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OLDHILL OR PEARSON'S COLLIERY, ROWLEY REGIS

by Nigel Chapman

Oldhill appears to have been a manor of fields and farms at the beginning of the 19th century. Coal mining had not reached the estate, but the existence of seams was probably suspected, based on the evidence of collieries sunk to the north in the parish of Dudley.

Two events brought the development of this natural wealth forward. The first was the construction of the Dudley No.2 canal southwards from Netherton to Halesowen by 1798. The second was the Enclosure of the Oldhill estates in 1821. By this Act of Enclosure, the minerals were the property of the Lord of the Manor and he was soon exploiting the coal seams. During 1827 Lion Colliery, sunk near the canal, became the first on the estate. By 1854 a total of thirteen collieries had been sunk.

The first lease regarding the Oldhill Colliery was signed on March 30th 1848 and permitted Thomas and Isaac Badger, ironmasters of Dudley, to work all seams of coal and ironstone lying under certain lands at Oldhill. They seem to have set about the sinking of shafts on these lands and were operating a colliery by 1850. At about the same time, they erected an ironworks to the south of the colliery and linked the two by narrow gauge railway. Coal and ironstone were mined under the estate, converted in the blast furnaces and the pig iron processed into iron castings or wrought iron. These were then loaded into barges and transported to the customer by canal. Messrs Badger operated the collieries and ironworks until 1863 when they were taken over by Daniel and David Rose and Co., owners of extensive collieries and ironworks at Albert and Moxley, Wednesbury. David Rose became sole owner on his brother's retirement in about 1870 and, in the following year, he sold the collieries and ironworks to Noah Hingley and Sons. This was an old established iron making company of Netherton, Dudley, with a good reputation for the production of chains and anchors.

On the opposite side of the Dudley No.2 canal, Frederick Barrs and his sister Ann Eliza Haden leased an area of 44 acres to Messrs Hall, Holcroft and Pearson, ironmasters of Brettell Lane, Kingswinford, Staffordshire, on December 26th 1862. The latter partnership also leased the existing Haden Hill No.2 plant of Oldhill Colliery with all remaining seams of coal and ironstone, and undertook to pay £6,000 for the freehold at the rate of £500 per annum. Having taken possession, they worked the coal seams, including the famed Thick Coal, and developed the colliery. Early in 1867, John Price, one of the partners, died and left his estate and interests in Hall, Holcroft and Pearson to his children. They were unwilling to continue in the partnership and wanted to withdraw their inheritance. This caused the liquidation of the concern and Messrs John and William Pearson, brothers and partners, received the Oldhill Colliery as part of their share of the

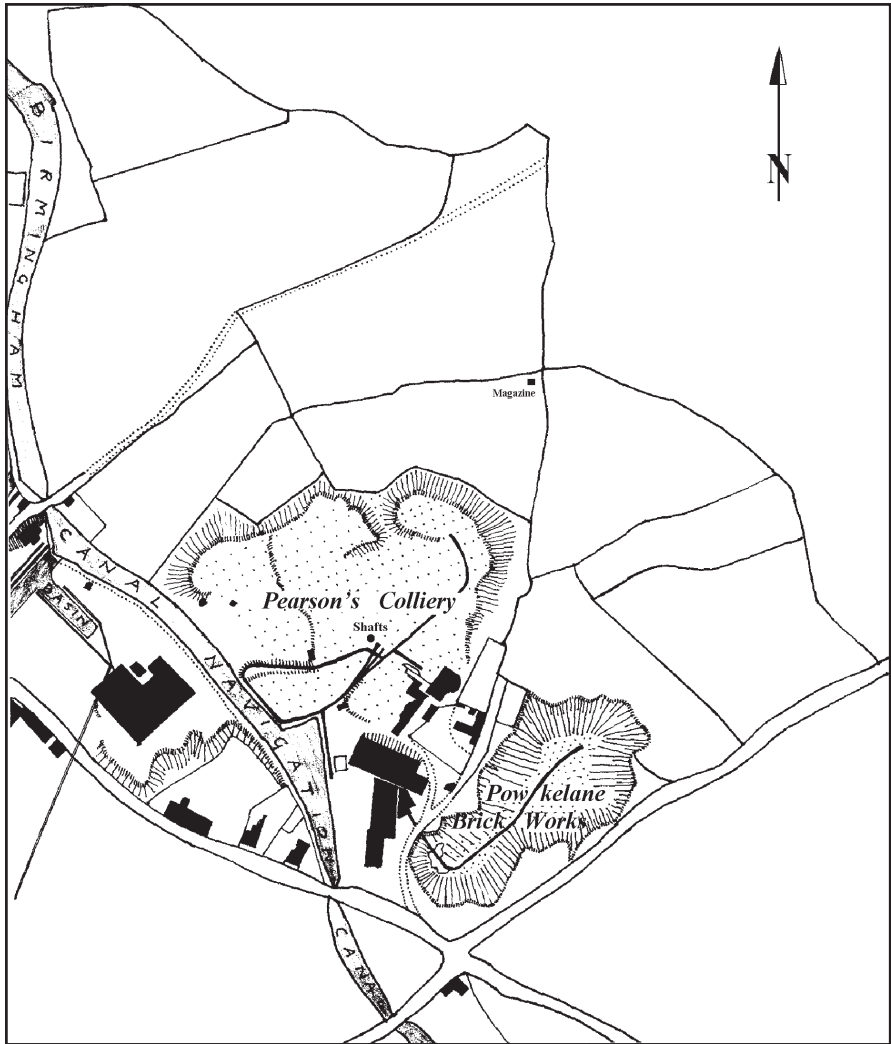


Fig.1 Surface layout of Oldhill or Pearson's Colliery. SO962871

company. They also received the existing debt of the colliery, standing at £3,500, plus debts to the Price family as part of the liquidation and, to settle these, they mortgaged the colliery and lands for the sum of £6,000 to the Birmingham and Midland Bank in December 1867. They then decided to form a partnership in the name of 'J. & W. Pearson', with a colliery at Kingswinford and a firebrick-making plant at Stourbridge, plus Oldhill Colliery. At about this time, they were also involved in coal mines at Knowbury and Cornbrook on the Clee Hills of Shropshire. But, typical of such companies in South Staffordshire, they failed to draw up any formal documents, and seem to have worked mostly by word of mouth.

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On December 6th 1869, they leased a further area of coal mines adjacent to Oldhill Colliery and amounting to 16 acres and extended the loan from the bank to £8,000. At this time, the bank sent a surveyor, John Yardley, to report on the colliery and he valued the plant and workings at £21,910 19s 7d. He noted that the colliery should produce in excess of 30,000 tons yearly at a royalty of one shilling per ton, which made a total of £1500 in addition to the surplus profit on working, and so at least this sum was due to the bank each year in reduction of the debt. John Yardley then suggested that the bank should reduce the amount of debt because of the reduction of the asset (i.e. the coal seams), as the Thick Coal was worked out of the Yew Tree Estate. The Pearsons were able to raise 1,200 tons of coal per day, from the Brooch, Thick and the Heathen coal seams.

On September 29th 1870, to free themselves from the debt to the bank, the Pearsons borrowed £8,000 from William Cecil Standish of Southampton. Later they also borrowed sums of about £2,000 from Standish and from Mary Christiana Boyle, wife of the Rev. George Boyle of Handsworth who would eventually become Dean of Salisbury Cathedral. Finally, on June 13th 1874, J. & W. Pearson were able to pay the last installment of £692 10s 0d as purchase money for the estate. Although they had gained the freehold of the colliery, however, they were probably deep in debt and, on March 22nd 1875 in an attempt to improve this situation, they sold 15 acres, 2 roods and 23 perches of Thick Coal mines to Messrs Hingley on the opposite side of the Dudley canal. Hingleys were to work these mines from their existing shafts, paying the Pearsons £20,000 over the next year. Some of this money was used to clear the debt of £8,000, while the rest was probably spent on their various mines.

John and William Pearson signed a formal Deed of Partnership on January 11th 1878 and considered that the actual partnership had existed from June 13th 1875. They requested George Hill to carry out a valuation of the assets of the concern. He visited the Stallings and Rectory Collieries at Kingswinford and Pearsons' Colliery at Oldhill, valuing the plants and mines at £45,663 16s 3d, but noting that they only owned the plant at the Stallings and Rectory Collieries, while Lord Dudley owned the rest. The partners also had two lime quarries at Oretton Banks, Stoddesdon, Shropshire, which were held by a lease of 999 years at 2d per year rent. William had put £23,209 13s 9d into the firm, while John had £15,385 17s 11d invested. They were both entitled to a living allowance of £400 per annum, drawn monthly, from the profits of the firm which, at this period, were £1300 per year.

John was probably ill at the time of signing the partnership documents, as he died on January 21st 1878 leaving his share of the partnership to Edward Jewkes, Joseph Henry Chavase, Thomas Parish Pearson and Frederick George Pearson. Of these trustees, Edward Jewkes filed a Disclaimer on April 23rd 1878 and Fred George had gone bankrupt by 1880. William Pearson was

left effectively in sole charge of the colliery, but was ill with some form of paralysis which at times left him totally unable to speak or move. The partnership continued to be J. & W. Pearson, as the trustees never asked for the name to be altered or enquired about money spent or operations at the colliery. However, apart from being ill, William had never been a mining engineer. Instead, he had left such matters to his brother, John, who had employed Richard Growcott to visit the colliery and workings weekly, draw plans and advise him. William appears to have attempted to continue the same system. He was probably too ill to do it properly, however, as, although the partnership was indebted to the bank for £1,000 at the time of John's death, this had risen to £2,500 after a couple of years and the colliery was being neglected. It was then suggested to let the colliery to sub-contractors, or "butties", for a royalty and so ease life for William.

At this point, John's ghost rose to haunt them. Back in the 1870s, the workings of the Oldhill Colliery had reached the boundary with the Fly Colliery which was then being worked by the New British Iron Company. Pearsons' men found a block of coal on the Fly Colliery side of the boundary. This appeared to John to have been left by the New British Iron Co and, believing they would never return to extract it, he permitted it to be worked. Richard Growcott, as mine agent, protested to John but was simply told not to inform William. So they kept quiet until the block proved to be larger than expected and they stopped the working. At a later date, the New British Iron Co's colliers who had worked the area came back and noted that about an acre of coal had been nicked. Benjamin Hunt, chief manager for the New British Iron Co., was informed, but, not wanting to worry William, let the subject lie as he was also aware of previous trespass by his colliers into Pearsons' royalty. Then, in December 1881, Hunt retired and George Allen was appointed to superintend operations. He soon found details of the trespass, brought it to William's notice and demanded payment in the form of two acres of mines from Pearsons in exchange for one acre from the New British Iron Co. The difference would return one acre of lost coal to the New British Iron Co. A long series of letters followed between the two sides until Mr Allen decided to settle the matter in the High Court.

William Pearson's defence was that he knew nothing of the trespass and that John, who knew the most, was dead! As the event had happened over six years earlier, a Statute of Limitations applied, and all that Mr Allen could claim was deliberate extraction, amounting to fraud. The problem dragged on into early February 1885, but, although a Court appearance was arranged and postponed a couple of times, nothing else happened and the story ends with a question mark, making it a typical example of easy going South Staffordshire mining methods which can be repeated again and again.

Meanwhile, in early October 1880, Benjamin Hingley wrote to advise William Pearson that he wanted to extend the Oldhill Ironworks and build a third blast furnace. He was unhappy with Pearson's workings being just over the

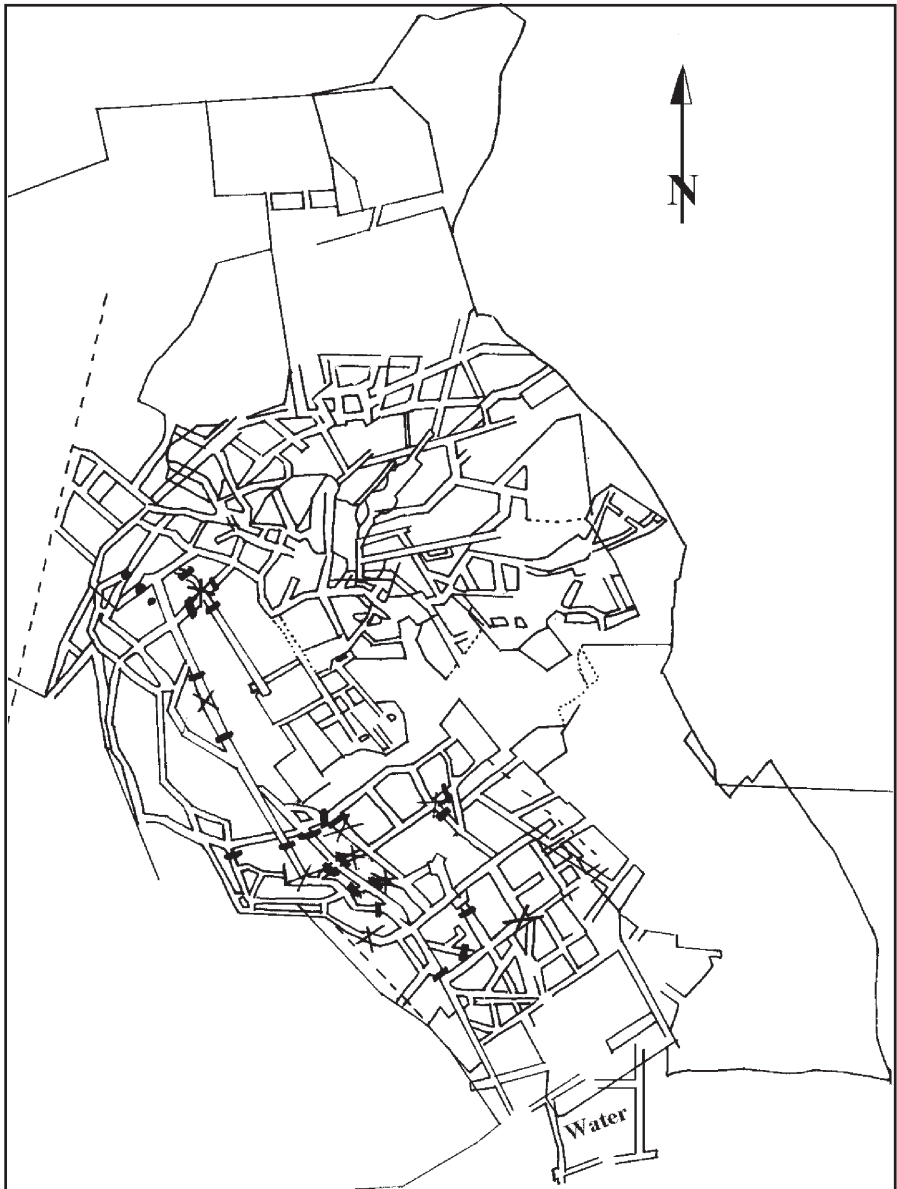


Fig.2 Plan of Pearson's Colliery working in 1903. The crosses show the location of underground fires in the Thick Coal Seams.

canal from the works and wanted to buy a strip of Thick Coal as a barrier against their activities. He had known William for many years and did not wish to disagree with him, but he was worried about his new plant suffering

from the lateral effect of the workings. He also reminded William that Hingleys were large consumers of Pearson's firebricks (used in the linings of furnaces). They soon came to a reasonable agreement, with Richard Growcott and William Davis valuing the 3 acres 3 roods 13 perches at £1625 12s 6d and Henry Johnson to act as umpire if required, and everything was signed and sealed and the first instalment paid by June 30th 1881.

William was becoming increasingly frail, however, and on October 27th 1881 the Birmingham newspapers carried the following advertisement:-

"To be let on lease because of death of one partner and failing health of the other, Pearson's Colliery at Oldhill near Dudley. The canal adjoins the colliery and the wharves are within 40 yards of the pit top connected by a double acting incline tramroad."

John Bird, clerk, and Robert Calderwood, colliery manager, both of Worcestershire, applied for the lease, but, before this could be arranged, it was necessary to produce a schedule of the plant and workings.

From the document we learn that the Brooch Coal had an expected yield per acre of 4,000 tons and a total of 68,000 tons was estimated to be ungoten. In the Thick Coal, ribs and pillars left from previous workings existed to the extent of 134,000 tons. The Bottom Coal (part of the Thick Coal) remained to the extent of 105,000 tons, while the unworked Thick Coal, which could produce 25,000 per acre, was estimated to contain 87,000 tons. In the Heathen Coal, an estimated 195,000 tons remained to work. The colliery also had two workable seams of ironstone of about one yard in thickness each. These were the Gubbin Ironstone, capable of producing 1400 tons per acre, with about 42,000 tons left to work, and the White Ironstone, of 2500 tons yield per acre, with about 92,500 tons left to extract. During this survey of the workings, it was noted that the water level of the colliery, which emptied into the neighbouring Fly Colliery, was choked up and neglected. The Fly Colliery was by this period being leased by the South Staffordshire Mines Drainage Co. as a pumping plant for the Oldhill area, in an arrangement whereby the collieries cut levels to allow their water to get to the pumps and paid a percentage based on the tonnage of coal raised for the service. The Pearson partnership wanted to charge Bird and Calderwood £500 for cleaning the level, but others considered its choked up state to be gross neglect on Pearson's part and eventually £500 was taken off the lease and a clause added for Bird and Calderwood to do the work.

To keep an eye on the day to day running, a check clerk was installed in the colliery offices, while Richard Growcott operated a 'check agency' on behalf of the Pearson partnership at £40 per year. He was to visit the pit to supervise operations and to keep accurate accounts and mining plans, while Bird and Calderwood were to pay £700 Mine Rent per year for the first six years, plus a royalty of 8d per ton on coal and 1s 6d per ton on ironstone raised.

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As the following figures from the bills for royalties show, both coal and ironstone were being raised successfully in the first three quarters of 1882.

In the quarter to	March	25	1882	they raised	Tons	
ditto	June	24	1882		1513	coal
					2787	coal
					125	Gubbin Ironstone
ditto	Sept.	29	1882		1619	coal
					3977	slack
					400	Gubbin Ironstone
					22	White Ironstone

However, these bills were followed on October 25th by a writ demanding payment of arrears of rent for the June and September quarters to a total of £381 5s 0d. Bird and Calderwood complained bitterly about the writ, but paid up. They were also expected to pay the 3 Guineas for the writ and added a "*paid under protest*" note to the bill. At the same time, they were being chased by the Taxman, who attempted to sell the colliery to get his money, but the Pearson partnership had their solicitors stop the sale as the colliery still belonged to them!

Calderwood continued working the colliery and, in the quarter to December 1883, 53 perches of Heathen Coal and 20 perches of Bottom Coal were extracted. He then disappears from the records. William Pearson, having made his will on March 19th 1881, died around this time, leaving his share to John William Thomas, firebrick manufacturer, Mary Hingston of Southampton, and Phoebe and Sarah Pearson of Stourbridge. They wanted the colliery to be worked as a profitable concern and permitted John William Thomas, as the only one with mining knowledge, to continue operations. This proposal seems to have found favour with John Pearson's Trustees, and so Mr Thomas took on the colliery. They were all still prepared to lease the pit, however, and, in 1888, Whitehead Brothers took over. William and Henry Whitehead were already working the Beacon Colliery at New Invention, near Wolverhampton, when they signed a lease on July 1st 1888 for a Mine Rent of £500, plus 8d per ton of coal, and agreeing "*to work in a proper and workmanlike way*", to weigh all mineral raised and to keep accurate accounts of all transactions.

They seem to have continued extracting the coal under Richard Growcott's superintendence until they sold the lease for £200 to Edward Whitehouse. He was a brickworks manager from Tipton and was assigned the lease on August 7th 1889. He then sold it to the Metropolitan Coal Consumers Association Ltd on January 1st 1890 for £5,000. This London based company consisted of:-

Edmund John Sheriff
James Handel MacFarren
Ernest Morton
Joseph Trubshaw

Regents Park, London.
11 Queen Victoria Street, London.
49 Marylebone Road, Middlesex.
Whitehouse, London.

Less than three weeks later, on January 20th 1890, Mr Justice Kay made an order in the Court of Chancery for the winding up of the Metropolitan Coal Consumers Association Ltd under the supervision of the court. At a further Court appearance, on September 26th 1890, he appointed Frederick John Young to be the Official Liquidator. On the same day, Mr Young assigned the lease for £1,025 to Messrs Wright and North, coal masters of Rowley Regis. Joseph Green Wright of Tettenhall, Wolverhampton, and Frederick William North of Rowley Regis were the sons of the original partners of Wright and North who had sunk and then worked the Rowley Hall Colliery since 1865. Calling themselves the Oldhill Colliery Co., they continued working the remaining coal until March 10th 1893, when, by reason of several outbreaks of spontaneous combustion, the colliery was closed. Ten heatings, or fires, were raging in the workings and, to smother them, the pumps were stopped and the colliery allowed to flood. After a couple of years, the Bournehills and Withymoor Collieries and Fireclay Co. reopened the workings and extracted coal from the Thick, Heathen and Brooch seams. They removed any pillars and ribs left from previous working, known in the Black Country as pickings, until very little coal was left to work and the colliery was finally closed on May 27th 1903.

Today the site has been cleared of the waste tips and spoil of the last century's mining and been replaced by a large Council housing estate. The area of the colliery shafts has become a grassed area with nothing but a widened section of the Dudley No.2 Canal, formerly used to load the narrow boats with coal, to locate the site.

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- Mining Journal* 1871. Volume 41, page 359.
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