A century on... and Norchard miners are named at last

MINES historian Dr Graham J Field has tracked down the names of the Norchard 11, the miners of Norchard colliery in the classic "wagon group" photo from early last century (writes Bob Smyth).

Graham, a Kent GP, was an early member of the Dean Forest Railway Preservation Society, founded in 1970.

"I was attending an open day when a diesel unit ran trips up the branch line and I remarked that it would be nice to know the history of the Norchard site," he recalls.

Getting lumbered with the job of finding out, he published **A Look Back at Norchard** (1978). A substantial booklet (90pp) it was a pioneering history of a Dean mine, few individual histories having been written at that time.

New technology allowed him to republish in autumn last year with enhanced photos (£7), including the cover "wagon group" image. "The underground miners all have moustaches and caps," he pointed out.

"The office staff person is clean shaven with a homburg hat. The miners carry carbide lamps, and the two deputies a stick."

He confessed, though, that "sadly, even now I do not have names to put to the cover photograph, which was supplied by one of the miners."

Doyen of mine historians, Ian Pope, added, "The date is post 1912 as that is when the Park Colliery Co. Ltd was formed" – but he had no full list of names.

Graham had a few. "Sitting down on the front on the right as you look at the picture is William George Watkins, born 1874, and died 1964, aged 90. His son William Watkins Jnr was a carpenter at Norchard.

"I spoke to Roy Watkins and he said that his grandfather lived in one of the stone built semi-detached houses opposite the colliery until he died. He thought the other house was occupied by George Hancock.

"The gentleman with the collar and tie and hat is Percy Moore, once secretary of Norchard, who left to join Princess Royal and eventually becoming its managing director. The one with the stick is Gus Hooper, the under manager."

This month, Graham has completed the line-up – here published for the first time.

Back row, left to right: William Ellaway (deputy), Charley Powell (rope splicer), Percy Moore (secretary), William Sims (deputy), Jack Challenger (deputy), Geo. King (deputy), Fred Isles (deputy), Ernest J Hancocks (under manager). Front row: Wilfred Coldrick (surface foreman), A J Guss Hooper (manager), William Watkins (electrician).

"Hancocks is Ernest J in some mining records and John Ernest in others, and acquired his 2nd class cert by 1923," Graham adds. "He was still undermanager in 1938.

"A problem with people looking back in time at photos is that they tend to remember the position they held when there was last any contact. This might not relate to the position held at the time of the photo."

Graham is now working on an account of mine and quarry remains in Bixslade.

"I have crawled through the iron mine there and have some from photos of it from years ago," he tells us.

"The first edition of my book was produced after several years' research, which included many happy hours spent in Foresters' homes. Especially helpful was R A J Bell, secretary of Norchard 1923-38 and thereafter at the central coal sales office at Speech House."

The *Review* would like to know more about Jack Bell (d.1987). Active as a churchwarden, he wrote a booklet history of *The Parish Church of St Mary Lydney* in 1961 (reprinted 1981).

His *Lydney & District Hospital* 1882-1982 booklet history deserves an update next year. Following his death his Forest of Dean books and documents were bequeathed to St Mary's, who in turn donated them to Lydney Library.

The Bell Collection occupies a cabinet in the downstairs reference room. Would anyone with further information about R A J Bell drop a line (or email) to Bob Smyth at the *Review*.

The *Norchard* book is at bookshops or available from the author at £9 (inc p&p) from 37 Minster Road, Westgate on Sea, Kent CT8 8BP.



•Named at last...the classic group photograph taken at Norchard.