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Crimes against the state? Surveying coal mines in Upper Silesia, Poland

Ray Riley

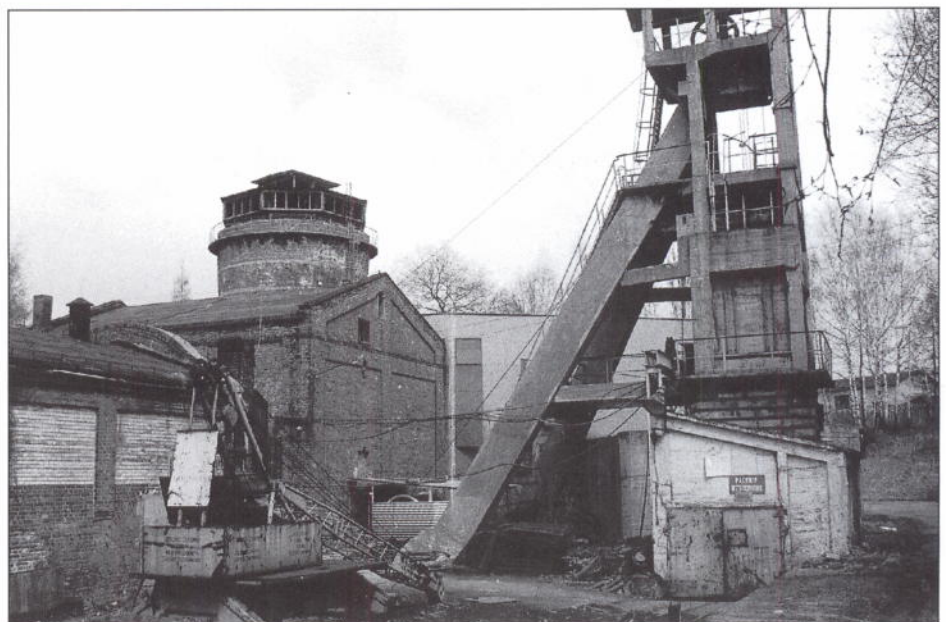
This paper describes the trials, tribulations and pitfalls of recording the IA of a large coalfield in Poland, a country emerging from decades of communism. There are some sobering lessons to be learned by all industrial archaeologists.

The majority of readers will be familiar with the problems associated with survey work in the field - the cold, the wet, the dirt, uncooperative owners, sites difficult of access - and with bureaucratic rules which are sometimes counterproductive. Rather few will have been in a position to experience the problems of recording in foreign countries, especially those whose attitude to industrial archaeology is ambivalent. The following remarks are based on the writer's work surveying coal mines in Upper Silesia in southern Poland during 1996-97. In some ways the situation there is as it was in the UK in the 1960s, when industrial archaeology was in its infancy, and so much needed doing by too few people. But there are some differences, many of which derive from what may loosely be called Polish culture.

During the communist period, 1947-89, the Upper Silesian coalfield was rapidly developed as a means of underpinning the industrialisation programme, and also as a source of hard currency through exports. Between 1947 and 1979 output rose from 46 to 197 million tonnes. There was much inefficiency, and under capitalism production has dropped to 130 millions, but nevertheless the coalfield is the largest in Europe outside the former Soviet Union. This contraction has been achieved through the closure of many pits which, as in the UK, are demolished as soon as possible afterwards, together with the disappearance of documentation. Since it was the oldest, and therefore the most interesting

pits which were being shut, there was an urgent need to record at least the surface installations. In 1996, well after closures had begun, I was asked to conduct a rapid six-month survey of the 65 collieries and approximately 400 shafts that remained. Because of the communist decision to go for production at all costs, many late nineteenth century and early twentieth century structures were retained, making the field a fascinating relic of German technology between 1880 and 1939.

The Cultural Heritage Centre in Katowice I worked for was established by the Ministry of Culture in 1994. It was ill-equipped for industrial surveys, being staffed by historians, an archaeologist, an art historian and a lawyer director who nevertheless did appreciate the urgency of the situation and recruited my services. The Centre has a very broad brief, but no statutory powers and no right of access to sites. It quickly became apparent that there was an overlap between my work and that of the County Cultural Monuments Department established during communism. This Department comprises a mere three people, of whom one, the director, is part-time. They have undertaken some survey work themselves, but during communism most surveys were effected by academics, mostly architects and engineers, under contract. However, no comprehensive survey of the coalmining industry had been carried out; the fullest work was a study of steam winding engines in place in 1984. In any event, such surveys that have been completed have never been published and there is no public right of access to them. Moreover, it was rather frustrating to find that this Department possessed the right of access, the right to inspect documentation and the power to schedule buildings, yet lacked the time to keep track of the rapid changes taking place. Additional overlap resulted from the devolution of much political power in 1989, causing



Circular masonry ventilating tower or évasée of 1898 and later reinforced concrete shaft, Debiensko colliery

Photo: Ray Riley

COVER PICTURE

Swing railway bridge over the Forth & Clyde Canal at Kilbowie in the 1930s, with the Singer sewing machine factory behind, from the Sir William Arrol Collection (see page 13)
Photo: RCAHMS

some towns to try to preserve some mine installations; a small amount of survey work has been completed to this end.

The ideal strategy might have been to look at all the mines, but within the time scale this was impossible. I therefore decided to exclude mines sunk during communism, to dispense with measured drawings, to pay special attention to collieries to be closed, and to try to understand why building design took a particular form, and why it should change, rather than concern myself with fine detail. Since no technical help was available from the Centre, although I did have an assistant who helped with photography, the task of recording such a huge coalfield effectively single-handed was a little daunting.

This proved something of an understatement for a number of reasons. The original plan was to use a County Council taxi to reach distant mines. This worked on some occasions, but more often than not the taxi was commandeered at the last moment by an official with more clout, causing the visit either to be cancelled or the time of arrival to be drastically amended. Since many mines are in rural areas, to reach them could take up to three hours involving many buses and trains, with the consequence that the survey time was greatly reduced. Then, two weeks prior to the end of the work, I discovered that the Centre had its own car, but it had not been offered since it was thought that I would never be able to drive on the other side of the road - ironic since I had driven left-hand drive cars in just about every European country, Poland included.

Having arrived at the mine, elaborate protocol had to be observed and valuable minutes would tick by as tea was drunk and opinions expressed about Mrs Thatcher, the future of Poland, holidays and the English language. There was constant difficulty in trying to convince managers that the kind of 'culture' I was concerned with was technical rather than historical and social. Almost everywhere I was given photographs of grim-faced apparatchiks to admire, and further time was spent on looking at miners' dress uniforms and non-technical documentation in little



One of only three remaining headstocks with pyramidal backstays, Petrowski colliery, 1902

Photo: Ray Riley

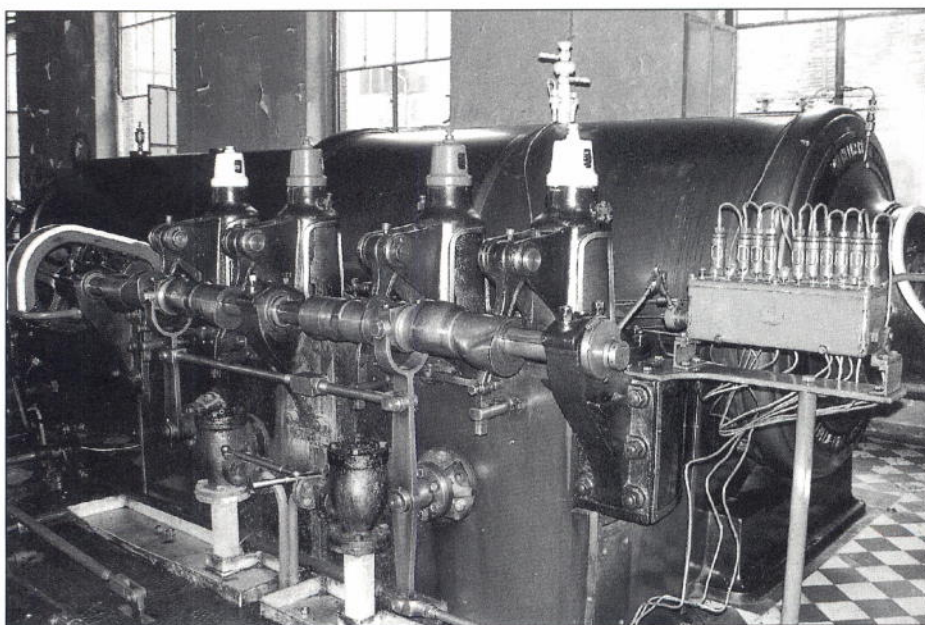
museums some of the mines had established. At one mine, the manager simply refused to visit the headstocks, saying that a general photograph could be taken from his window, and I was then directed to the museum. As luck would have it, some weeks later I was on a train which stopped close to the headstocks and I secured some good photographs, much to the horror of the passengers for whom such action was still a *crime against the state*.

In the absence of a statutory requirement to assist, the mines interpreted help in different ways. Some were excellent, providing knowledgeable guides and transport to all shafts, some of which are often some miles from the main site. Others declined to take me to peripheral shafts and to others which

had been closed. A few were most reluctant to allow me admission when they discovered I was not Polish, even though I was employed by the Ministry, and one mine refused me entry on the interesting grounds that the wording of their letter agreeing to the visit did not in fact allow admittance. Needless to say I took photographs of the all too visible headstocks from the road and departed hurriedly. All the mines possess technical documentation, but when they were produced (their existence was often denied) in most cases the sheer volume and lack of time for perusal unfortunately meant that little benefit could be derived. Most mines had commissioned exhaustive histories to be written by academics whose bent was not technical, although the early photographs were useful. The best history from an industrial archaeological standpoint was written by a staff member of the Zabrze Mining Museum; on my recommendation the Centre's director immediately offered him more money to work in Katowice, a proposal he accepted. Perhaps he will give momentum to further industrial archaeological surveys.

Being far from fluent in the Polish language was a distinct disadvantage, and far too often the discussion would follow the direction that my assistant, rather than I, thought appropriate. Further, my first assistant, an art historian who spoke English, sometimes found it difficult to believe the basis of some of my questions. Thus: why are there two sets of backstays at this shaft, or why is the heapstead so tall and narrow, or why was the shaft freezing process not used in sinking? Because they seemed obscure, she was reluctant to put them, but when she was eventually persuaded, the engineers immediately understood their relevance. Halfway through the project I was assigned a new assistant. He spoke no English, so I asked the questions in Polish; matters improved, even if I did commit the odd howler. Once, when asking if the coal mined was coking, I used the word 'kokosowy' (coconut) instead of 'koksujący'. The engineers fell about at the thought that an English 'expert' actually believed there was such a substance as coconut coal. My second assistant appeared to have slightly different priorities from my own, for everywhere we went he would meticulously note the names, and standing, of everyone we encountered. I later discovered that the information was for his reports which gave precedence to journey details and personnel met over what we had seen. When it rained he would put up his umbrella, making it impossible to take photographs. Since the rainfall of June 1997 was torrential, prior to the severe floods, outdoor photographs were at this time restricted to those I could take with both his and my camera, between making notes and trying to keep up with the main party. Fortunately, by this time I had become familiar with most structures and could afford to be selective.

However partial the survey may have been, it was by far the most comprehensive to have been carried out, enabling recommendations to be made to the County Council with regard to the rarity of particular artefacts. It is to be hoped that the allocation of such funds that are available for preservation and for the development of industrial tourism will take note of the fruits of the survey.



Valve gear of the steam winding engine by Wilhelmshütte, Sprottau, 1906, at the Centrum colliery

Photo: Ray Riley