

A COLLIERY AND A COMMUNITY

How we traced the history of the Warsop Main Colliery and village of Warsop Vale

By Mave Calvert, secretary of the Warsop Vale Local History Society

I first set foot in the North Nottinghamshire pit village of Warsop Vale in January 1996. We were looking to move to the Mansfield area and had come to view The Old School House. Mr. Brailsford, who showed us round, explained that the house had been built in 1905 and had housed the headmasters of Warsop Vale schools. He told us that the village had been built in the early 1900s by the Staveley Coal & Iron Company to serve the Warsop Main Colliery. Apparently, to get permission to sink a pit it was necessary to build houses for the miners, a school, a church, a chapel, stores, an institute for social work and a public house. I was looking for a property in a small village where I could look into the local history, having exhausted most of the branches of my family history, so this seemed ideal.

We moved into The Old School House in April 1996, but it was not until August of that year that we found out what a colourful history the house had. At the annual Warsop Gala we met Mr. Jeff Noble who told us about the headmaster who had been murdered in our house in 1937. After a few initial misgivings, this served only to fuel my interest in the history and off I went to Mansfield Library to find the relevant newspaper articles.

I met some other residents who were interested in the local history and research began in earnest in December 1998 with many trips to local libraries and archives departments. The experience I had gained during my family history researches proved extremely useful.

We decided to start with the history of the last hundred years. The older history will never go away and will only become better documented and researched over time. Recent history is in the memories of the older generation of today and needs to be preserved while they are still here to tell us.

The first stop was the local studies department at Mansfield Library. Looking through the newspaper indexes I was delighted to find that someone had painstakingly indexed all the entries in the Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser covering most of the period I was interested in. If that person is reading this then you have my heartfelt gratitude. I made a note of all the index entries relating to Warsop Vale and Warsop Main Colliery which numbered over a hundred. Over the next few months I spent many hours with a microfilm reader and a bag of ten pence pieces taking a copy of each of the articles. Back at home I typed them all up on my computer.

The next stop was Nottinghamshire Archives Department. My neighbour and I spent a fascinating day there having found the school log books for the Warsop Vale schools, some minute books from the colliery and various trades directories. The second visit to Notts Archives took place after I had spoken to Mr. Noble who had found copies of the blueprints for his own house, which had been built for the colliery officials, in the archives. He gave me the reference number and off I went. Not only

did I find the blueprints for Mr. Noble's house but for all the miners' cottages, the mine manager's house, the hotel and the Co-Operative houses. However, the most exciting to me were the blueprints of my own house. At the end of a most rewarding day, my hands filthy with age old grime from the blueprints, I ordered photocopies of every one of the plans. A week later they all arrived and I spent many an evening scanning them into my computer and joining the pieces back together.

The local studies department at Nottingham library was next on the agenda. Armed with my faithful bag of ten pence pieces I took photocopies of all the ordnance survey maps of the Warsop Vale area starting with 1890 when the colliery and village were nothing but farmland. I then turned my attention to the electoral register. For the first few years of the village's life there were very few residents and even fewer eligible to vote so it was easy to transcribe the whole register. By 1908, however, the houses were all occupied. I decided to transcribe the full register at intervals of ten years. The 1925 register was the most exciting. I had been lent an exercise book by Bill Everett, who had lived in the village since 1908 and is now our Honary President. In this book he and some friends had listed the name and occupation of every man in the village in the 1920s. Remarkably, this concurred almost exactly with the electoral register.

Every Friday night I would arrive in the local pub with the results of the week's research tucked under my arm – typed up newspaper articles, school log book entries, maps, blueprints, scanned photographs etc. The regulars would swarm round me to look at the latest findings and help identify the people on the photographs. Terry, the landlord, would then spend the following week sorting out my masses of paper into sections about the pit, the building of the village, sports, the Co-Operative society, the St. John's Ambulance Brigade, Church and Chapel etc. and gradually coming up with a chronological history of the colliery and the village.

In February 1999 we had a letter published in our local paper, the Mansfield Chad, asking to borrow photographs of Warsop Vale. Almost as soon as the paper was published the phone started ringing. It was amazing at how many people responded for a village of less than 250 properties. We spent the next few weeks visiting people all over the Mansfield district, collecting photographs and other memorabilia and returning it, duly scanned. Every person we visited impressed upon us what a wonderful village Warsop Vale had once been with a community spirit second to none.

Our first port of call regarding the colliery history was Jack Winfield, former deputy manager at Warsop Main and now chairman of this society. Jack told us that many of the records relating to the pit had been destroyed at the time of nationalisation which explained why we were having difficulty tracing anything at Nottingham Archives. Undeterred, we carried on searching. It was not long before Bill Everett found his copy of a colliery department booklet published in 1935 about the Staveley Coal & Iron Company. The booklet had a large section on Warsop Main, then the flagship of the Staveley Company's collieries, and many excellent photographs. This not only gave a valuable insight into the colliery but into mining history in general. We decided to check whether any records existed in Derbyshire given that the Staveley Coal & Iron Company was a Derbyshire firm. Visits to the Derbyshire record office at Matlock and Chesterfield Local Studies Library produced two papers written about

the colliery in the 1950s and the 1980s and copies of the newspaper articles written at the time of the closure in 1989. These, together with the newspaper reports about the various fatalities at Warsop Main in the early 1900s, provided us with a full picture of the colliery history.

The story was coming together but there were several pieces of the jigsaw missing, especially regarding the very early development of the village. These gaps were filled when Mrs. Ruth Burrows of the Old Warsop Society lent me a set of Warsop Almanacks written in the late 1890s and early 1900s by her grandfather, Samuel F. Wilson. These contained excellent information about the sinking of the pit and building of the village, written at the time it was all happening.

Now most of the research had been done and Terry had begun to write up the various sections, I set to work at my PC turning it into book format. Two months later "The Hundred Year History of Warsop Vale & Warsop Main Colliery (1889-1989)" was ready for proof reading complete with 125 scanned maps, photographs and plans.

It was only then that we started to wonder how we were going to afford to have the book printed. We were selling into a coalfield regeneration area characterised by high unemployment and low incomes so we had to sell it as cheaply as we could to ensure everyone had an opportunity to buy it and re-kindle their memories. We therefore decided to go for a cheaper spiral bound version rather than a professional thermally bound book and obtained several quotes from various copy shops.

We started by printing a hundred copies as we were not sure how well it would sell and only had very limited funding. We were amazed to find that within four days all the books had gone and we were inundated with requests for more. We had not even had chance to ask the local papers and radio for the promised free publicity.

At this stage we decided to officially form the Warsop Vale Local History Society so we could start applying for grants to help with the cash flow problem. Other societies were contacted for advice, a meeting was called, a committee formed and a constitution adopted with the help of Bob Hammond and Beryl Mellor from the Keyworth and District LHS. We then set to work filling out grant application forms to obtain the money to pay for further printing.

While we waited to hear about the grants we had applied for, demand was rocketing as people who had bought one of the first hundred books showed it to friends and family and we realised that we couldn't wait any longer. We found a different printer, who was prepared to offer us a discount, and managed to scrape together enough money for a deposit for another 250 copies, keeping our fingers crossed that we would have sold enough to pay the printer's invoice by the time it became due.

We need not have worried, the second batch of books sold almost as rapidly as the first batch and we soon had enough funds for a third printing.

The project and the resulting book was summed up beautifully when one of the ex-Warsop Main miners who pointed at the flattened site of Warsop Main Colliery and said to me "They've taken all that away from us, but this book has given us a piece of

it back". The colliery may have gone but the community still exists, more geographically dispersed these days, but now far richer for knowing it's heritage.

Copies of "The Hundred Year History of Warsop Vale & Warsop Main Colliery (1889 – 1989)" can be obtained for £3.95 each (plus £2 UK postage and packaging if required) from Terry White, The Vale Hotel, Warsop Vale, Mansfield, Notts, NG20 8XE. Telephone 01623 742418 or email mavecalvert@warsopvale.freemove.co.uk. Cheques should be made payable to "Warsop Vale Local History Society".

Further details about the Society can be found on the web site at www.warsopvale.freemove.co.uk
