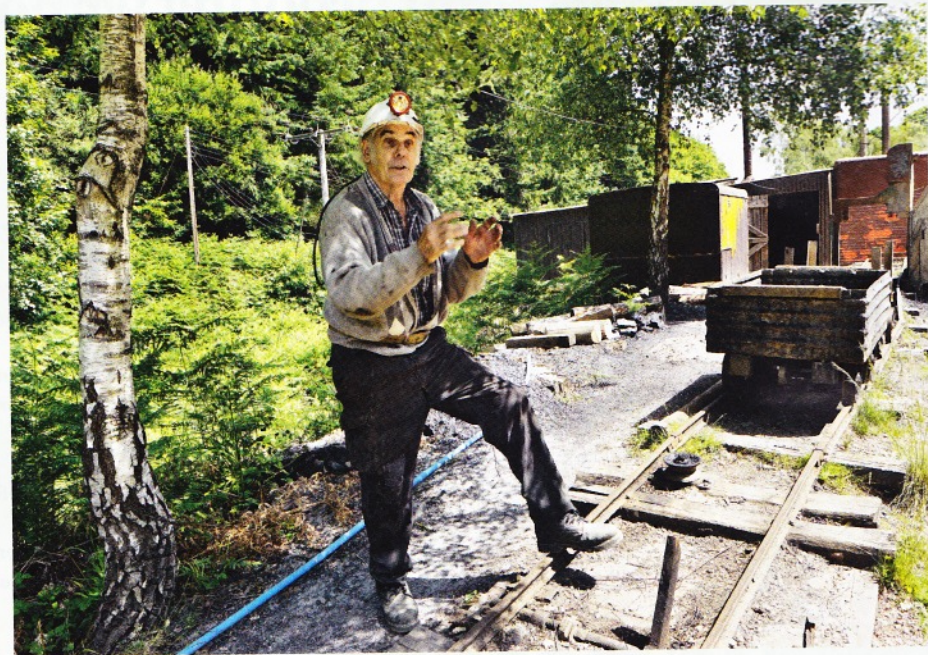


**THIS PAGE** Robin works at the coalface at the end of the adit (the long slope down from the entrance) in Hopewell Colliery, in the heart of the Forest of Dean (**TOP RIGHT**) **BOTTOM RIGHT** Once above ground, Robin uses a winch powered by an old Morris Marina car engine to pull the tubs to the surface



## my country life

### the free miner

# The free miner

Meet **Robin Morgan**, a Forest of Dean free miner who has been digging for coal for more than 60 years

Words: Anthony Burton Photos: Rob Scott

**T**he Forest of Dean, between the Rivers Wye and Severn, is one of the most beautiful areas of woodland in Britain. So it is hard to believe that, not so many years ago, there were more than 10,000 men here working underground, extracting coal and iron ore.

Robin Morgan was one of those men, and although the last of the big collieries closed in 1965, he is still mining because he has no need to look for an employer: he has the right to own or even start a mine of his own. He is a free miner, part of a tradition that stretches back for hundreds of years.

The rights of the miners were given the royal approval by Edward I in the 13th century as a reward, it is said, for their help in the taking of Berwick-upon-Tweed from the Scots, where they used their expertise to undermine the defences. Even then, the document noted that rights to mine here had existed since "Tyme out of minde".

These rights were later confirmed by Act of Parliament and the rules are simple: any man can be a free miner provided he was born in the Hundred of St Briavels and has worked underground for a year and a day.

**"I took time off school to work with my brothers when I was 13. Since then I've always had a mine"**

Robin Morgan certainly qualifies: "I took time off school to work with my brothers when I was just 13." He never thought of doing anything else and says: "I've always had a mine." Now in his 70s, he has been owner of his present mine, Hopewell Colliery, for 18 years.

Like all the surviving mines worked in the Forest of Dean, Hopewell Colliery is a drift mine – you make your way underground down a tunnel, rather than being lowered down a shaft. It is a steep

descent to the coalface, and any visitor will soon discover that a colliery is a complex system of underground roads.

The earliest parts of the mine date back

to the 1820s and some are hewn out of the solid rock, one of which has a clear stream running down a side of the tunnel. Robin remembers when they used to use it for washing at the end of the day – their version of pithead baths. He makes his way easily and comfortably down the incline, while I soon find out just why you need a hard hat as head and roof beams come together all too often. But if you think these roads are uncomfortable, the actual

working area at the seam 61m (200ft) below ground seems impossibly cramped.

To get at the coal, Robin has to blast the rock with gelignite, but never removes any more than is necessary – leaving just enough space in which to fit the automatic cutter that carves out the coal. The seam in this part of the mine is less than 1m (3ft) high and once the cutter has done its work, the coal has to be shovelled away by hand, which means Robin has to lie on his side on the slimy clay floor to do the work. But he remembers even worse places than this. His son was once working with him in a narrow seam. "He took a break and laid down on his back to have a smoke – there is no explosive gas in the local mines – and the tip of the cigarette touched the roof."

The coal is loaded into a cart or 'dram', which is hauled to the surface by a cable. Free miners have to be ingenious. The winding drum is Edwardian and power is supplied by a Morris Marina car engine that Robin bought 34 years ago.

### Uncertain future

Robin is passionate about preserving the mining heritage of the forest, and has opened part of the colliery as a museum. "I don't make any money out of it – I have to keep cutting coal to pay for it [which he sells locally]." But will there be free miners in the future? The local maternity hospital was closed recently, so unless babies are born at home they will never qualify. One thing, however, is certain: Robin himself will carry on the proud tradition. "I can't imagine not mining – wouldn't know what to do with myself."

### More info

Hopewell Colliery Museum, Cannop Hill, Coleford, Gloucestershire. Open daily Mar-Oct, 10am-4pm. Adults £3, children £2. ☎ 01594 810706

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