

A Postscript to the Priston 'Coal Adventure', 1792-94

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As is often the case, interesting additional material immediately came to light following the publication of the 'Priston Coal Adventure' in Volume 25 of *BIAS Journal*, in this instance from the diaries of John Skinner, *Journal of a Somerset Rector, 1803-34*. As Rector of Camerton, Skinner was much involved with the coalworks there and made frequent, though generally disapproving, reference in his diaries to the lives of the colliers. It can now be seen that Aaron Horler, underground bailiff at the Priston coalworks, was subsequently employed in the Camerton pits, where he met his death some nine years later under circumstances which are best described in Skinner's own words:

'July 1803 ...Aaron Horler, another collier, was killed in a very extraordinary manner. He had been drinking at the public house, whence, after behaving in a violent manner by dancing on the tables and stools, etc., and insulting some of his associates there assembled, he walked to the Lower Pit and, it is supposed, endeavoured to slide down the rope (by which the coal is hauled) to the bottom; but going too quick, not being able to retain his hold, he fell down many fathoms and was dashed to pieces, his hands being much burnt by the velocity with which the rope passed through them before he let go his hold. A person going down the pit about ten o'clock to feed the asses kept under-ground was presented with this horrid spectacle on his descent, and was so much frightened as not to recover him self for some time'.

The Skinner diaries also provide a clue to the identity of John Lewton of Camerton who carried out the survey of the Priston coalworks in 1840. Lewton appears to have been the bailiff or 'overlooker' of the Camerton coalworks, casually mentioned by Skinner when he was involved in preventing an outbreak of cholera among the colliers during the epidemic of 1832. He may have been an educated man, and ran an evening school for boys at his house which apparently still stands at Redhill. His involvement with the Priston coal interests may not have been without risk. The Camerton pits were then the nearest coalworks to Bath or, as it was said, '*Camerton Company is the first in Land and Water*'. However, the coal reserves of the Old Pit were approaching exhaustion, while the New Pit coal was too friable to be carried by road and had to be transported via the Somerset Coal Canal, so that any competition from Priston would have been viewed as a very serious threat. Their anxiety may have been somewhat relieved in 1847 when they applied to the lord of Camerton, apparently successfully, to extend the Old Pit workings northward beyond the Tunley Road under his land known as Tunley Farm. Nevertheless, this remained a sensitive issue and Lewton's correspondence with the Vaughan-Jenkins' of Priston was still considered confidential when rediscovered by his nephew in 1882.