
The Vobster area

Parking is limited to roadsides and lay-bys.

The pretty village of Vobster is situated just north of the Nettlebridge Valley, seven kilometres north-west of Frome. Its rural tranquility belies an industrial past at the heart of the Somerset Coalfield. This area of Mendip contained numerous collieries working, on and off, from medieval times until the 1970s.

The Vobster area lies north of the Beacon Hill Pericline and is underlain by some complicated geology. The majority of the rocks here are late Carboniferous in age. They are highly contorted and have been folded and faulted by earth movements at the end of the Carboniferous.

Three kilometres to the north of the village, the Carboniferous rocks are unconformably overlain by the gently dipping Jurassic Charmouth Mudstone and the Inferior Oolite. The higher ground of Mells Down and Kingsdown, three kilometers to the north, is part of the Great Oolite escarpment.

The quarries at Upper Vobster [21] [ST 70363 49770] have been excavated in Carboniferous Limestone. This outcrop is rather curious, as it is isolated from the main mass of limestone 1.2 km to the south. In fact, its position here is due to thrust faulting and folding. In this part of Mendip, the Carboniferous rocks have been so severely folded that they have been overturned on themselves to form a recumbent structure known as a nappe. The limestone outcrops here form the 'nose' of the structure, now isolated by erosion. The knoll of Carboniferous Limestone in Lily Batch Wood [22] [ST 70717 49235], just east of Vobster, is a similar nappe structure.

The Vobster quarries were worked for aggregate but closed in the 1950s. One of the quarries, Vobster Quay, is now flooded and is used as an inland diving centre. The old quarry workings can still be seen if you are a diver!

Most of the area south of the quarries is underlain by highly contorted sandstones and mudstones of the Coal Measures. These are occasionally exposed in stream gullies and along the banks of the Mells River. Some coal seams have proved workable, for example the Standing Coal and Dungy Drift seams. Many small collieries and pits were worked around the area; the main collieries were Vobster, Vobster Old, Vobster Breach, Newbury and Mells.

Newbury Colliery [23] [ST 69630 49748] opened in 1799 and was worked until 1927. The coal produced was good quality and was used to make coke for Westbury Iron Works. The site of Newbury Colliery is now an industrial area, but the winding and pumping engine houses still stand, as do the colliery offices. Coal waste can still be seen in the pathways around the edge of the site.

The Newbury collieries were connected by rail to the broad-gauge Great Western Railway, Frome to Radstock line. Opened about 1857, the remains of this line can still be seen between Newbury and Upper Vobster. It ran close to the route of the Dorset and Somerset Canal, and in places used the old canal bed. The line of the canal can still be seen just south of Vobster Cross, where there is a well-preserved bridge beneath the road [24] [ST 70919 49387]. West of here, the canal cannot be traced and the section between Newbury and Coleford was probably never built. There would have been a tunnel under the ridge south of the Newbury Colliery, but it appears this was never started.

The opening of the Newbury Railway stimulated the development of the Mells Colliery [25] [ST 71211 50093]. This opened in 1863, closed in 1881 and was re-opened in 1909. It was never very profitable and there were many disputes about pay and working conditions before it finally closed in 1943. Some of the buildings and the spoil heap remain, but the latter has been obscured by trees.

A narrow-gauge tramway was laid to connect the railway with the pits in the Nettlebridge Valley to the south. Part of the tramway, which is now followed by a footpath, was up an inclined plane just east of the pub in Vobster. At Vobster Colliery [26] [ST 70343 48944], a few remains including the spoil tip, store house and the old ventilation shaft can still be seen. Just to the east is the site of Vobster Old Colliery [27] [ST 70546 48971], but nothing remains here except an old

spoil heap.

The opening of the Newbury Railway and the tramway also stimulated the development of Vobster Breach Colliery [28] [ST 69799 48922] during the early 1860s. A shaft was sunk to link with a branch of Vobster Colliery. By the mid-1860s two banks of coking ovens had been constructed at the site. However, increased competition and a downturn in the coking trade led to economic difficulties and mining had ceased by 1884.

Vobster Breach Colliery is now overgrown. Most of the mine buildings were grouped around an infilled shaft in the centre of the site. The remains of two banks of coking ovens can be seen from the path. Most have now collapsed, but approximately 12 remain intact. To the north lies the spoil tip which is bounded by a leat that once fed water-powered pumps at Vobster Colliery. From here, footpaths lead up the Nettlebridge Valley to Coleford (*see Nettlebridge*) and the Stoke St Michael area (*see Stoke St Michael*).

Figures

(Figure 34) Aerial photograph of the Vobster area.

(Figure 35) Vobster Quarry before it was flooded, showing the contorted Carboniferous Limestone.

(Figure 36) Wainwright's Newbury Colliery showing the extensive coke ovens and some of Wainwright's privately owned rail wagons. Courtesy of the John Cornwell collection.

(Figure 37) Newbury Colliery workforce, 1900–1912. Courtesy John Cornwell collection.

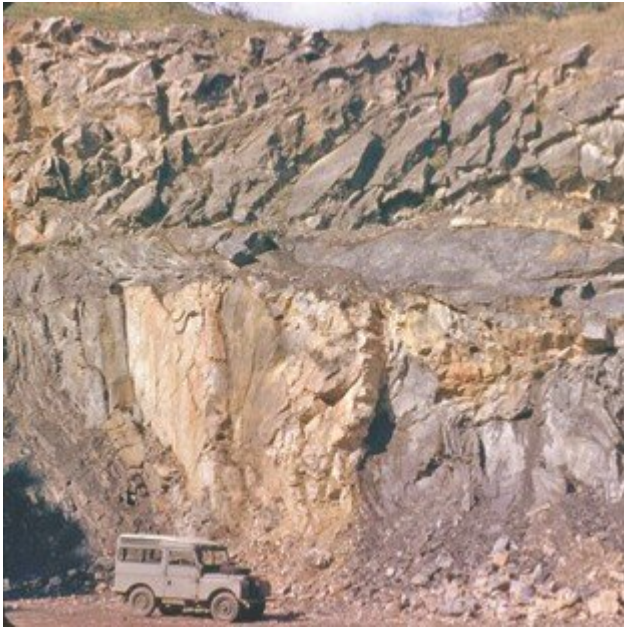
(Figure 38) Map of the old collieries, quarries, tramways, railways and canals around Vobster.9

(Figure 39) The remains of a bank of coking ovens, Vobster Breach Colliery.

(Figure 40) Vobster Breach Colliery workings, displaying contorted and faulted coal seams (named). Adapted from a mine plan in the John Cornwell collection. Vertical sections of workings Vobster Breach Quarry (Approx 1860–1870)



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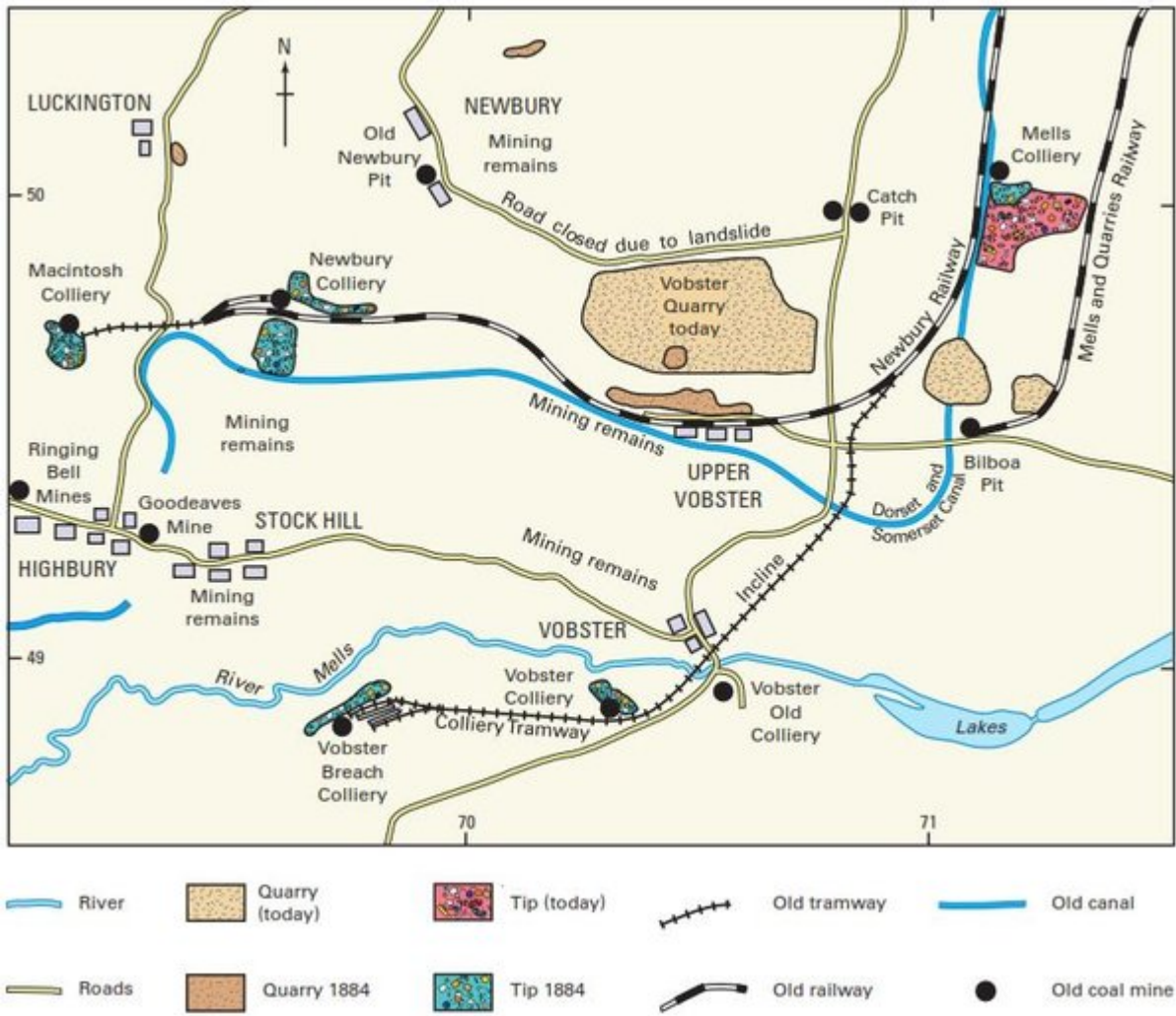
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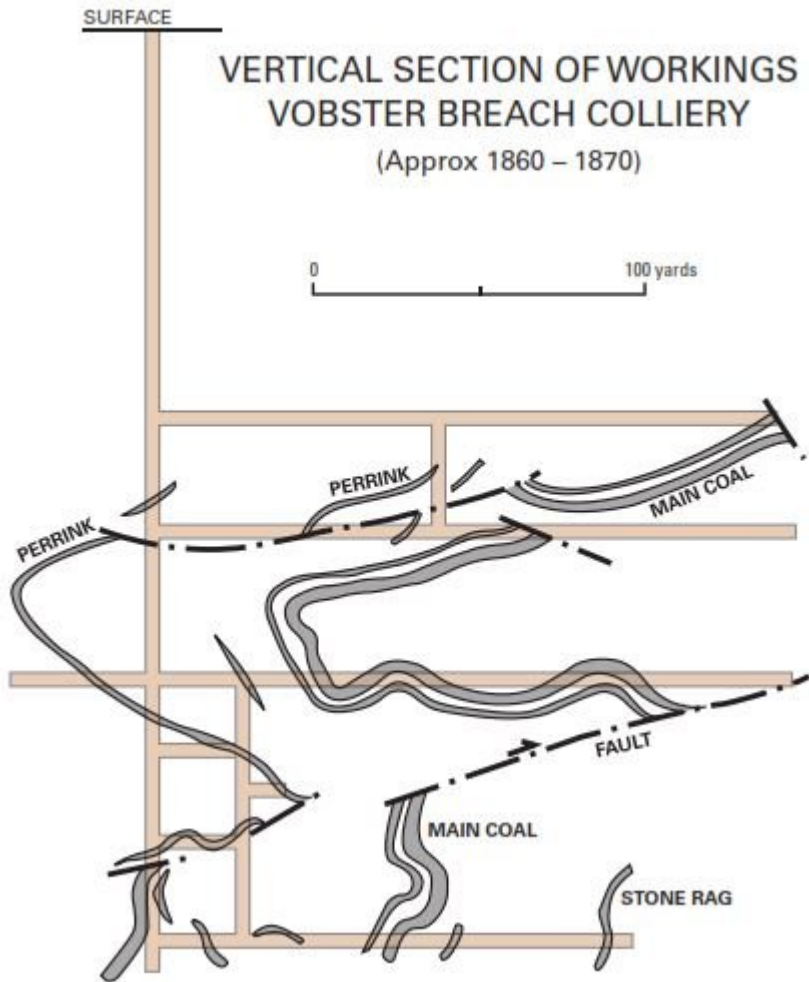
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