

SAUNDERSFOOT AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

For its second lecture of the 2016-17 programme the Society welcomed Anthony Ferrier, an engineering geologist, to speak on 'The geology of Saundersfoot and how it has affected its growth.'

The Pembrokeshire coal seams lie at the western edge of the South Wales coalfield but whereas coal to the east was largely steam coal and lower grade anthracite hereabouts the seams yielded very high grade anthracite with a carbon content approaching around ninety-six per cent but within a challenging mining environment. Beneath the anthracite lay significant layers of culm, a granular poor quality coal that was often mixed with clay for domestic use where it would be laid at the edges of fires and ovens. Coal could often be found at or near the surface and until the eighteenth century simple mining techniques were used: open cast, trenching and bell pits. The latter would involve whole families with the men working below ground and the women operating a windlass to haul material to the surface, and the end product had a ready market in the production of lime for agriculture.

Extensive faults leading to folding of the geological strata meant that deep mining was extremely challenging and working conditions dangerous, damp and unpleasant. The narrow deep seams created very small working spaces and were prone to the build-up of dangerous gases. A combination of factors, particularly the risk of roof falls, pockets of gas and inroads of water produced a hazardous working environment for miners. The Ladies Cave anticline at Glen Beach and the plunging anticline between Wiseman's Bridge and Amroth bear witness to the severity of the chevron folding of rock strata to be seen locally.

By the mid-eighteenth century local anthracite was being used for smelting in and around Swansea and by the brewing industry as well as for the burning of limestone. Coal boats loaded their cargoes from beaches in Saundersfoot and Wiseman's Bridge, coming in on low tide and leaving on a subsequent high tide. The industry expanded significantly after the passing of the Saundersfoot Harbour and Railway Act in 1829; deep pits at Moreton and Coppett Hall, and later Boneville's Court, were able more easily to find outlets for their products. Nevertheless the prosperous days, at least for the owners, were to end in the early twentieth century when the narrow, difficult Pembrokeshire seams faced world-wide competition from simpler and more productive coal measures. Local anthracite was expensive and difficult to mine; it could no longer compete.

The speaker was warmly thanked by Mrs Rosemary Hayes for a well-illustrated and informative talk that drew a large audience. The next meeting will be on 16 November at 7.30 in the Regency Hall when Simon Hancock will speak on 'Witchcraft in Seventeenth Century Pembrokeshire.' Non members are as usual welcome on the night. The Society's Christmas party at the Wiseman's Bridge Inn will take place on 14 December; members wishing to attend can either give their names at the November meeting or telephone the secretary, Tessa Pearson, on 01834 813388.