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**BLAKELEY HALL AND BROMFORD COLLIERIES,
OLDBURY STAFFS.**

by Nigel A. Chapman

Samuel James Dawes resided at “*Woodvill*” Handsworth Birmingham, and died there on May 3rd 1853. As a partner in the firm of John Dawes & Sons Ironmasters of the Bromford Ironworks, he had spent most of his life in the iron and coal trades. After Dawes’ death, his freehold estate, known as the Littleton Hall Farm, West Bromwich, in the hands of his Trustees. One of the latter, Samuel’s brother William Henry, went on to become the senior partner in the firm.

William Henry bought 15 acres of the Littleton Hall Farm from the Trustees for £7360 on March 25th 1854. As land with the famous Thick Coal seam underneath was then selling at around £500 per acre, he paid around the market value. It could be that Samuel had already established the Littleton Hall Colliery, but this has yet to be proved. William with his brother George, also acted as trustees of the late Joshua Horton during the 1850s and were busy working his Victoria Colliery next to Littleton Hall Farm.

South of the farm, William had since at least 1835 worked the Bromford Colliery with its two shafts sunk near the Birmingham to Wolverhampton Canal. To the east, the canal passed the Bromford Ironworks which since the early 1800s had been developed by John Dawes & Sons. Bromford Ironworks supplied bars, rounds, hoops, rods, and every description of fancy iron around the world. The works covered about 10 acres of land, with 69 puddling furnaces and 7 forges with rolling mills, producing about 700 tons of finished iron per week and found employment for around 700 men and boys. Coal raised at the Bromford and Littleton Collieries was used in the puddling furnaces of Bromford Ironworks.

William bought more adjacent lands from which to extract coal, and on April 21st 1859 he purchased 10 acres of virgin Thick Coal lying beneath the Birmingham Canal, near the Bromford Colliery. For this he paid £4356 5s 0d at the rate of £500 per year, with a final payment of £356 5s 0d on March 25th 1866. John Dawes and Sons then had a consolidated freehold mineral estate, with three collieries, an ironworks and access to the canal system, which was used to bring raw materials in and take finished goods out.

On July 14th 1873 William Henry Dawes leased 30 acres 0 roods and 20 perches of coal and ironstone mines at the Bromford Colliery, including shafts and steam engines, to Reuben Plant a Mine Agent of Wordsley, Staffordshire. Plant also leased the 10 acres of coal under the Birmingham Canal – all for the grand sum of £20,000. This gave Plant 30 acres of partly worked Thick Coal, 10 acres of unworked and, more importantly, it was next to 82 acres of virgin coal under the Blakeley Hall estate to the south. Plant had already

Fig.1. Location map of the
Blakeley Hall Colliery (SP002879)

leased the coal under the Blakeley Hall estate with Patrick Allen Fraser of Forfar Scotland, on February 17th 1873. Fraser married Elizabeth, the daughter and heir of Frances Parrott of Hawkesbury Hall, near Coventry.

One of the covenants of the Blakeley Hall lease was that Plant would quickly sink shafts, of at least seven feet diameter, on the estate and work the coal from them. He advertised in the *Mining Journal* of February 22nd seeking tenders for the sinking of two pairs of shafts and a “*pit for pumping top water to each pair.*” All the shafts were to be eight feet diameter. Plant, having contracted to buy the

Bromford Colliery and engines lacked the necessary £20,000, so he began working the coal from the Bromford shafts and looking around for others to join in a company to operate the mines. With over 100 acres of coal under lease, and the machinery to extract and sell coal into Birmingham, he was in a superb position to wheel and deal. He soon found Lewis Frederick Edwards and Henry Brindsley Sheridan of London who contracted to pay £20,000 to W.H. Dawes, plus £30,000 to Plant, plus £20,000 in fully paid up shares in a company they would float. On June 12th 1873 they sold Plant’s leases to Henry Holman Suckling of 72 Cornhill London, for £60,000 plus Plant’s entitlement to £20,000 worth of shares. Suckling was acting as a trustee for the Birmingham (Blakeley Hall) Coal and Ironstone Company which was being floated. This company, which was registered on June 23rd 1873, had Robert Meek Carter, Frederic Richards Mealy Gosset, The Hon. Arthur Wellington Alexander Nelson Hood, and Herbert Tritton Sankey as its first directors. The company’s capital was £220,000 with £100,000 reserved for the creation of Trust, which was to be done immediately.

The Trustees were: Samuel Boteler Bristowe, Q.C. and M.P., of the Inner Temple, London; The Honourable Edward C. Leigh, Barrister, of the Inner Temple; and John Jaffray, Esquire, J.P., of Birmingham, who were to raise funds by mortgage debentures with 10% interest per annum, with powers to convert to Preference shares within 15 months. This seems to have been a way of raising money quickly, to get operations moving, while floating the company shares to the public. As the Trust Deeds were being produced, Mr Fraser discovered that coal was being raised at Bromford, instead of through shafts sunk at Blakeley Hall, and prosecuted Plant for his efforts. The



directors modified the Trust Deeds to suit Fraser and told Plant to negotiate. A modified lease of July 29 1874 permitted the raising of coal extracted from Blakeley Hall at Bromford Colliery, but it cost Mr Rueben Plant £10,000!

Bromford Colliery would, according to a report, be capable of producing 4000 tons per week with double deck cages. This would give a profit of eight shillings per ton or, over twelve months, a profit after expenses of £42,000. The prospectus also mentioned that the estate was estimated to contain over five million tons of coal, so a rosy picture was painted of a company which could not fail to produce profits for the shareholders. Yet, problems seem to have developed from an early date and by January 1875 the company was in financial difficulties, which led to the three trustees taking over its direction. Shares were apparently not being bought by the public, plus most of the capital went on acquiring the royalty instead of working it. On February 1st 1875 the directors called an Extraordinary A.G.M. to discuss releasing 4000 shares of £25 each to the public in order to bring in extra funds. An added inducement was that these shares would carry 15% interest per year. It was suggested that the existing bonds, instead of being paid off at the rate of £10,000 per year, should be converted into shares while holding the property in perpetuity. The directors soon had promises for £60,000's worth of the new Preference shares, but were unable to persuade a certain Daniel Plant to co-operate. He just happened to be Rueben's brother and a major shareholder with most of his brother's shares in his hands. At the same time the Board of Messrs Sheridan, Carter and Edwards decided to resign and was replaced by Messrs Carter, Crassair, Shepherd, and McGawley all of Leeds, with Messrs Henry Hughes and Plant as the local directors. At this stage Reuben Plant, as a mining engineer, was asked to run the colliery!

Following this meeting, on March 6th, a letter from "*Birmingham Investor*" appeared in the *Mining Journal* asking what had happened to the £100,000 raised by the 10% bonds? The leasehold had cost £50,000, and the freehold of the colliery another £20,000, leaving £30,000 plus a deficit of £28,579, making a clear loss on the 18 month life of the company of £58,579. The problem of selling the shares to the bondholders proved too difficult - with Plant Brothers in the forefront of any opposition to the Director's plans. By the middle of July the company's bankers were drawing attention to an overdraft of £8400 and refusing to extend its credit. The directors agreed to a personal guarantee of £500 each to the bank, but to no avail.

Elijah Davies, the colliery engineer of West Bromwich, promised to raise large quantities of coal in the next few weeks, while Plant and Hughes decided to visit the colliery and went underground. They were appalled to find the charter master, Mr Jenkins, was getting a tonnage rate 30% above what they considered fair and accordingly they reduced the price of Best coal from 6s 2d to 3s 11d, Common Coal from 6s 2d to 3s 7d, Lumps from 4s 10d to 3s 4d and Slack from 3s 0d to 1s 11d. Plant protested long and loud about the waste of purchasing a Robey steam engine for use underground, backing his

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complaints with an opinion from J.T. Woodhouse, a noted mining engineer, but to no avail. The engine was sent down the downcast shaft at great expense, probably to haul the tubs along the gate roads. It managed to raise the temperature in the mine and in the board room, but proved to be unable to do the job required. As a result, a Director offered Jenkins £5 to “*shut Plant’s mouth up,*” while Jenkins proposed that “*if found in the pit, he would smother him in coal.*” Plant was obliged to take a policeman with him on visits to the colliery and stayed above ground!

With so little co-operation among the board, the lack of capital and poor mining methods the company could only stagger to a collapse by October 1875. Rueben Plant wrote to a shareholder friend “*that he could not see any cause to continue the working of it by the present proprietors.*”

Blakeley Hall and Bromford Colliery was advertised for sale in the local papers and, on November 4th 1875, a public auction took place at the Midland Hotel in New Street, Birmingham. The Trustees, Messrs Bristowe, Leigh and Jaffray sold to William Winter Riddell, wholesale draper of Birmingham for £17,200. He was the leading figure in a group of businessmen prepared to continue working the colliery. They were John Shepherd, iron founder of Headingley, Leeds, and Robert Meeks Carter, coal merchant of Leeds, both former Directors of Birmingham (Blakeley Hall) Company; William Ross Hedges, chemist of Birmingham, and Henry Symonds, merchant of Edgbaston, Birmingham. They met at Henry Symonds, house in Norfolk Road, Edgbaston on November 18th 1875 and decided to form a limited liability company and sell their interest for £30,000!

They began during December 1875 by floating the Bromford Colliery Company with the intention of raising some coal, but it was not to be. Rueben Plant and the debenture holders in the old company brought an action in the Court of Chancery and tried to have the sale revoked because of the low price. They suggested that the sale was rigged to permit them to buy cheap and then sell dear to the new company. The sale was stopped and Mr Fraser decided to join in, with an action in the High Court regarding rent arrears and damage to the colliery. He claimed £6,825 in unpaid rent and £20,000 for breaches of the covenants of the lease by the old company.

Some of the debenture holders claimed that the pumping engine at Bromford Colliery, which had pumped all the water during William Dawes’s time, had been broken up, that the shaft guides had been destroyed and considerable damage done to the workings. Mr Carter was quick to defend their actions, stating that the pumping engine had been hopelessly broken down when they had gained possession. The mine water had then been raised by tanks, using the winder, while the pumping engine was removed and a new one erected. He also pointed out the new engine had been brought for £270 from Mr Wood of Manchester and was pumping the mine water satisfactorily.

The Court actions were being heard at the same time, and went on into 1876, with a hearing during May, when Plant and the debenture holders were dismissed with costs against them. The proposed purchasers offered to withdraw from the sale if Plant could find another purchaser willing to offer £21,000! Plant produced a Mr Thompson who had agreed to purchase, offering to pay £7,000 immediately, Mr Fraser true to form, refused to transfer the lease! At this Plant gave up, having, it was stated, spent £20,000 setting up the company and keeping operations going.

Mr Fraser was owed £6825 in rent arrears and he was more difficult to deal with. Riddell paid a mine rent of £4500, plus £206 5s 0d as interest, and then spent over £3800 to keep the pumps running. The other members of the proposed company began to have second thoughts, especially when Carter was declared bankrupt and his part in their schemes was ended. Riddell appears to have purchased the rights of the other proposed directors and he was the sole owner until by May 1877. It is believed that the colliery stood idle during this period, which coincided with a depression in the coal trade, and that Riddell was looking for a group of capitalists to join him in the creation of a new limited company to work the mines and to buy his leases.

On July 14th 1877 Riddell agreed to sell his leases in the Bromford and Blakeley Hall mines to Harry Heaton, David Peacock, Abel Rollason and Thomas Rollason for £21,000, plus £15,000 in fully paid up shares. They registered the Blakeley Hall Colliery Company which had a capital of £60,000 divided into shares of £100 each, on July 19th 1877. This was done with such speed that a meeting on July 26th was busy discussing the site for a shaft sinking. David Peacock was appointed mining engineer, at a salary of £200 per year, while a Frank Walter Peacock (his brother?) was appointed certified manager, also at £200 per year. They produced plans and sections for two shafts, one of 12 feet diameter and the other of nine feet diameter, to be sunk on the Blakeley Hall estate. David Peacock had advertised for sinking contractors and had received ten replies prior to the meeting. He suggested that they would require two steam engines at about £250 each and boilers at about £430 each, all second hand from Ratcliffe & Son of Hawarden near Chester. The meeting resolved to accept Sperring Brothers' tender for the sinking and approved the purchase of a horse gin for £16.

Shaft sinking had begun before a meeting on October 24th 1877, when Thomas Rollason produced plans of the proposed colliery offices for the director's comments. The boardroom needed enlarging to 16 feet by 24 feet, (probably to suit egos!), and a Mr Smith was awarded the building contract. The conveyance of the estate to the colliery company had been completed by a director's meeting of November 26th, and Mr Riddell had accepted his money and shares. So a call of £10 per share was made to the shareholders to improve company funds. A Mr H. Sutcliffe was appointed to be the colliery surgeon, to attend the injured, except for "burn cases", at £10 per annum. Mr Peacock was able to report the issuing of tenders for a pair of winding engines with 33 inch cylinders and a 15 feet diameter winding drum.

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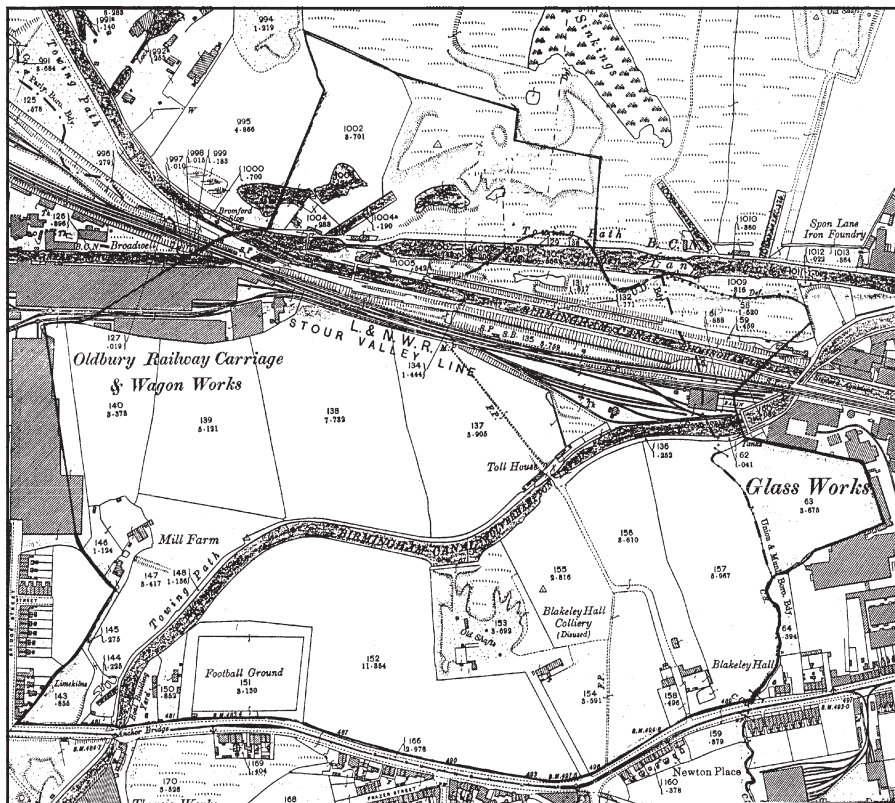


Fig.2 Area map of the Blakeley Hall and Bromford Collieries (SP002879).

Many leading steam winder makers of the period replied, with prices for the proposed engines as follows: Coupe of Wigan, £2049, Dalglish of St. Helens, £2029, Fowlers of Leeds, £1775, down to T. & J. Silvester, at £1705. The director's decided to visit Perry Colliery, at Great Barr, to view an engine by Leigh of Manchester, and also to look at a Thornwell and Warham engine at Cannock and Leacroft Colliery. The eventual order went to Thornwell and Warham, of Burton-on-Trent, for £1595.

By July 12th 1878 the director's were able to meet in the new boardroom suggesting the completion of the surface works. On July 16th J. Woodward, a sinker, aged 25, was riding up one of the shafts in a bowk, or kibble, when it detached from the rope and fell to the shaft bottom, killing him. His widow later received an allowance from the company. Mr Peacock was able to report on September 13th that No.2 shaft was 178 yards deep, with 35 yards of sinking completed since August 9th, but was flooding. He proposed continuing the sinking to test the water inflow prior to purchasing a pump. Problems had been experienced with the steam winder used for sinking, and

a new piston had been fitted by Dutton and Sons at a cost of £24 2s 6d. Because of the difficult conditions Sperring Bothers were granted £50 extra. On the plus account a Mr Lewis offered to buy the Bromford Colliery pit mound, from which he wanted to make bricks. Sinking operations continued into the following year, being pushed vigorously until a depth of 320 yards was attained. The neighbouring Flash Colliery had found the Thick Coal at a depth of 180 yards and Peacock was puzzled. He invited a number of leading mining engineers to the sinking to discuss the geology and, on October 27th 1879, a meeting with William North, Henry Johnson, John Field and John Thompson took place. They examined sections of local shaft sinkings and also went underground to study the strata and the headings which had recently been started.

A couple of days later, at the company's A.G.M., Peacock reported that the mining engineers had suggested driving a number of headings in different directions to locate the Thick Coal. Work continued as they suggested until, on October 25th 1880, Peacock again reported to an A.G.M. on progress. A heading had been driven for 236 yards from No.1 shaft before the Thick Coal had been found. This heading had been continued for about 58 yards then stopped until a heading from No.2 shaft had '*Thurled*' (intersected the first heading) on August 23rd 1880. They continued driving in the Thick Coal for 234 yards, proving it to be of poor quality. In the west headings they had found several minor faults. Eastwards, under Chance's Glassworks, he noted the loss of 19 acres of coal because of the intrusion of a major fault. To the west they had proved 32 acres of old workings associated with the Bromford Colliery, plus an acre of trespass near the Oldbury Carriage Works. Of the Blakeley Hall estate, 48 acres were unworkable out of a total of 82-1-0 acres leaving only 34-1-0 acres worth working.

At £600 per acre the workable estate should be worth £20,550, but to March 1880 the colliery company had paid £20,750 in mine rent. Mr Peacock admitted that it was impossible to state exactly the amount of coal worth mining, but believed the above figures to be close. The directors saw an opportunity to stop paying mine rent to the landlord, Mr Fraser, and informed his mineral agent, Mr Caddick, accordingly. They also instructed Frank Peacock to assist Mr Cooksey, Fraser's mining surveyor, with any information or underground visits he required. Mr Cooksey seems, with minor exceptions, to have confirmed David Peacock's report on the acreage of workable coal. Mr Fraser was unimpressed with the stoppage of mine rent and began a court action against the company, claiming £1517 7s 2d in rent, plus interest.

Underground, the colliers were still driving headings until, in early May 1880, they cut through the major fault and proved conclusively the loss of the Thick Coal. The heading was abandoned on May 9th and the colliers were given their notice. Blakeley Hall Colliery consisted of two 320 yard deep, shafts with a fine pair of 33 inch winding engines ready for work, but with little

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coal to raise. The engines were employed winding water to keep the workings dry while negotiations were opened with Mr Fraser. These protracted talks appear to have continued until December 1881, when the following settlement was reached. The colliery company were to pay Mr Fraser £1500 plus interest as mine rent, to surrender the lease of 1873 and accept a lease of 33 acres of Thick Coal. The company could wind the coal got from Bromford shafts if required. At the termination of the lease the Blakeley Hall plant and machinery would belong to the company, whereas many South Staffordshire leases stated that at termination the equipment on the colliery belonged to the land owner.

Checking and altering the new lease, then signing it seem to have taken until the middle of 1882, when a directors' meeting decided '*That the pit frames and pulleys at the Old Bromford Colliery should be pulled down and the shafts filled up.*' Four labourers were paid on June 29th 1882 for '*filling shafts at the old colliery.*'

On June 19th 1882, an Extra Ordinary Shareholders' Meeting was held to discuss the new lease and conditions with general agreement to continue operations. The directors also admitted that the bank had refused any more credit to the concern. They were prepared to contribute a loan of £3000, raised among themselves, with interest of 5% per year. It appears that operations were restarted, because the following year some of the director's were receiving interest on the £3000. However, little remains of the paperwork from this date. What is certain is that a small staff were employed at the colliery until August 3rd 1882 when Thomas Coxon left with a bonus of £5. Then, on August 24th, the staff was reduced to a day and a night watchmen. They were employed until the middle of October 1884, when all the paperwork ends. Over the period little work seems to have been done or coal produced. The colliery buildings were left standing when the plant was salvaged and the shafts were probably fenced off, but certainly not filled.

Around 1911, Robert Fellows of Cradley purchased the site of the Bullock's Farm Colliery, to the north, and seems to have considered reopening the workings. The Blakeley Hall shafts were down the dip of the strata and, being 30 yards deeper than the Bullock's Farm shafts, would have been the ideal place to put in pumps to dewater the workings. Frederick Meacham, a mining consultant, was approached for his opinion, and believed the scheme was feasible. He noted that Bullock's Farm had been worked only once, while the plans showed some of the best remaining ribs and pillars of coal he had ever seen. In the meantime, Fellows was busy removing the two pit mounds at Bromford Colliery, using the canal for transport. Fred Meacham worked out that he had taken away 694 boat loads in 1911, which, at 30 tons per boat, came to 20,870 tons. Fellows had taken out a lease on March 25th 1909 and was paying two shillings per boat load royalty.

Fred Meacham suggested the royalty for the use of Blakeley Hall shafts and buildings should be £30 for the six acres of land required, £100 for the use of the shafts, £20 for the use of the existing offices and weigh machine and £16 for the house for an engineer or undermanager. In all a mine rent of £166 per annum would, he believed, be fair. Following on from these suggestions about October 24th 1912 Mr Fellows appears to have signed a lease with the intention of entering Bullock's Farm Colliery from the Blakeley Hall shafts. At present, however, the story ends at this point.

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Paper submitted - February 28th 1996: Nigel A. Chapman,
14 Dorset Road,
Edgbaston,
BIRMINGHAM
B17 8EN