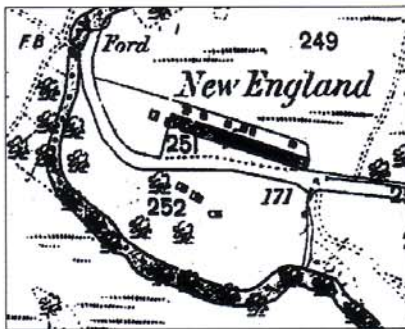


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NEW ENGLAND ENHANCEMENT SCHEME

The Highley Initiative

FINAL REPORT

June 2003



Local Heritage *initiative*



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1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 This report has been prepared by BHWB Environmental Design and Planning, on behalf of the Highley Initiative, to suggest management recommendations and enhancement for the New England site. Following a public exhibition of the proposals, the report will be used to support applications for grants from various bodies.
- 1.2 New England lies in the north western corner of the parish of Highley, in south east Shropshire, near the Severn Valley (see Figure 1). It is owned by Bridgnorth District Council, who support the project.
- 1.3 The project is managed by the Highley Initiative, an active group of local volunteers with a good track record in promoting community projects. These include the 'Seams of Time' sculpture trail and the 'Welcome to Highley' leaflet which contains a guided tour of the parish. The Initiative also has a website, at www.highley.org.uk.
- 1.4 The Highley Initiative has carried out research into the history of the site, identifying features of historic interest which would benefit from management and interpretation. This report, funded by the Local Heritage Initiative, takes forward the work of the Initiative to produce definite recommendations.

2 THE BRIEF

- 2.1 The main aim of the project brief is 'To produce an enhancement and management scheme for New England that will benefit the local community by increasing its awareness of the heritage of the site and its amenity value and that will protect the area's natural and historic environment.'
- 2.2 Additional and important requirements were that the scheme should 'command local acceptability', and that the consultant should work closely with Bridgnorth District Council and the Highley Initiative.

3 SITE DESCRIPTION AND CONTEXT

- 3.1 The New England site covers some 6 hectares (15 acres). It lies on the north western edge of the parish of Highley, bordering onto the parishes of Kinlet to the south, and Billingsley to the west. The village of Highley lies about 1km to the east of the site, and Billingsley lies about 1.5km to the west (See Figures 1 and 2).
- 3.2 The Borle Brook, which is also the parish boundary, forms the southern and western boundary of the site. The valleys of the Borle Brook, and its tributary, the Bind Brook, which joins the Borle Brook at the south eastern corner of the site, are deeply incised with steep banks. Much of the site is therefore steeply sloping. The Borle Brook joins the River Severn south of Highley, at Brooksmouth.
- 3.3 A minor road, Bind Lane, runs through the site from Highley to Billingsley, crossing the Borle Brook at a ford. There is a footbridge close by.
- 3.4 A long distance bridleway known as the Jack Mytton Way runs through the southern part of the site, crossing the Borle Brook via an early 18th century bridge generally known as Donkey Bridge, and continuing south along the eastern bank.

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of the Bind Brook to Rays Farm.

- 3.5 Public footpaths run south east from the Jack Mytton Way along both banks of the Borte Brook towards Borte Mill. A public footpath also runs north from the road, along the eastern edge of the site, leading to the northern part of Highley.
- 3.6 Most of the steepest parts of the Borte and Bind Brook valleys are covered in woodland, and the site itself is entirely overgrown by woodland and scrub.
- 3.7 The New England site has been owned by Bridgnorth District Council since 1947.

4 HISTORY OF THE SITE

- 4.1 The majority of the information in this section has been supplied by the Highley Initiative, with additional interpretation by BHWB. The historic maps referred to have been copied, and are bound into the back of the report. Existing features are also shown on Figure 3.
- 4.2 The wooded nature of the site today is a reflection of the woodland history of the parish as a whole. The *-leah* element in the name Highley means a woodland clearing. The field names of the mid 19th century contain many 'coppice' names, indicative of woodland, and 'leasow', meaning pasture, as well as 'meadow' and 'rough'¹ (See Figure 10). These all suggest a wood pasture landscape, with the woodland managed as coppice with standards. A hedgerow survey carried out by Shropshire Wildlife Trust in 1996 shows a reasonable number of hedges containing more than 7 species per 30m, an indicator of considerable age. There are also many Small Leaved Lime and Wild Service trees marked, especially in the north of the parish, which again are ancient woodland indicators.
- 4.3 The earliest identifiable structure on the New England site, or strictly speaking just adjoining it, is the Donkey (or Horse) Bridge. This is first shown as the "New Bridge" on Jean Roque's map of Shropshire of 1753 (see Historic Maps sheet 1, which includes a view of the bridge). According to a tradition in Kinlet recorded by the vicar, the Rev Blakeway c1800, it was built in 1709² by Sir Lacon William Childe for the benefit of the High Churchman, Henry Sacheverel, who had been prosecuted for sedition by the Whig government with little success. There is no doubt that Childe was politically sympathetic to Sacheverel. Roque does not indicate any road leading to the bridge from the Kinlet side but there are traces of track leading to the main Bridgnorth-Cleobury Road and its branch into Highley. Blakeway confirms this was the route of the road. A Kinlet estate map of 1782 marks this track as the "old road from Bridgnorth". It seems clear, irrespective of the truth of Blakeway's tradition, that the bridge had some economic importance, probably on packhorse routes from the Rea Valley to the River Severn. It now forms part of the Jack Mytton Way.
- 4.4 The bridge is built of stone, with some brick. Over the years, maintenance works have been carried out, particularly to the hand rails. The hand rails are of different design on each side of the bridge, and are out of character with the

¹ Field name map: Highley parish, from 1839 Tithe map; Field name map: Billingsley parish, from 1837 Tithe map; Field name map: Kinlet parish, from 1841 Tithe map. Shropshire Record Office.

² Since Sacheverel's trial was 1710, not 1709 as Blakeway implies, it is possible that the date of the bridge is a little later (Source: David Poyner pers. comm.). Blakeway's story is that after the trial, Sacheverel was given a new benefice at Selattyn in North Shropshire and that brought him to Kinlet, which led to the building of the bridge. Source: Trans Shrop Arch Soc, 3rd Series, Vol 8, 1908, pp83-150: *Notes on Kinlet*, Mrs Baldwin Childe.

robust but elegant design of the bridge itself.

- 4.5 The next map to show the Highley area in any detail is Robert Baugh's map of Shropshire of 1808 (see Historic Maps sheet 1). This does not identify New England or the Donkey Bridge, but it does show that coal mining and iron working were taking place in the area: coal pits and a furnace are marked at Billingsley; and it is the presence and working of coal in the area that dominates the history of New England from the mid 18th century onward. The ownership and use of the site is a complicated story, involving a number of bankruptcies and different companies and individuals.
- 4.6 In the 1790s coal and ironstone mines were opened up in Billingsley by Messrs Johnson & Co., a consortium of Newcastle-upon-Tyne based business men. In 1796/7 they constructed a plateway, which ran through the New England site, from the River Severn at Brooksmouth, south of Highley, to their works in Billingsley (centred on SO713840). This was later associated with a blast furnace, owned by Messrs Pemberton and Stokes, ironmasters of Oldswinford.
- 4.7 Part of the route of the plateway, or tramway, can still be seen as it passes through the site. The eastern section, east of the Jack Mytton Way, is now a public footpath. From east to west, the plateway runs first in a cutting and then on a shelf cut above the Borle Brook. A culvert is visible as it crosses a dry ravine. The route has then been washed away, and is confused by the remains of later buildings and dense scrub. However where it crosses the Borle Brook the bridge abutments are visible on either bank, and to the west the course of a self-acting incline which took it out of the Borle Valley towards Billingsley is marked by an embankment. The entire route of the plateway can be traced back to Brooksmouth where a house built for the managing partner remains. The remains of the mines and the blast furnace are visible in Billingsley.
- 4.8 The Surveyors' draft for the first Ordnance Survey (OS) map for the area, dated 1815, shows (rather faintly) the line of the plateway (see Historic Maps sheet 1). It may already have fallen into disuse by the time of the survey, due to the series of events outlined in the following paragraphs.
- 4.9 At the heart of the Billingsley partnership were George Johnson, a well known colliery viewer from Newcastle and his brother-in-law, Dr Henry Gray McNab, a prominent advocate for the north-east colliery owners. The early partners also included William Chapman, a famous Newcastle engineer and pioneer of railways. By 1801 Chapman had left the partnership but Thomas Telford had now joined. The mines in Billingsley lay on the land of his patron, the Shrewsbury MP, Sir William Pulteney. Unfortunately the partnership went bankrupt in 1801 and shortly afterwards MacNab absconded to France with the books.
- 4.10 The mines and the New England estate were sold at auction to Messrs Leeke, Rigby and Morris. In 1807/8 they built two rows of stone cottages, at right angles to each other. These cottages can just be made out on the 1815 map; they are clearly shown on the 1839 Tithe Map for Highley (not reproduced here).
- 4.11 By 1811 the mines and blast furnace at Billingsley as well as New England were all owned by George Stokes of Oldswinford, an ironmaster, but shortly afterwards he went bankrupt. After a Chancery case, New England was sold to William Hughes in 1818, who owned a colliery at Stanley, on the banks of the Severn in Highley. Hughes went bankrupt in the mid 1820s after Stanley Colliery failed and the estate was re-auctioned in 1829 when it was purchased by Thomas Porter. a

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maltster who owned a near-by inn at Little Hill (now the "Malt Shovel")³. Porter still owned the estate at the time of the 1838 tithe survey, but it was subsequently acquired by William Easthope, who owned Hazelwell's Farm in the north of Highley, and then, in 1851, by Edwin Paul Evans⁴. In 1868 it was sold to Samuel Du Pre, the vicar of Highley who already owned most of the north-east of the village, in whose hands the estate remained until 1915. By 1868 only one row of cottages was still standing.

- 4.12 Coal mining resumed at Billingsley in the early 1870s. In 1880 work was started by Messrs Drewitt & Pickering, on behalf of the Severn Valley Colliery Company, on a railway from the Severn Valley in Kinlet to Billingsley, following the southern bank of the Borle Brook through Kinlet and Billingsley. The earthworks reached just as far the Kinlet parish boundary, opposite New England but the Severn Valley Colliery Company than ran into financial problems and eventually was wound up. Both the 1881/2 and 1902 OS maps (see Historic Maps sheets 2 and 3) show the railway embankment within Kinlet parish, and stopping at the Bind Brook. The later map also marks the site of an 'Old Quarry' to the west of Bind Brook, possibly opened for the construction of the railway.
- 4.13 In 1910 a new company, the Billingsley Colliery Company, revived the idea of a rail link to Billingsley Colliery. Initially this was to come from the west, from the Cleobury Mortimer and Ditton Priors Light Railway but when work began in 1911 it had been modified to run from the Severn Valley along the Borle Brook in Kinlet (following the 1880 line) and then following Bind Brook to Prior's Moor in Billingsley. An office for the contractors, Messrs Caffin & Co., was built at New England and close by a stone quarry was opened, under the management of a Mr Trentham. The late Eric Walford (b c1905), who was born at New England, son of Oscar Walford, remembered: "There was a quarry down there and I'm just old enough to remember the crusher going".
- 4.14 At New England two bridges were built as part of the head-shunt needed to direct the line to Prior's Moor. The line was finished in 1913. It was intended to continue up the Borle Brook to a new sinking at the Hook in Billingsley but the First World War stopped this. The late Len Giles (b1902) recalled the Billingsley line being built: "The navvies were rough; Blackwell and Beady they called two of them. They lodged in a hut down Borle Mill, in a field by the cottage. Eddie Evans could have told you a tale or two about them [he lived at Borle Mill]. They threw one of their lot over the bridge into the brook once. We got rides in the empty wagons once the railway was built; from Borle Mill to New England. But not any further."
- 4.15 Although outside the site, the bridges are of historic interest. The bridges along this line were substantial stone structures, as illustrated in a 1930s photograph of another bridge outside the study area, now demolished (see Historic Photos sheet 2, Figure 13). One of the bridges near New England is still standing, though with some holes apparent in the structure (see View 28 on Figure 20). The other, which was probably more vulnerable because of its location nearer the junction of the two brooks, has fallen into the water (see View 27 on Figure 20).
- 4.16 Billingsley Colliery was not a success; it was sold in 1915 to the Highley Mining Company and was closed in 1921. However, the railway remained until 1937, taking coal from Kinlet Colliery to a landsale wharf at Prior's Moor operated by the Burwarton Coal and Trading Company.

³ PRO C13/1883/21

⁴ Woodhill deeds, in private hands

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- 4.17 In 1913 the Billingsley Colliery Company took out a lease of land for a settling tank and filter bed for the treatment of sewage from their building site in Highley (occupied by Clee View). The site was just north of the route of the plateway. The area of land was very small, and the scheme seems to have been a failure, or at least very slow to get working, as it was reported in the Kidderminster Times in 1915 that earth closets were to be replaced with water closets, implying that the sewage works was not functioning by that time.
- 4.18 In 1915 the Company purchased the land around the sewerage works and also New England Cottages, apparently for an extension to the works, to cope with a larger housing development in Highley, known as Garden Village. Later in that year the Billingsley Colliery Company sold out to the Highley Mining Company, who continued to have problems with the construction and functioning of the works. It seems likely that the lower site superseded the upper works, which had never been satisfactory, and that they were functioning by 1917/18, by which time the residents had been moved out of New England Cottages, and the cottages had been demolished.
- 4.19 The upper works are not shown on any OS maps, but remains of the brick structures and platforms can still be seen (see Views 21-25 on Figures 19 and 20). An old tramway rail appears to have been used as the support for some kind of sprinkler.
- 4.20 Structures in the lower works are shown on the 1954 OS map (see Figure 10, Historic Maps Sheet 4), and on a 1947 map showing the transfer of the sewage works to Bridgnorth District Council the area is shown as fenced off (see Figure 11, Historic Maps Sheet 5). By 1959 the works had been abandoned and replaced by a modern facility elsewhere in the parish. The remains of stone filter beds can still be made out between the plateway and the Brook, on the only relatively flat part of the site.
- 4.21 The inhabitants of the New England cottages, now demolished, but with some foundations still visible, can be traced through documents such as census records, and also through the memories of Highley people. A summary of the 19th century census information for the cottages is shown in the table below.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF CENSUS RETURNS 1841-1901

Date	Houses	Occupants	Average	Lodgers	Occupations
1841	6	26	3.7	0	3 labourers 1 collier 1 shoemaker 1 mason 1 widow
1851	5	19	3.7	0	4 labourers 1 collier
1861	6	23	3.8	2	5 labourers 1 collier 1 widow 1 sawyer
1871	9	37	4.1	2	9 labourers 6 colliers 1 shoemaker 1 mason 1 widow 1 grocer 1 charwoman