Crimdon in the south to Seaham Hall in the north and is marked by directional “Waymarkers” – 11 miles of unique coastline. This brings Blackhall up-to-date – a village, although the colliery has long gone, is still surviving in the 21st century.

**Note:** The views that are expressed on the website are the contributors own and not necessarily those of Durham County Council. This is a community website so no guarantee can be given of the historical accuracy of individual contributions

