Brusselton "Sparrowcock" Colliery and Others

by John Barraclough

Being a personal account of mining at Brusselton Colliery and other mines in D. Group, Number 4. Area, Durham Division of the National Coal Board.

This account came into being because of the institution of the ‘Durham Miner’ project, which I joined at Barnard Castle in January 2003. I chose the subject because my father, brother and myself worked at Brusselton Colliery in the 1950’s. The name ‘Sparrowcock’ was the name given to Brusselton Colliery by miners there in my early days.

When the British coal industry was nationalised in 1948 there were one hundred and five mines in the Durham Division, divided into four areas, Number Four area covering the South West. Because of the large number of small mines, this area was subdivided into Groups. The mines here described, stretching from Shildon in the east to Cockfield in the west became Group D. Coal mining in the area had been in decline since the 1920’s. During the Second World War this was taken into account in the creation of ‘New Town’ at Aycliffe which came into being about the time of the nationalisation.

To see why it had become such a prolific coal producing area it is necessary to understand the changes that were occurring. Demand for coal was rising and the Stockton and Darlington Railway at last made it feasible to transport coal from this inland location to the coast for shipment. The railway was locomotive-hauled from
Shildon to Stockton but west of Shildon it was rope-hauled over the Brusselton and Etherley inclines. This brought it into the Gaunless valley.

Almost immediately it was realised that this was an opportunity and in the following year, 1826, the first colliery at Brusselton was commenced on September 2nd.

‘Durham County Advertiser’, 02.09 1826. Durham Clayport Library.

This was followed by a succession of collieries along the valley, particularly following the construction of the Haggerleases branch of the railway, to Butterknowle. The larger mines were at Saint Helen Auckland, West Auckland and Gordon House Colliery at Cockfield, all opening in the 1830s.

Over the years several mines opened on the Brusselton hillside, the longest-lasting being Ladysmith Colliery later in the century. The Brusselton Colliery I wish to describe began life in 1930 and had various drifts. When I arrived there were three surface drifts; the Hutton, Beaumont and Busty.

The Hutton was in a field on the hillside towards Bishop Auckland, the Beaumont was in the pit yard and the Busty was two fields away towards Shildon but this overland route was later eliminated with the driving of a drift from the Beaumont.

The Hutton drift was exceptionally inclined from the surface, about one in one and a half, and it was said that coal was uncovered by the first round of shots fired. After about two hundred yards it began to moderate but was still considerable.

Three seams were worked from this drift, the Hutton naturally, the Low Main and the Maudlin. The lowest seam, the Hutton, was 3'0" thick and had good working conditions. The Low Main above it was about 4'0" and again good to work as long as
It was dry. This was because the roof consisted of a layer of clay about 1" thick which was normally dry and hard but when wet it became very soft.

The top seam worked in this drift, and in the whole pit, was the Maudlin. You could hear all sorts of stories about the Maudlin, usually horror stories. It was only about 2'0" thick with a shale roof but was so wet that this shale was often so soft it couldn't be supported and fell away up to the sandstone above it. The shale varied in thickness from 1'0" to 1'6" and the water poured in. Virtually all work was done in oilskin suits and with very few exceptions, myself included, everyone wore wellington boots. The water was quite capable of extinguishing the naked flame lamps that were in use. It was said that if it rained heavily on the surface the water was appearing on the face within two hours, the water was fully capable of softening the pressed-paper helmets we used at the time.

With all three seams being worked from one drift, other drifts had to be driven from the Hutton to the Maudlin at very steep angles, more like inclined shafts.

The Beaumont drift mouth was immediately off the surface gantry. The roadway then ran almost horizontally for a hundred yards or so into a flat where the surface sets of tubs were split into tens before being turned through ninety degrees and descending the very steeply inclined drift, the haulage engine for this was mounted on the surface.

The Beaumont coal was again about 3'0" thick, with a very strong roof. It had a 6" dirt band with about 6" of top coal and the roof was extremely strong. Conditions were very dry.
The Busty drift originally went underground immediately below a farmhouse until the surface flat was eliminated by making the underground connection via the Beaumont underground flat.

All faces were machine-cut, hand-filled and strip-packed. Because of the gradients of the coal faces, the coalcutters could only cut up the face and had to be returned to the bottom before the coal was fired down.

The only other collieries in the group to practice machine cutting were New Shildon, Middridge and Randolph.

New Shildon was adjacent to Brusselton and working across in front of it. It had two drifts, the Hutton and Low Main, the coal being brought to the surface by conveyor.

**Randolph Colliery and others**

Randolph colliery was at Evenwood and was old and large for this area but was largely worked out. When I went there there was a small amount of bord and pilliar working in the Brockwell which was about 6'0" high and multi-jib cutting of the face in the Marshall Green. This must have been really bad to work since the face was only 16" high and was being cut out entirely, with dust coming off like black fog.

It was a performance to go underground at Randolph because usually when I went there there was no banksman or onsetter so you had to do it yourself. Also, the shaft guides were of wood and were not very well aligned so it was a case of shake, rattle and roll when you descended.
Randolph was noticeable because it had a large conical pit heap which later was buried.

Gordon House Colliery at Cockfield was the only other sizeable colliery in the group but it was a lot older than even Randolph, having been sunk in 1834 on Cockfield Fell but was re-located in 1921 off the fell, to the south and east of the village.

Very close to Gordon House was Esperley Lane Drift which worked a very small area of coal between 1954 and 1962.

Coming back towards West Auckland, Staindrop Field House Drift was a similar drift on the south side of the A689.

In West Auckland, the original West Auckland Colliery opened in 1838 and was closed in 1932. The National Coal Board opened a new drift in the 1950s and that closed in 1967.

Alongside the A68 between West Auckland and Toft Hill, at the junction with the road to Morley, was Ramshaw Colliery. This again was a very old colliery consisting of two drifts, Gaugers Arms and Hunters Hill. These were on either side of the Morley road and connected by a stone drift underground. This last was unsupported and had small openings going off it which were claimed to be centuries old. On the mine plan the current workings were very restricted and the rest of the plan was marked ‘Ancient Workings’.

South of West Auckland, off the A68 was Bildershaw Colliery, another very tiny place working at no great depth, which was known to one and all as Hummerbeck, the
name of the tributary of the River Gaunless flowing past the site. Mainly I remember it for using locomotive haulage, on the surface.

The remaining mines were essentially in Shildon and spread around New Shildon Drift. On the south side of the town was South Shildon Colliery, opened in 1939 by the South Shildon Coal Company and closed by the National Coal Board in 1958. It was right on the edge of the town where the by-pass now bears off left. No great depth and an easy walk in from the surface.

About a quarter of a mile away is the site of East Thickley Colliery. It is more memorable because of its system of working. The entrance drift was driven almost level into the hillside, unlike Brusselton, which was a mile away. When it reached the coal it turned and then followed it down in a wagonay about 4'0" high. The working places went off from this and formed a staggered longwall with each place having its own gate to the face.

The pit was very small, employing no more than fifty men but facing it across the railway was New Shildon Drift, the largest in the group.

The other pit in Shildon was Princes Street Drift, on the same scale as East Thickley but almost surrounded by houses. It was closed in 1957 and the manpower was transferred to the new Haggs Lane Drift. This new drift was driven by contractors so as to exploit a patch of Low Main coal left by the extensive opencast mining on Brusselton hillside. Although this drift was only a couple of hundred yards from Brusselton Colliery’s Hutton drift I never visited it. It opened in 1958 and closed in 1964.
To the east of Shildon, again very close to the edge of the coalfield was Middridge Drift, another mine driven after the NCB took over. The Low Main coal was more nearly level and it was damp. At the time I went there it was working one face. This used a conventional coal cutter but also had a Huwood Loader. It was operated privately after the NCB closed it.

And that leaves only the colliery known as North Tees. This was at the side of the A67 about a mile west of Winston, totally separated from the other mines in the group. This separation wasn’t only geographical. The pit was a one off in that whereas the others worked the Coal Measures, which was normal, North Tees worked in the Yoredale coal. This contained many thin dirt bands and the entire output was taken by a power station at ICI Billingham.

In getting to this colliery site from the village of Staindrop the road passes through South Cleatlam, a tiny village with an industrial appearance. This is all that remains of a failed coal mining venture, failed because of the amount of water encountered.

Closures

The following list gives the dates of closure of the mines in the group.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Opened</th>
<th>Closed</th>
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<tr>
<td>Middridge</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Shildon</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>1958</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Shildon</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>1965</td>
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<td>East Thickley</td>
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<tr>
<td>Princes Street</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>1957</td>
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Although some of the dates are by no means exact it can be seen that from the late fifties to the late sixties these collieries closed steadily, largely due to exhaustion. So the industry died apart from very rare licensed mines.

All of these closures taken together probably were equivalent to the closure of one medium-sized colliery elsewhere, but the effect wasn’t so catastrophic as later closures of large mines because the numbers involved in the individual cases were relatively small. As said before this had been foreseen and alternative work was available.

Note. The remaining coal at Brusselton is now (February 2003) being removed by opencast working in a mile-long site.
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