

# Mining AND Bolsover Church



EXPLORING BOLSOVER'S  
COAL MINING HERITAGE  
THROUGH OBJECTS IN  
THE PARISH CHURCH



Records mention mining in the Bolsover area as early as the 14th century (1366) and there are various further references over the following few centuries including in 1510 when a pit was let to the vicar.

Originally miners simply followed a coal seam into a hillside or down into the earth and dug out the coal, perhaps forming a simple pit called a bell pit. But as the digging went deeper so the need for more advanced technology grew: horse, water and steam power.

It was not until the late 19th century that mining began to transform Bolsover. As Philip Riden and Dudley Fowkes wrote in *Bolsover: castle, town and colliery*:

Between about 1880 and the First World War the parish of Bolsover was transformed by the sinking of new collieries to the coal which lies beneath the Magnesian limestone of the district. Within a single generation Bolsover changed from a decayed market centre with few shops and little or no industry into a town providing a range of local services for a population of well over ten thousand. As well as a good deal of building in Bolsover, new communities grew up in the east of the parish at Whaley Thorns, to the west of the town at New Bolsover and Carr Vale, and to the north at Stanfree and Shuttlewood. Alongside the houses and shops, new churches, chapels and schools were built, as well as pubs and clubs. The entire character of the community, as well as its appearance, changed in barely thirty years.



Detail from the Revd Hills' grave, near the west door of Bolsover Parish Church

In 1867 the Reverend Thomas Charles Hills came to St Mary & St Laurence's. He was the epitome of the indefatigable late Victorian parish priest. Besides revitalising the church, he was involved in almost every aspect of life in the district: he was a member of the urban district council, a JP and a guardian.

As well as overseeing the restoration of the parish

church in 1877-78 (and its rebuilding after a serious fire in 1897), Hills worked ceaselessly to raise (or in some cases provide) funds to build churches and schools elsewhere in the parish to serve the booming population. The first was a dual-purpose school-church at Whaley, opened in 1870, which seated 150, followed by new churches at Whaley Thorns (St Luke's, 1879), Stanfree (St Peter's, 1880) and Shuttlewood

(St Lawrence's, 1893). The last of the district churches, St Winifred's, serving New Bolsover and Carr Vale, was opened in 1908, eight years after Hills's death.

The Derbyshire Times observed in a lengthy obituary of Hills that he was a man of great energy, overcoming many difficulties that would have defeated lesser men. He was kind-hearted and generous.

One of his contributions to the life of the town was in introducing the Somercotes Building Society (originally set up to finance house-building in the Alfreton area) to Bolsover, where they funded the building of a block of houses on the Scarcliffe side of Langwith Road, east of the existing built-up area. This was named Hillstown after the vicar.

By 1912 the Church in Bolsover provided 1720 seats in six places of worship to serve a population of over 11,000. Mission churches had been opened in each of the new mining villages, with help from the colliery companies and landowners. Still the Bishop called for another building in Bolsover and the parish hall was opened across the road from the church in 1915.

Along with this rapid expansion in buildings, churches and chapels also became central to the daily life of their communities. Attendance at worship was much higher than it has been since 1945 – in the early years of New Bolsover it was said that 90% of the village went either to church or chapel on a Sunday – but all places of worship saw it as part of their work to provide a range of social activities on almost every other day of the week as well. As well as stone-laying and opening ceremonies, these included Sunday schools, men's societies or mother's meetings, young peoples' organisations, sports teams, music and drama groups, or parties going on trips in charabancs or wagonettes, plus a constant round of sales of work, bazaars, entertainments, lectures and cricket and football matches week by week.

The choir of St Lawrence's church, Shuttlewood (date unknown)



**Timeline and Key Facts**

1366 Records of this date mention mines at the manor. The coal mined then would probably just have been used as household fuel, rather than for any industrial purpose.

1508-09 Two mines in the area are let for 6s 8d each, a third one is already exhausted.

1510 A new pit opened and was let to the vicar of Bolsover.

1526 Eight coal pits in the area.

mid-17th C. Coal pits on the Welbeck estate let for £40.

1780 Colliery at Oxcroft leased for £40. This one had gone by 1817 but a new colliery at Oxcroft is revived in the 1840s.

1801 About 1000 people live in the parish of Bolsover.

1855 Pit at Stanfree used until 1867.

1871 Population is up to 1721.

1876 Langwith colliery sunk by the Sheepbridge Coal & Iron Company.

1881 Population is up to 2281.

1890 Bolsover colliery sunk by the Bolsover Colliery Company.

1891 Population is up to 3662.

1894 Creswell colliery sunk by the Bolsover Colliery Company.

1895 Bolsover colliery is employing about 850 men and the output is at 1800 tons a day.

1900 Oxcroft colliery sunk by the Oxcroft Colliery Co.

1901 Population is up to 6884.

1905 Bolsover colliery's output is at 2850 tons a day.

1911 Population is up to 11,214.

1920s Ramcroft colliery sunk by the Oxcroft Colliery Co.

1926 General Strike.

c.1929 The Bolsover Colliery Company has six large collieries producing over 5 million tons of coal a year.

1931 Population growth has slowed but is up to about 11,800.

1936 Coalite and Chemical Products Ltd established producing a smokeless fuel and other by-products.

1942 The Bolsover Colliery Company is producing 6 million tons of coal a year.

1945 National Union of Mineworkers created.

1947 Industry nationalised. British Coal staff settle in offices previously occupied by the Bolsover Colliery Company.

1953 Coalite ceases to be rationed.

1956 Bolsover colliery employed about 1000 men and produced 10,000 tons of coal a week; at

Oxcroft around 750 miners produced 9000 tons of coal a week.

1971 Oxcroft still employs around 700 miners.

1972 Coalite still employs 1200.

1974 Oxcroft colliery closed.

1978 Langwith colliery closed.

1984-85 National miners' strike.

1987 Bolsover colliery now employs only 750.

1987 The British Coal area offices at Bolsover close.

1990 45 new businesses occupy the old British Coal offices.

1990 Bolsover colliery now employs only 600.

1991 Coalite now employs only 388.

1993 Bolsover colliery closed.

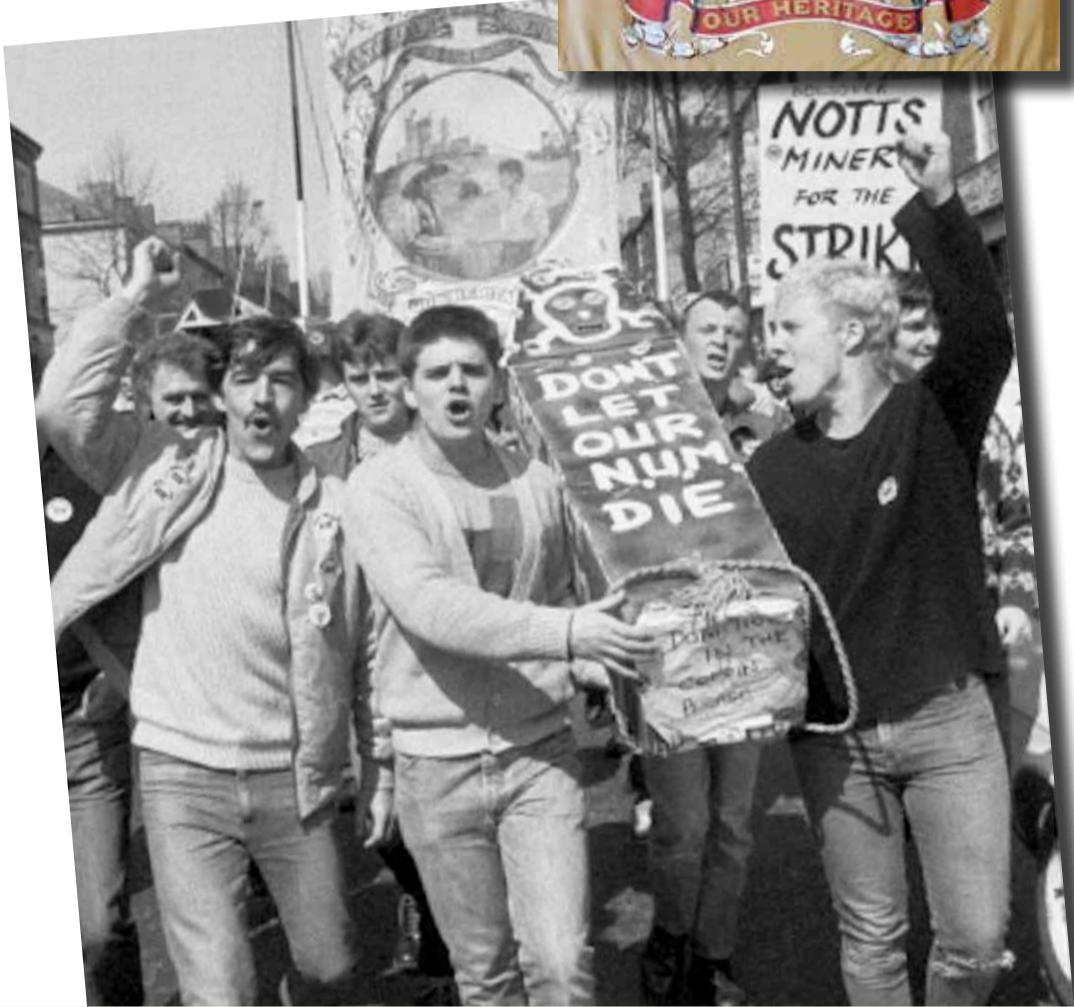
2000 Coalite employs 350. Attempts to diversify.

2004 Coalite closed.

## Mining Memorials in Bolsover Parish Church

The National Union of Mineworkers - Bolsover Branch - banner hangs over the main door of the church. The banner depicts a 17th century Cavendish-type figure shaking hands with a miner as a representation of Bolsover's heritage.

The photo below shows the NUM banner on a march in 1984. (Photo used with the permission of Mick Shannon.)



There are two miners' lamps in Bolsover Parish church. One is in the far north-west corner near the main door and the other (pictured right) is in the Lady Chapel on the north wall.

The lamp in the Lady Chapel is now used as a sanctuary lamp to show that the reserved sacrament is present. It is in memory of Francis Young (1896 – 1983) who had been churchwarden of St Winifred's church in Carr Vale (later demolished). Frank was also a serving Brother of the Order of St John of Jerusalem. The lamp is also in memory of Charlotte Elizabeth Young (1900 – 1982). The lamp is dated 1984.

The miner's lamp in the north-west corner of the church was donated in 1984 by Bolsover Colliery Ambulance Divisions (a previous lamp having been stolen).



Dominating the choir is the copper corona: This "Crown of Light" is a replica of one in Lincoln Cathedral and was a gift of the Bolsover Coalite Company, having been made by their local craftsmen.

On a pillar between the altar and the baptistry is a wood carving of the Madonna and Child that was made and given by Mr F. E. Bliss, a former director of the Bolsover Coalite Co. It was given to the church in 1965.



### Underpinning the Tower

The novel system underpinning the 13th century church tower was installed during the early 1990s to stabilise the long-standing movement of the tower over the previous 700 years. During the last 100 years this movement had been compounded by mining subsidence.

Although the church tower had stood since the late Norman times and remained intact despite the fires that gutted the church in 1887 and 1960, the tower had been gradually moving during all that time, resulting in its south wall being 23 cm (9 inches) higher than its north wall. This slowly increasing tilt was caused by a major geological fault running diagonally through the whole length of the church and exacerbated by mining.



The results of this movement are particularly noticeable in the west door, where one side of the door is 23 cm lower than the other.

During the 1980s there was concern over the movement and advice was sought from the structural engineering firm Ove Arup on how to stabilise the tower. At the same time advice on funding was sought from Derby Diocese, the Church Commissioners, the Local Authority, the congregation and friends of Bolsover Parish Church who had started to raise funds to save the tower. British Coal were also consulted: they had previously agreed to pay compensation for the subsidence cause by coal mining.

During the reading of the Coal Industry Bill in January 1990, members of the House of Commons discussed the issue of mining subsidence throughout the country. Dennis Skinner, MP for Bolsover, ensured that the challenges faced by Bolsover Parish Church were brought to the attention of the Conservative Government and the whole country on January 16th 1990:

*"Friends, I have dealt with this matter at length. The Secretary of State will know that I have referred to the problem of subsidence in Bolsover Church. For several years negotiations did not proceed at any level between British Coal and Bolsover Parish Church, partly because of some negligence on the part of British Coal and partly the fact that there was no vicar for a period. I had to take over – [laughter] (It's the way I tell them!) – I had to take over as an intermediary. Several years ago I was approached about whether I could get negotiations started. I told British Coal that I would be prepared to challenge it to a debate in Bolsover Church so that the whole community could take part. That cracked it – British Coal then decided to negotiate."*

– The report in *Hansard* on the proceedings of the reading of the Coal Industry Bill 16/01/1990  
Mr Skinner went on to describe his negotiations with the Church Commissioners

and British Coal. He was concerned to hear from the new Vicar of Bolsover at the time, the Reverend John Easton, that despite all these efforts, "there is deadlock." Although British Coal had agreed to pay for stabilising the church tower, nothing had been forthcoming. Mr Skinner stressed that the issue should be resolved a.s.a.p. and read out a letter from the Vicar and the Churchwardens of Bolsover Parish Church to the whole House of Commons. The letter described the ways in which British Coal was delaying payment of agreed compensation. Dennis Skinner confirmed this and added other examples of how, "people such as those at Bolsover Parish Church are suffering from subsidence and the delaying games in the payment of agreed compensation."

On Friday, February 9th 1990 the *Derbyshire Times* headline read, "A Saintly Role for MP Dennis" and the newspaper reported on Dennis Skinner's speech and the Reverend John Easton's letter, together with the news that British Coal had finally agreed to release the compensation funds to Bolsover Church. The newspaper further reported that Michael Alison, one of the Church Commissioners, had joked that, "Bolsover Church could be renamed after Mr Skinner!"

When the Bolsover Parochial Church Council received official confirmation of the compensation it commissioned Ove Arup to put into action the design devised to stabilise the movement in the church tower. Margo Cole reported in *Construction News* (10/05/92):  
*"The cunning underpinning system which has been devised by Arup's Sheffield Office and installed by Laing includes jacking bolts which can take movement of 88mm (about 3 1/2 inches) vertically as well as horizontal movement. It works on the principle that the north wall is fixed and the south wall is moving relative to it. A flexible foundation under the south wall is tied back across the fault line in the north wall, which is supported by a massive concrete*



*and stainless steel foundation... which acts as a massive anchor block. The south wall has a flexible foundation made of blocks which are made up of three parts which can move freely over one another and act as a giant moveable wedge to prevent the tower from moving... The parts are tied together in a giant frame, invisible above ground but parts can be viewed underground in the access chamber."*

The access chamber to the underpinning is situated at the back of the church and is often made accessible to the public during church open days.

Information supplied by Brenda Pegge.

Below: "Bess of Hardwick" inspects the underpinning during a recent open day.





In the churchyard there are various graves of local miners who either died of natural causes or mining-related deaths such as John William Houlden. John's grave is by one of the main paths to the church - look out for it when you next pass and spare a thought for the hardships endured by miners and their families.

Front cover images:  
The background picture is of a lump of coal  
now situated at the back of the church.  
The fourth picture from the left is  
Bolsover Colliery in 1972  
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For more information please see [www.bolsoverparishchurch.org](http://www.bolsoverparishchurch.org)

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