

# MEMORIES

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## Looking back at life at the Chislet coalface



View of Chislet Colliery from the East in the 1930s and locomotive "St Augustine" based there from 1955 to 1960  
Pics: Dover Museum and Bronze Age Boat Gallery

The honour of discovering the Kent Coalfield went to Francis Brady, chief engineer of the South Eastern Railway. In February 1890, he was seconded to the Channel Tunnel Company established by South Eastern - and between 1896 and 1919 thirty-eight bore holes were sunk to locate coal in Kent.

Fourteen collieries in Kent subsequently progressed beyond the planning stage. Most were located within the triangle of Canterbury, Dover and Deal - which became the Kent Coalfield. Only four of those collieries were to prove viable in the longer term: Tilmanstone, begun 1906, Snowdown, 1908, Chislet, 1914, and Betteshanger, 1924.

Test bores were drilled at Hoades Wood, near Sturry, Reculver, near Herne Bay, and Chitty and Chislet Park, near Canterbury. The Anglo-Westphalian Coal Syndicate Limited leased land from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners at Chislet Park, commencing January 1912.

Coal prospecting then moved to the parish of Westbere, between the Canterbury to Margate Road to south of the Canterbury to Minster railway

Construction of Chislet Colliery commenced 105 years ago this month. Richard West, founder of The Chaucer Education Project, looks back at the history of coal mining in East Kent...



Kent miners at the coalface in the 1920s

line, to which a branch line for the colliery was constructed.

The Anglo-Westphalian (Chislet, Kent) Colliery Limited company was incorporated in 1913. Work on sinking both shafts at Chislet stopped at 30 feet depth, due to water bearing sand.

A German contractor was employed to bore 11 holes around each shaft, into which cement was then forced at a pressure of 600 pounds per square inch to harden the sand layer. This was an established proven method used in Germany to keep water out of shafts, but was relatively new in Britain.

Three months later, Great Britain declared war with Germany, and an extraordinary annual general meeting changed the company's name to The Chislet Colliery Limited. In moving the resolution, chairman Joseph Shaw said: "The press had got an idea into their heads that this was a German company, whereas they had only one German shareholder, Mr Peritz."

Willi Peritz lived in Canterbury, where the local authorities were suspicious of him and the company's telephone was removed, hampering the business. That difficulty was resolved by Mr Peritz offering his resignation, which the board promptly accepted. It seems Mr Peritz might have become a "guest of the nation" at Alexandra Palace, where "enemy aliens" were interned during the First World War.

Sinking of the two 16ft diameter shafts resumed in early 1915. North shaft reached 1,470 feet and south shaft reached 1,480 feet. The estimated quantity of workable coal was 75 million tons. However, strikes and lack of money for repairs led to parts

of the mine collapsing during its early years, causing subsidence of the ground above.

In 1929, the colliery was re-organised and relations between the company and staff were improved. As the local community had no experience of mining, the workforce derived from traditional mining areas, especially South Wales.

Several hundred houses were leased by the company in Thanet for the miners, who travelled daily to Grove Ferry station by special miners' trains. Special buses ran from other Thanet towns and Herne Bay to the colliery. Chislet Colliery Halt on the Canterbury and Ramsgate branch of the South Eastern and Chatham Railway opened in 1920.

In 1924, Chislet Colliery Housing Limited was established, to build a village, later named Hersden, of 300 houses close to the colliery. Pit head baths, the first in Kent, were also opened in that year.

Chislet Colliery had an important role during the Second World War as a training pit for what became known as the "Bevin Boys". From December 1943 onward, one in ten men selected by ballot on

scription for war service did not go into the armed services but worked in the coal mines.

Between March 1945 and 1952, pit ponies worked at Chislet Colliery, with comfortable stables provided to house the ponies below ground.

In 1947, Chislet Colliery, along with all other collieries in Great Britain, was nationalised.

The colliery's highest average level of output was achieved in 1957, when 8,949 tons of coal per week were raised to the surface, amounting to just under half a million tons per year, with a manpower of 1,681.

Chislet Colliery's main customer was British Railways, which in the 1960s replaced steam locomotives with diesel and electric ones. Chislet Colliery was then no longer considered financially viable.

Miners were transferred to the other three remaining coal pits in Kent, and Chislet Colliery closed completely on July 25, 1969.

The former industrial site now forms Lakeview Business Park and a nature reserve. Tilmanstone Colliery closed in 1986 and Snowdon in 1987. Betteshanger was the last to close in Kent, in 1989.



The former Chislet colliery site is now home to Lakeview Business Park

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