

# The rise and fall of an east Kent coal mine



ON THE MAP: The Kent coalfield Photo: Dover Museum and Bronze Age Boat Gallery



INDUSTRY: A view of Chislet Colliery in the 1930s Photo: Dover Museum and Bronze Age Boat Gallery

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## Way We Were

**Richard West**  
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ONE hundred years ago, in May 1914, construction of Chislet Colliery commenced. Coal mining was to become East Kent's only heavy industry.

The honour of discovering the Kent Coalfield went to Francis Brady, chief engineer of the South Eastern Railway, in February 1890, when he was seconded to the Channel Tunnel Company established by the railway company. Between 1896 and 1919 forty bore holes were sunk to locate coal in Kent. Twenty-nine of those bore holes showed the existence of coal.

Fourteen collieries in Kent subsequently progressed beyond the planning stage; most were located within a triangle bounded by Canterbury, Dover and Deal, in an area which became established as the Kent Coalfield. Only four of those collieries were to prove viable in the longer term: Tilmanstone, begun 1906, raising first coal to the surface in 1912; Snowdown, begun 1908, raising first coal in 1912; Chislet, begun 1914, raising first coal in 1918 and



ON RAILS: The locomotive St Augustine, built in 1923, was based at Chislet Colliery from 1955 to 1960 Photos: Dover Museum and Bronze Age Boat Gallery



HARD WORK: Miners at a Kent coalface in the 1920s

Betteshanger, begun in 1924, raising first coal in 1927.

Each of the proposed Kent collieries were situated in rural areas. The problem from the outset was how to transport coal from the mines to the customers and where to house the miners and their families.

German industrialists took an interest in the Kent coalfield's potential. Test bores were drilled at: Hoades Wood, near Sturry; Reculver, near Herne Bay; and Chitty and Chislet Park, near Canterbury.

The Anglo-Westphalian Coal Syndicate Limited leased land from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners at Chislet Park, commencing January 1, 1912. The leases for the land were of various lengths, with the shortest being 60 years.

Permission to transport coal along the Sarre Penn and out to sea via the Wantsum Channel was refused because of the damage which would be caused to the natural habitat along the waterway. Coal prospecting then moved to the parish of Westbere, between the Canterbury to Margate Road to south of the Canterbury to Minster railway line, to which a branch line for the colliery was constructed.

The Anglo-Westphalian (Chislet, Kent) Colliery Limited company was incorporated on November 6, 1913. Construction of Chislet Colliery's first shaft began in May 1914. Work on sinking both shafts stopped at 30 feet depth, due to water bearing sand. A German contractor was employed to bore 11 holes around each shaft, into which cement was then forced at a pressure of 600 pounds per square inch to harden the sand layer. This was an established proven method used in Germany to keep water out of shafts, but was relatively new in Britain.

Three months later, Britain declared war with Germany, and an extraordinary annual general meeting changed the company's name to The Chislet Colliery

Limited.

In moving the resolution, chairman Joseph Shaw stated that "the press had got an idea into their heads that this was a German company, whereas they had only one German shareholder, Mr Peritz."

Willi Peritz lived at Canterbury, where the local authorities were suspicious of him, and the company's telephone was removed because it was thought that it was being used for purposes other than those of the company. This had hampered the company a good deal in carrying on its business. That difficulty was resolved by Mr Peritz offering his resignation, which the board promptly accepted. It seems Mr Peritz might have become a "guest of the nation" at Alexandra Palace, where "enemy aliens" were interned during the First World War.

### Shafts

Sinking of the two 16ft-diameter shafts resumed in early 1915. North shaft was completed in July 1918 and reached 1,470 feet deep. South shaft was completed in August 1919 and reached 1,480 feet. The estimated quantity of workable coal was 75million tons.

However, strikes and lack of money for repairs led to parts of the mine collapsing during its early years, causing subsidence of the ground above. In 1929, the colliery was re-organised and relations between the company and staff were improved.

As the local community had no experience of mining, the workforce derived from traditional mining areas, especially South Wales. Several hundred houses were leased by the company in Thanet for the miners, who travelled daily to Grove Ferry station by special miners' trains. Special buses ran from other Thanet towns and Herne Bay to the colliery.

Chislet Colliery Halt on the Canterbury and Ramsgate

branch of the South Eastern and Chatham Railway opened in 1920. In 1924, Chislet Colliery Housing Limited was established, to build a village, later named Hersden, of 300 houses close to the colliery. Pit head baths, the first in Kent, were also opened in that year.

Chislet Colliery had an important role during the Second World War as a training pit for what became known as the "Bevin Boys". From December 1943 onward, one in ten men selected by ballot on conscription for war service did not go into the armed services but worked in the coal mines.

Between March 1945 and 1952, pit ponies worked at Chislet Colliery, with comfortable stables provided to house the ponies below ground.

On January 1, 1947, Chislet Colliery, along with all other collieries in Great Britain, was nationalised. The colliery's highest average level of output was achieved in 1957, when 8,949 tons of coal per week were raised to the surface, amounting to just under half a million tons per year, with a manpower of 1,681.

Chislet Colliery's main customer was British Railways, which in the 1960s replaced steam locomotives with diesel and electric ones. Chislet Colliery was then no longer considered financially viable.

Miners were transferred to the other three remaining coal pits in Kent, and Chislet Colliery closed completely on July 25, 1969. The former industrial site now forms Lakeside Business Park and a nature reserve.

Tilmanstone Colliery closed in 1986 and Snowdon Colliery in 1987. Betteshanger Colliery was the last to close in Kent, in 1989.



For more tales from the city's past, visit  
canterburytimes.co.uk/hostalgia

## Thought for the Week

I HAVE recently returned from walking the whole 630 miles of the South West Coastal Path and it was the most amazing time ever!

A combined ascent of 115,000 feet, more ups and downs than you could ever imagine, and physical scenery to match anything anywhere in the world.

Of course, as we know, the south-west was badly hit by the winter storms, but it's recovering well.

By the Reverend  
David Bedford  
St Andrew's, Canterbury

It was good to slow down for the 48 days of walking, meet people on the way and listen and see more than my normal rushed life allows.

The Apostle John in one of his letters says: "Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did."

Most of you reading this could

do with slowing down, most are trying to do too much and not really succeeding, and most would find their soul refreshed if they reverted to being human beings rather than human doings.

In the Old Testament many are described as "walking with God": oh for a new generation in Canterbury who know what that really means.

Oh, and perhaps we too will then survive the storms!