



Hopewell Colliery Museum & Working Mine

Large Print Guide

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Hello and welcome!

This booklet will provide information about Hopewell Colliery – Museum and Working Mine, for visitors who prefer to use Large Print.

**Please return this guide before you leave.
Thank you.**

Introduction

**Welcome to Hopewell Colliery –
Museum and Working Mine.**

**Hopewell Colliery is one of only a handful
of Freemines still in operation today in the
Forest of Dean.**

What is a Freemine, you may ask?

A Freemine is when special permission is granted to miners, to mine their own personal plots of land, known as 'gales'. This permission is extremely rare; in fact, the Forest of Dean is the only place in the whole of the UK that allows Freemining.

The ancient right was bestowed by King Edward 1st in the 13th century. He gave miners in the Forest of Dean exclusive rights to mine their own gales and become Freeminers. This right was granted as a reward, for being instrumental in recapturing Berwick- Upon-Tweed several times during his reign. However, it is also written that he stated that such 'customs and franchises' had existed since 'tyme out

of mynde'; suggesting that Freemaners already existed for a long time before he formally recognised their role.

The Dean Forest (Mines) Act 1838 states that to be a Freemaner, the following must apply:

“All male persons born or hereafter to be born and abiding within the said ‘Hundred of St Briavels’, of the age of twenty-one years and upwards, who shall have worked a year and a day in a coal or iron mine shall be deemed and taken to be Free Miners.”

The ancient area, known then as the ‘Hundred of St Briavels’, is generally considered to be the whole of the Forest of Dean and each parish adjoining it.

The criterion shown above was recently updated to include females. Although the original 1838 Act was not subject to Equal Rights legislation; the Forestry Commissioners decided to allow females on to the register for the first time in 2010.

Life as a Freeminer

Working as a Freeminer was hard work and meant long hours working in small, confined spaces, a long way underground.

The mines were damp and dark, and the Freeminers would work with only the light from the lamp on their helmets.

The work was back-breaking and would mean wielding a pickaxe to work the seam to release the coal. The coal was then

loaded into a cart or 'dram' and hauled to the surface.

Being a Freeminer was also dangerous. One of the most significant risks was that of roof falls. However, poisonous gases like Black Damp, which was the unique name miners give to carbon dioxide, was also a major hazard for any miner.

Many years ago, children as young as six would work underground in the mine, alongside other family members.

Working twelve-hour days in the darkness, at the coal face, was not a pleasant job, or uncommon.

Hopewell Colliery

Hopewell Colliery is a drift mine – this means that miners make their way underground via a tunnel, rather than being lowered down a shaft.

The earliest parts of Hopewell Colliery date back to the 1820s, with some tunnels cut out of the solid rock. One tunnel has a small stream running down the side, which in the old days the Freeminers used to bath in at the end of the day. Life in a coal mine was very dirty!

Hopewell Colliery is still mined today. However, some of the equipment used today is a little more modern, such as pneumatic picks and cutters to work the

seam. They also have stronger lamps and better air meters!

It isn't an easy job, and conditions remain the same, cramped and isolated.

Today there is only a handful of Freeminers left, but this ancient tradition is going through a resurgence. Hopewell is supporting this independent and unique lifestyle, making it more viable for future generations.

Going underground at Hopewell will be as close as you can get to Freemining, without working in one yourself! You will be able to experience the atmosphere and see first-hand the conditions faced by the miners, without the back-breaking work.

Please be aware that the tunnel descends quickly and is quite steep in places, as well as uneven, and maybe unsuitable for people with sight impairments.

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**Thank you for visiting Hopewell Colliery -
Museum and Working Mine.**

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