

# Banking on an old face lift

A BANKER face that kept the coal flowing during a pit's lean spell has helped turn a 14,000 tonne deficit into a 150,000 tonne surplus . . . in just three months.

Nottinghamshire's 1,150-man Annesley/Bentnck Colliery, one of Britain's oldest pits sunk in 1860, is now mining some of Britain's cheapest coal with production costs during one record-breaking week down to an all-time low of 89p a gigajoule.

And both men and man-

## SURVIVAL PLAN

MINING unions have agreed to a survival plan for a heavy loss-making pit — to get it back into the black.

The major reconstruction programme announced by Group Director Bob Siddall for North Yorkshire's Houghton Main — which lost £15 million in eight months since March — calls for a reduction in manpower and ending production in the geologically unsound Silkstone seam.

The 860 workforce will reduce by around 400 initially and 100 more in March, when salvage in the Silkstone is completed. Future output will be concentrated in Fenton seam.

## PICKING A POCKET OR TWO!

A PIT, where a multi-million pound investment has been hit by worsening geology, is to re-work small pockets of reserves to maintain its anthracite production.

Betws Colliery spent more than £10 million to access new reserves, where a retreat face began production in August. But exploration to block out further panels in the Four Feet seam has proved the ground to be faulted and fractured.

The new plan means manpower will reduce from 270 to 95 as it pulls out of those reserves after next year. It will

By DENNIS TOWLE

agement agree that most of the bouquets should go to their 255 metres BS12s face in the 2.1m thick Blackshale which they claim is the most consistent advancing unit in the country in its seam section.

The clockwork face has averaged over 3,400 tonnes a day in the last quarter, helping Annesley/Bentnck set a new pit record of 55,000 tonnes — the second highest weekly output ever recorded in Nottinghamshire.

Now more than 150,000 tonnes above target — compared to a deficit of 14,000 tonnes at the beginning of September — the booming pit is planning to plough back its profits into a complete overhaul of two sets of heavy duty shield supports as well as uprating its heading machine fleet.

And with face room stitched on for next year, morale is "brilliant", says 12s UDM charge-man Paul Dallison.

He added: "Everybody wants to work on a face where you can turn coal and earn some money. The coal thickness indicator on the machine has made a big difference — it's cut out the guess work and helped us keep a perfect horizon."

"The machine never stops and if we get a hole in the roof, we're moving that quick we're out of it in a shift."

Apart from the coal thickness indicator — which has enabled them to reduce the roof coal they leave from 45 to 36cm — there's nothing fancy about 12s hardware. It includes Anderson's "old faithful" the double-ended AM17, described by Paul Dallison as "spot on", and Webster 2000 in-line ripping machines in each gate.

It's not a one-face show at Annesley/Bentnck — their 268m long Blackshale retreat unit BS92s recently set a new single face record of 32,496 tonnes to help the pit to its fastest-ever million tonnes on November 19.

Delighted manager Eric Blackwell is also quick to pay tribute to the contribution from his coal preparation plant team who have made their coal the most consistent in the Nottinghamshire Group.



Banker with a capital B . . . that's BS12s face at Annesley/Bentnck which the consistent advancing unit in its seam section. Machine driver John Burgir



# Oldest colliery sees last shift

By ADAM BEAUMONT

**THE CURTAIN** finally fell on the country's oldest surviving colliery today ending 140 years of the pit they dubbed "the grand old man" of the coalfields.

The closure of Annesley-Bentinck, near Kirkby-in-Ashfield, sees another 300 miners join the thousands who have left an industry and a way of life behind them.

The final shift was due to finish at 1pm leaving a team of 30 workers to fill in the pit shafts and cap them with stone.

Jim Sorbie, managing director of Midland Mining, which took over the running of the pit in 1996, described it as a "very sad day".

"Four years ago we came here with high hopes that the mine would have a long, sustainable future but unfortunately we haven't been able to make the mine work economically," he said.

Mr Sorbie praised the men who had "pulled out all the stops" since last year's closure announcement to ensure the colliery's remaining contracts

## 140-year-old pit closes

were met. Colliery electrician Mick Elliott, 61, the oldest member of the workforce, added: "It's a very empty feeling. The fat lady has certainly begun to sing."

Midland Mining has worked with organisations, including East Midlands Development Agency, North Notts TEC and Nottingham TEC and Gedling and Ashfield district councils, to offer re-training courses in skills ranging from forklift driving through to computing.

However unemployment in the Ashfield area already stands at 5.4% — the highest rate in Notts outside the city.

Annesley colliery opened in 1860.

In 1895 Bentinck colliery opened — the two were merged almost a century later.

In its heyday around 1,000 men worked underground.

It was later taken on by the private firm Coal Investments who in turn were bought out by Midland Mining in 1996.

Today's closure leaves just four pits remaining in the Notts coalfield.



**SAD DAY:** Annesley Bentinck Colliery is shutting down today after miners complete the last shift

POST PHOTO 99557/19

# Bitterness as Britain's oldest remaining pit goes

A SENSE of bitterness marked the closure of Annesley-Bentinck Colliery last week.

Around a third of employees have found new jobs — including more than 50 at the nearby Kodak plant.

But there was still a feeling among mineworkers that the pit had enough reserves for a viable future and some blamed management decisions for the closure.

Mineworker Peter Allen told Chad: "Many of the men at this pit feel bitter towards the management. Although they've put us in work for the past four years, we feel betrayed by bad management decisions."

"We feel like they've ripped the coal and the profits from the pit and not put anything back into it," Colleague Robert Johnson said: "We wanted to stay here at least another 15 years."

But Midlands Mining managing director Jim Sorbie told Chad: "It's very unfortunate the mine has got to close."

"It means hardship for a lot of miners, I'm very much aware of that. I could accept the criticism if it

By Rob James

was only Annesley-Bentinck closing, but if you look around in the last year other coal mines have closed and the other mining company is having a hard time.

"Management won't always get it right and no doubt we have made mistakes."

"But everybody in the pit from myself to the youngest worker all gave it their best shot."

"It just didn't work out." Mr Sorbie denied rumours that the company was about to take over Scotland's last deep mine, Longannet.

"Midlands Mining are not taking any interest in any other coal mines in the UK," he said.

But he explained he was to undertake consultancy work for Scottish Coal.

Over the next 10 weeks, the shafts at Annesley will be filled with tonnes of granite and the Bentinck drifts sealed and stopped before demolition work starts.

Much of the site will then be marketed for potential industrial development.



FOTO—A0140-25

The headstocks at Annesley-Bentinck turned for the last time at the weekend. The site could now become a new industrial development.



FOTO—A0149-17

The deserted lamp room at Annesley-Bentinck colliery which closed its doors at the weekend.



FOTO—A0118-29

FORMER Annesley miner David Amos takes a last look around the doomed pit, which he hopes to immortalise in his new book.

## CLOSURE OF BENTINCK COLLIERY . . . CLOSURE OF BENTINCK COLLIERY



# 'Bad management' closes the last pit

FOR Union of Democratic Mineworkers' president Neil Greatrex, the closure of Annesley-Bentinck Colliery is a particular tragedy.

Mr Greatrex, pictured above, worked at the Bentinck pit for 20 years alongside his three brothers until he became a full-time union official in 1985.

His father also worked at Bentinck and, tragically, his grandfather was killed while working underground there.

It was Mr Greatrex who led the consortium which re-opened the pit in 1994, two years after it had been shut under the Tory Government's closure programme.

Mr Greatrex told Chad the closure was down to 'bad management' and said there were still reserves which could be mined there.

"There are still reserves there and mining could carry on there for a few years yet," he said, but added:

"Since the closure was announced I've been talking to people in Europe and Britain with a view to getting a group together which was prepared to buy it and take over the running of it because of the way it's been run

Reports by Rob James

there. "But the fact that the Government is not supporting coal in any way, shape or form means people are very, very reluctant to come into mining." Ashfield MP Geoff Hoon said: "The closure of the last deep mine and colliery in the constituency will be something that will cause a great deal of concern."

### 'Future'

He said Ashfield must now seek to pull in new investors, adding: "Whilst it's important to commemorate the past, it's equally important to provide opportunities for the future."

Coun Elaine Bonam, chairman of Ashfield District Council's Economic Development Committee, said: "We have already said we can't look back."

"Ashfield has been a coal area and had a lot of employment down coal mines with other industries, such as engineering, feeding off mining. We realised way before Annesley-

Bentinck went we had got to try and look for something else.

"But what we don't want is a quick fix that doesn't work."

Coun Bonam, who supports the idea of an industrial heritage centre at the colliery site, said the emphasis should now be placed on reskilling, supporting the area's established industries and attracting new investment.

Keith Stanley, the National Union of Mineworkers' Nottinghamshire general secretary, said: "Annesley has stood the test of time."

"It's the oldest pit and has still been producing coal and selling all it produces."

"Its closure was the inevitable consequence of privatisation," he added.

Midlands Mining managing director Jim Sorbie said the company would now look to market the site for industrial development.

Mineworkers who have not yet found new jobs will be provided with counselling and training support for another 12 months.

A FORMER Annesley miner is determined the pit's story will not be forgotten.

David Amos, the last of four generations of his family to work there, has published a Brief History of Annesley Colliery 1865-2000 to mark its closure.

Packed with images and documents collected over the last 20 years and dating back to the 1870s, Mr Amos remembers the pit's great days and tragedies, such as the explosion of May 1877 which killed seven men.

He also recalls the pit's celebrities and characters, which include the legendary England cricketer Harold Larwood.

Mr Amos (42), who now works for the National Federation of Anglers, told Chad what his time at Annesley had meant to him.

"It was mainly the family aspect of it. "Everybody there seemed to know me before I had even started there."

He added: "I think with being the last of the generations to work there, it is part of you."

"And to do something like this it needs to be in your bones and in your blood."

"It's really a case of putting together a social history to realise why it's there in the first place — to put over the local part in the whole process of where we've got to and how we've got there."

Influenced by the eminent mining historian Dr Alan Griffin, Mr Amos now hopes to produce a detailed history of the mine and, eventually, an account of the industry from nation-



FOTO—A0118-29

FORMER Annesley miner David Amos takes a last look around the doomed pit, which he hopes to immortalise in his new book.

alisation in 1947 up to the present day.

Like many, Mr Amos, who left the pit in 1998 after 24 years, saw its closure as inevitable.

"It's sad, but it's the way of life, I suppose," he said.

But his family, whose own history is intractably tied up with that of the mine, have given their stamp of approval to the work; which has risen out of the ashes.

Said Mr Amos: "Obviously my wife has been close to the problems there all these years and so has my dad."

"With my dad's side of the family working there, there is that type of pride that you never get rid of."

# LAST SHIFT AT NEWSTEAD

Contd from page one

The majority of men employed at Newstead live in the Kirkby area — 118 — and the next highest totals are Hucknall and Newstead with 62 each.

It is understood that 262 of the miners took redundancy and 174 transferred.

Two Dispatch staff who visited the 113-year-old colliery on the day of its last production shift found there was generally an atmosphere of sad resignation.

Chief reporter Denis Robinson met with mixed views about the closure from men he interviewed.

One miner said British Coal had "dangled a big, fat, juicy carrot" in front of the men with the severance and transfer payments.

"It is human nature that a man will take the best deal on offer," he declared. "All this has been done for the simple reason that the Board are saving their face in the media. It goes down that the men shut it."

A miner who lives in Hucknall said he did not think it should have been left to the men to make the decision. "It should have been British Coal who decided," he maintained.

But Mr Peter Jackson, of Kirkby, who has worked at the pit for 29 years, said: "I think it



**Newstead pitmen at the end of the last production shift.**  
— DISPIC 87/143.

was the right decision on the whole, though I did not personally vote for the closure. They told us it would still be closing in June."

## Done their best

Senior winder Mr Robert Hickman, who lives in Nottingham, thought British Coal had done their best to help the miners, and had looked into each man's

circumstances.

"The men, both on the pit top and underground, knew as long ago as last year that the closure would be coming," he claimed. "I think it has been timed right."

Winder Mr Ron Bates, of Underwood, said: "Everybody is feeling sad. Some blokes have been here since they left school many years ago."

He commented that

the closure of the pit at this stage would at least make it possible for £17 million to be spent on developing other pits instead.

Miner Mr Stephen Thompson, of Linby Road, Hucknall, who is moving to Linby Colliery, told the Dispatch the men obviously felt very sad. Newstead had been a wonderful pit over the years.

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