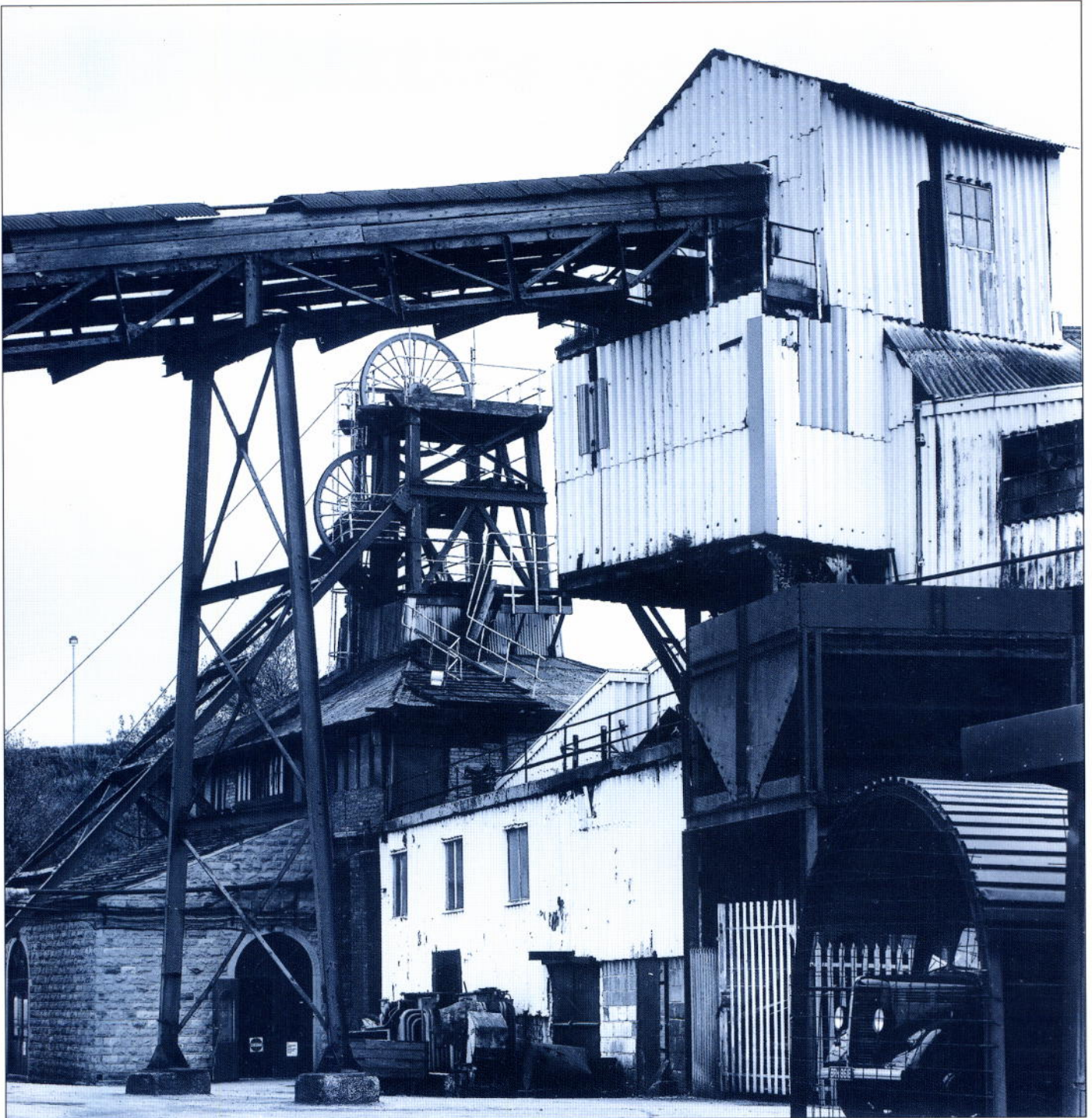


INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY NEWS

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The Museum of the English Coalfields

After the rapid decline of the English coal mining industry with so much of its industrial archaeology demolished, the important work of the National Coal Mining Museum near Wakefield is featured in this issue. The development of this remaining site as a museum is described.

Rosemary Preece

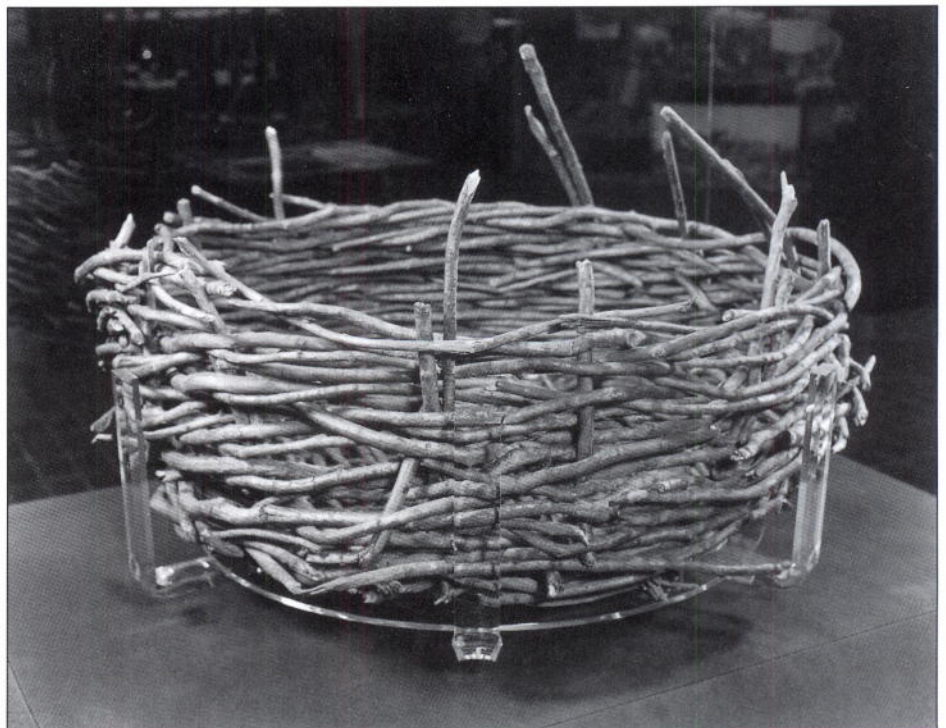
The National Coal Mining Museum for England is based at the Caphouse Colliery and Hope Pit sites near Wakefield, West Yorkshire. The Museum is committed to opening up the history of coal mining and mining communities in the English coalfields to as wide an audience as possible through the interpretation of the surface buildings and collections and by providing access to the genuine underground workings. Visitors can go down the 140m. shaft in the cage and still see original roadways from the pit workings of the late-1940s. Further roadways have been developed which show how the pit would have been at various points in mining history. Tours underground are with ex-miner guides who talk about their experiences in the industry and give visitors the opportunity to speak with someone who has actually mined coal for a living. The pit still comes under the Mines and Quarries Act and has to comply with the same regulations as a working mine, and employ the same statutory officials.

The Museum was established as the Yorkshire Mining Museum in the early 1980s when a number of local coal-mining authorities began to discuss ways of marking the importance of the industry in Yorkshire. Money was provided by West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire County Councils, Wakefield and Kirklees Metropolitan Councils and the

National Coal Board agreed to support, with help in kind, a single coal mining museum for the county. The Museum opened to the public in June 1988 and had its official opening as the Yorkshire Mining Museum in 1989.

The collections at that time were mainly from the modern industry within Yorkshire, and reflected the availability of material from the closure of so many collieries in the aftermath of the 1984/5 Miners' Strike. Items had a strong Yorkshire connection, either from use in the coalfield or manufacture within the county. Although the displays endeavoured to look at coal mining and mining communities from a social history perspective, the collections were primarily technological. The decline of the industry led to an avalanche of recording and collecting and, with very limited staff and financial resources, has left conservation and documentation issues which are still being addressed today.

In 1993 the mining museum at Chatterley Whitfield Colliery near Stoke-on-Trent went into liquidation, and its collections were sold at auction by the receivers. The British Coal Collection, which had formed part of the collections there, was identified as a separate charitable trust by the Charity Commissioners and saved from sale. This collection had been assembled over the previous 20 years at Lound Hall Mining Museum in Nottinghamshire, a Coal Board initiative which had led to a very wide-ranging collection from throughout Britain. The Charity Commissioners agreed that this unique collection could be preserved intact at the National Coal Mining Museum for England. Without their intervention it is quite possible that this collection would have been sold overseas. The collection had much early



Corf from William Pit, Cumbria, c.1875. Believed to be the last surviving corf in the UK, it was used for hauling coal from the coalface to the pit bottom
Photo: Phil Butcher Photography/National Coal Mining Museum for England

COVER PICTURE

Caphouse Colliery, Heapstead and Screens (see this page)
Photo: Ian Macdonald/NCMME

material from a number of coalfields which complemented the Museum's own collections and made a more comprehensive cover of the industry as a whole.

The Yorkshire Mining Museum became the National Coal Mining Museum for England in 1995, recognition by the Museums and Galleries Commission of the national scope of the collections and the Museum's real intention to act as the centre within England for the history of the industry. In 1995 funding was obtained for a stores building for the smaller objects in the British Coal Collection and to fund a Registrar's post for two years to document the collections, which are now catalogued. A store for the large items, which at present have to be kept out of doors, is the subject of a Heritage Lottery bid.

The colliery site, deemed by English Heritage to be the model of a small Victorian colliery, is intended to allow visitors to gain an idea of the everyday workings of a pit. The colliery was established in the eighteenth century, and was one of the many small pits which made up the rural landscape of the West Yorkshire countryside. Coal seams in this area are at a very shallow level and many outcropped in the wooded hillsides and streams, so that many pits were shallow dayholes mined by smallholders who farmed in the summer and mined in the winter. Ironstone was mined from an early date at the bell pits of Bentley Grange close by, and the whole area shows the early industrial landscape which predated the establishment of the large, deep mines in the east of the county.

Caphouse was chosen as the site for the museum for many reasons, some linked to its early history, but in purely practical terms its site is a compact and manageable one, unlike many later collieries. Colliery buildings remaining on site include the 1876 steam-winding engine house, which is still run for demonstration purposes, the heapstead building with its wooden headgear, the early timber-framed screens building and the baths and office block. A wooden gantry leads from the screens building to the drift mouth which forms the second means of egress from the pit. There is



Miners' Lamps at the NCMME

Photo: Phil Butcher Photography/
National Coal Mining Museum for England

not the sprawl of buildings which characterises so many late-nineteenth and early twentieth century pits, and this has enabled the pit to retain its essentially rural character. However, it has also caused problems, with a lack of space both for storing collections and expansion for new galleries. The lottery bid allows for modernisation and better use of existing exhibition space.

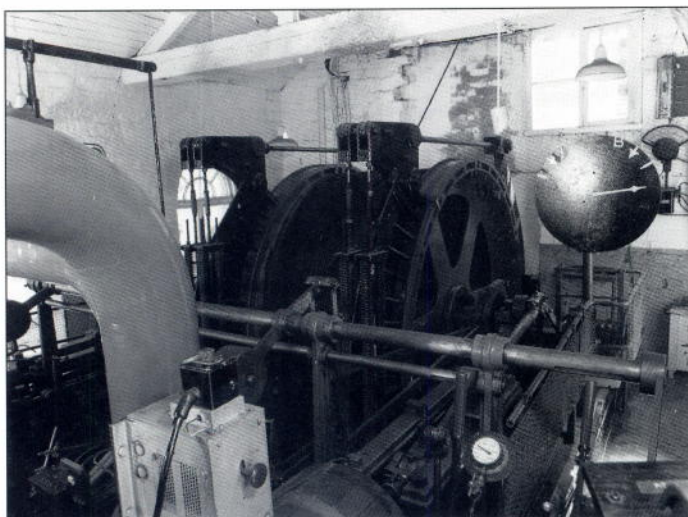
The site is a distorted dumb-bell shape with Caphouse and the colliery buildings at one end. At

the opposite end is the sister Hope Pit, which was used in later years for winding men down the shaft to the Caphouse workings while coal came up at Caphouse. Hope Pit retains a pump house and compressor house from the mid-nineteenth century and a later fan house, winding engine house and heapstead building. Only the heapstead building and winding engine house still have their original fittings, and the former shaft is still used to pump water from the workings adjacent to the Caphouse museum levels. There is no access to the Hope Pit site for the public at present, but refurbishment of this site is part of the bid, which includes a public-access large-object store adjacent to the Hope Pit site.

At present the old Hope Pit workshops are being used for storing some of the vehicles in the collection.

Exhibitions at the Museum are concentrated in the visitor centre and blacksmith's building, showing the history of coal mining in England from a community and workforce perspective. Outstanding aspects of the collections include an extensive range of coal-cutting machinery, early tubs and coal wagons, the unique coal-carrying corve from the Cumbrian coalfield, mining art, photographic collections and printed ephemera. There is a coal-mining library which is open to researchers by appointment on Tuesdays and Wednesdays as the process of indexing and cataloguing is still underway. A national survey of oral history recording is underway and is informing the Museum's own oral-history recording programme. The Museum works in collaboration with the Welsh Mining Museum at Blaenafon and the Scottish Mining Museum at Newtongrange, and has links with other mining collections throughout Britain through the Coal Mining Collections Group. Collecting still continues, although at a slower pace, and maximum effort today is directed towards preservation of and accessibility to the existing and future collections.

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Steam Winding Engine

Photo: Phil Butcher Photography/National Coal Mining Museum for England



Hope Pit

Photo: Phil Butcher Photography/National Coal Mining Museum for England