

Avon

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Avon Past



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Line drawing of roof-boss excavated from Keynsham Abbey showing Samson and the Lion.

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Avon Past

the joint journal of
**AVON ARCHAEOLOGICAL COUNCIL
and AVON LOCAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

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Few streets were without a shop of some sort — usually a general store providing anything likely to find a sale — matches, pins, pegs, groceries, green-grocery, firewood and paraffin among the rest. Often these shops were run for mere pittances by widows or maiden ladies trying to eke out their meagre income. Such a one existed at the corner of our Avenue, owned in succession by Mrs. Palmer and then by Miss Bishop; but the extra farthings on each item necessary to cover the overheads kept inpecunious customers away, and the living was a meagre one. Sometimes, however, a forceful character built up a thriving business which brought in a good income — for instance Gibb's of Woodborough Street was quite a lively store. Sacks of dried peas, split peas, lentils, oats, sugar, and potatoes stood around the floor space. Behind the counters were large canisters full of tea and coffee — often blended on the premises. Blocks of butter, lard and dripping, drums of treacle, sides of bacon, tins of biscuits with glass covers, rows of glass jars containing pickles or sweets, and a huge range of other goods festooned the shelves. Each customer's needs were personally attended to. A half-pound of butter was taken from the block, beaten into a neat pat, stamped on the surface with a cow, swan or sheaf of wheat, and wrapped in grease-proof paper. Beans, peas, flour were scooped from the sack, weighed in view of the customer, and served up in cones of stiff paper deftly rolled by the shop-keeper. Sugar was always packed in cones of blue paper. Pickles and liquid items were decanted into customers' own jam-jars. Those were the days of far less useless packaging, and far more customer attention.

At the other end of the scale was the shop at the corner of Graham Road, run by a widow named McNeil. She had little capital to invest in idle stock, and so specialised in small items with a ready sale — mostly sweets for school children. On display in her shop window were bulls' eyes, owls' eyes, small packets of chewing gum, liquorice in the form of pipes, strips, tubes or what-you-will, boiled sweets at twopence per quarter pound, tops, whips, lengths of rope, small boxes of coloured chalks and many other items. Many were priced at only a farthing or half-penny — and that at a time when there were 240 pence to the pound. Mrs. McNeil's living can never have been a fat one.

There were other wonderful experiences lying in wait for us children when, as we grew older, we ventured farther afield into town, travelled on tram cars, caught tiddlers in Cumberland Basin in the very shadow of ocean-going ships moored near the Tramways Centre; but that is another story. Enough has been said for comparisons to be made. In 1980 we have difficulty in visualising conditions applying in 1910. It is certain not all the changes have been for the better.



Our apologies to the Clevedon and District Archaeological Society, whose member Mrs. Sheila Sunderland provided the issue 3 crossword, whose name we accidentally printed as the Clarendon and District Arch. Soc.!

(Crossword in this issue courtesy of J.S.)

The editors would be pleased to receive crosswords from any enthusiasts who would like to send us one.

THE UNDERGROUND MEN: A PERSONAL VIEW OF THE KINGSWOOD COLLIERS

by Patricia Lindegaard

In the days when boys went down the Kingswood mines, girded with tigger and chain, and the only illumination was provided by the pale flames of their tallow candles, they used to push the coal trucks with their heads. How do I know? I had it from my father, and he had it from his grandfather Burchill, collier, whose long white beard was offset by the friction-bald proof of a shiny head, naked as a ball. In the evening of his life "Granfer used to crack stones, 6d a square foot. I used to 'ave to go down an read to un on a Sunday, out of the Bible", my father remembers fondly, " 'E couldn't read or write". My father, himself now nearing eighty, is a great teller of tales, their authenticity enlivened by the richness of his broad Kingswood speech, with its "thees" and "thous" and "bists" and "custs".

From him, I learned too of his own father, shoe-maker and part-time barber, who used to sit the neighbourhood children on a little stool in his back garden, shearing their locks by the simple method of scissors and pudding basin. When my grandfather got to work on his own son's angelic mop, which cascaded over his shoulders in whorling, bouncing, golden curls, the female members of the family cried for a week at the waste of so much beauty.

My grandfather had, however, a greater claim to fame. He had once fought Jack Johnson, heavy-weight champion of the World. It was by no means as grand as it sounds. Johnson, after a chequered career which had caused him to flee the States in somewhat dubious circumstances, was making a tour of the Music Halls. He duly fetched up at the Empire Theatre, Bristol, where he was to be seen strutting about the stage — which they said he could cover with four giant strides — bellowing out a challenge to all comers. Grandfather's family, the Pillingers, fancied themselves with their fists. (Was there not another story of a bare-knuckle fight in the middle of Two Mile Hill, between one of them and a butcher called Billy Jefferies, over the disputed ownership of some pigs? The duel apparently left both contestants bloodied but unbowed, and the quarrel was later solved by both parties retiring for liquid refreshment. The pigs got eaten). However, to return to the story. On the one hand we have the mighty figure of Jack Johnson, roaring out his challenge, and my grandfather, never one to resist a dare, ("outta devilment" says my Dad) setting to. I suspect he came off rather ignominiously, despite at the time being "a gurt big chap, about fifteen stone".

In hard times my father was a customer at Swashes Pawn Shop with his little sailor suit (and the straw hat) he wore to church on a Sunday carefully pressed and parcelled under his arm to be left as a pledge for a few coppers to help his mother through the week. It was always redeemed in time for the following Sunday services. When he grew out of the sailor suit, it was "down to Froggy 'Armon's mother for a pair of 'cut me downs' — poor old Froggy, he got killed in the First World War".

Then there was my father's mother, Laura Hester, who, like her husband, had a part-time occupation. She could charm warts, and ministered her witchcraft to the neighbours with slivers of raw meat and incantations. Whatever she said or did, the spells satisfied her customers, who by all accounts became wart-free in a matter of days. Grandmother Lavinia was another character.

"Terrible 'ot temper, she 'ad, and strong! She was the only 'oman I knew as could kill a pig!" (This extraordinary sideline seems an unbelievable contrast to her intricate and accomplished dress-making, evident in photographs of her children.)

Then there was the story of the boy relation who stole a horse, "a hanging offence in those days", my Dad would say with satisfactory relish, putting the matter at a stroke outside the region of his memory and into the realm of hearsay. The boy did not hang. Somehow he escaped from the Pound where he had been locked up overnight, showed a clean pair of heels for Liverpool and took a boat for America. He was never heard of again.

My father's stories were much more thrilling to me than the Congress of This or That, the Battle of Here or There that I learned about at school (and which seemed so remote that they might have taken place in the stratosphere), so at about twelve years old I went in search of local history. The printed histories revealed nothing to add to my rich store of tales. The absence of the family names in the indexes led to the empty discovery which attacked me with face-burning shock that I was descended from nonentities. Even a gleaned nodding acquaintance with the Cock Road Gang, the execution of Fry and Ward, or the flesh-creeping exhibit of a book labelled "bound in the skin of a Kingswood murderer" did not compensate for my dismay. If I had known the truth it might have been even worse. Fry and Ward were hardly the scar-faced villains, nor yet the dashing highwaymen of my pubescent imagination. Many years in the future I was to know them as they really were, a pair of unsuccessful burglars aged ... nineteen and twenty. Horwood, whose hide covered the grisly relic, I was later to feel quite sorry for — but that was yet to come. Let down by my ancestors, I replaced the books with a sickening sense of disappointment. Why hadn't some of them been hanged? Notoriety, even vicarious, had appealed mightily to my own urgent insignificance. My father tried to comfort me that they had taken part in years of undetected crime, but nothing could overcome my despondency. Raging in silent fury, I gave up history in disgust in the first year of my teens.

As with the craving for nicotine, a lust for history is never quite overcome. In subsequent years I could never see a textbook without first examining the index to see if my name appeared. As the years went by, my disappointment lessened. Now I expected nothing; and nothing was what I found.

Incredibly, a quarter of a century went by before quite by chance I was to spot the signpost which would at last point the way. The discovery that there were records available of the common man was literally monumental. When least expecting it, and at a time when my mind was wholly bound up in the present — I was pushing a pram containing my three under-fours through Brislington churchyard, my eyes chanced upon my own name on a tombstone. There had, it seemed, once been Pillingers in Brislington in profusion, and being of a marginally richer variety than my Kingswood lot, they had had the foresight to have their names inscribed on their gravestones, just so I could find them. A word with the vicar, and I moved into the Aladdin's cave of parish records. In an instant I reverted to the eager hopeful innocent I had been before my teenage disillusion.

Thus through tracing my ancestors, I began piecing the family together, and bit by bit, armed with the nucleus of my father's stories, I traversed every branch in an extraordinary adventure in time. My entire paternal ancestry, except for one line, the Fray family, Dutch brassmakers of Keynsham, proved

to be Kingswood colliers. Pillinger, Burchill, Garland, Brain, Summerill, Stone, Lear — their names leapt at me from the old manuscripts. I shared at second hand their hardships, grieved with them in the loss of their children (one Pillinger family lost eight out of their ten children from smallpox, seven of them within a matter of months); agonised with both the victim and the dependants of those who fell to their deaths or were drowned in coal pit accidents. I realised that my family was a microcosm of all the colliers of the Northern coalfield of Bristol. I saw reflected in the mirror of my own ancestry the coal-blackened face, the badge of blue scars on hands, arms, back and knees, the broken body of every collier who had ever lived, loved, suffered and died within the confines of the ancient forest which had become a coalfield.

"These black bigots" a self-styled 'gentleman' of Bristol called them with, it seems to me, little or no justification, in an attack he penned in 1714, recounting with undisguised glee how the colliers' half-clothed children had run as far and as fast as they could beside his Bristol-bound coach, begging pennies.

There is no doubt that human nature hates what it fears. The outsiders in their forest home were inclined to use their coal as a political weapon; the conditions in which they existed were deplorable and just to prove that they wouldn't go away, lie down or die, they frequently rioted, an activity which not altogether surprisingly put the fear of God into the timid Bristolians. "The lawless colliers" is a phrase of which I was soon to tire; an often repeated instance of their savagery is the tale whereby a couple of bailiffs were put forcibly down a coal-pit in 1795, supplied with gin and gingerbread, kept in the dark overnight, and forced to buy their release for 6/8d. The fact that at roughly the same time the French Revolutionaries were guillotining their enemies makes this treatment seem almost laughably lenient. Historian after historian has accepted the lawlessness — and it did certainly exist — but has lumped the colliers whose offences we would term political protest together with the petty criminals and tarred the lot with the same brush; no-one before troubled to find out who was who, or who did what. Only occasionally were they named.

It was not all mayhem. Only recently I discovered a fascinating story of a man who sold his wife to a Kingswood collier for thirty shillings. The woman accepted the arrangement and lived with the collier, happily perhaps, until his death.

I am compiling an index of the names of the coalmining people of South Gloucestershire (now of course Avon) from 1600 to 1936. I can trace family connections with the Kingswood coalfield all the way from Edmund Stone, "colyer" of Hanham, described in 1608 as taller than average physique and suitable for army service as a pikeman (should the need arise), right down to my uncle, Joseph Comley, who was a miner in Speedwell pit in the 1930's.

My index, hopefully the prelude to a book on the subject, is entitled "The Underground Men". The title I owe to an un-named hack on the *Bath Journal* in 1749. He describes how a party of bailiffs went into Kingswood to arrest "one Harborough, alias Reynolds, a collier, one of the underground men" for being one of the leaders of the turnpike riot. Harborough put up a spirited defence, fought off his assailants with pitchfork and stones — and escaped. I would be grateful to anybody who could help with photographs, documents, letters, diaries or any newspaper references to anyone who was a coalminer in the Kingswood Forest area — and of course I would be happy to answer questions from anybody who has connections with the district.

A great many of the 'wild ruffians', 'lawless savages' and 'black bigots'

have now been given back their names. What started as a family history has become a crusade to redeem the reputations of my Kingswood men and their women. I have named them. Some of them I know, even though the dust of centuries separates them from me. For each instance of cruelty I know another of loyalty and courage. Those I do not admire, I at least understand.

Mrs. D.P. Lindegaard, 49, Clayfield Road, Brislington, Bristol BS4 4NH.
(Please include s.a.e. with any correspondence).

Plate 1



George Garland

Charles Lewis

Plate 1. Detail from lithographed broadsheet issued to raise money after five Kingswood boy miners were trapped underground for six days in 1833. Both boys carry candleholders in their hats and George Garland is wearing a chain 'tugger' around his waist with which he would pull coal trucks. The text on the broadsheet runs as follows:

"By the breaking in of the water at Kingswood Lodge Coalpit near Bristol, these Five Boys were shut in for six nights and days entirely destitute of food. They entered on Friday evening, April 18th, 1833, and were rescued on the following Thursday evening. The circumstances of their preservation and of their deliverance, call for peculiar acknowledgements. This rough sketch of the Lads in their pit costume, is intended as a memorial; and by the sale of the impressions, with charitable donations, they will be apprenticed to some plain trade. The monies received for this purpose, are deposited with Mr. Hall, Lower Castle Street, Bristol.

*The parents pray'd above,
The children pray'd below,
The mother's frantic love,
The father's manly woe, —
With wrestling strife, shook earth & air,
And moved the very stones to pray'r.*

*Behold the captive free
The mourners now rejoice,
With grateful ecstasy,
Let Kingswood raise her voice;
And all her deep, dark pits resound,
The dead are raised, the lost are found".*

(Broad sheet in possession of Mrs. P. Lindegaard).

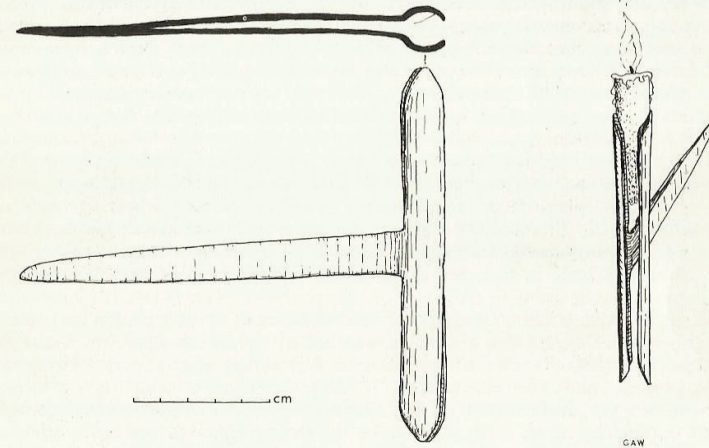


Fig. 5. Miner's candle holder from the Kingswood area. The atmosphere in the pits was sufficiently clean to make the use of a bare flame possible.

(In possession of Mrs. P. Lindegaard).