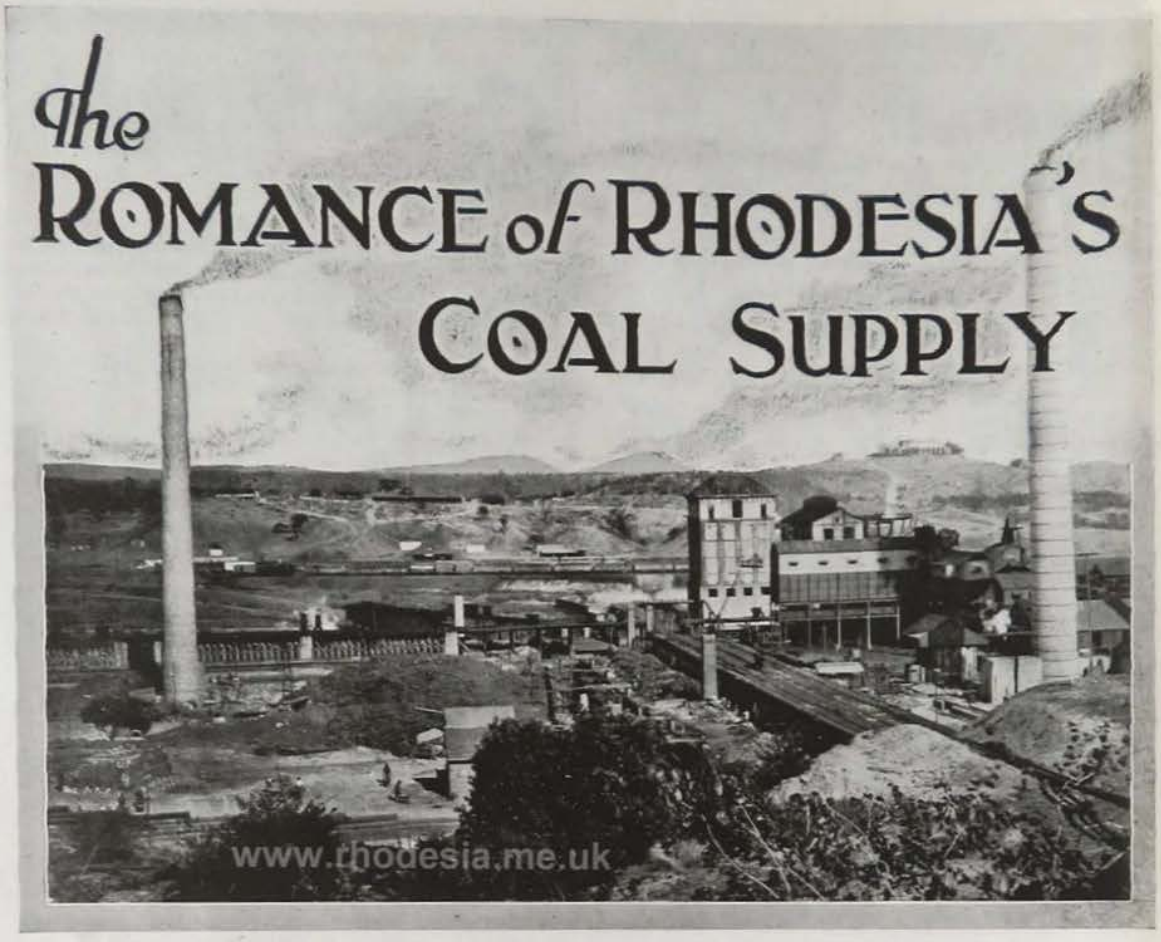
The ROMANCE of RHODESIA'S COAL SUPPLY



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THE Wankie Coalfield has been so much written up recently that the main facts in connection with the place and its business are well known to the reading public, so instead of writing an article bringing the information already given up to date, I propose to treat the subject in a way which has probably not been done before and detail some of the struggles and trials the concern went through in a persistent effort to make good before it actually succeeded.

In Cecil Rhodes' idea of a Cape-to-Cairo railway, the scheme was to get North in as direct a line as possible. Mr. Rhodes was also well enough aware that the country would be under a handicap if it did not possess and develop a good supply of coal, and in the furtherance of this idea, prospectors were sent out along the proposed railway route to the North. The results got by these prospectors were very disappointing. Giese pegged coal in the Wankie area in 1893, and handed over the samples taken on the six blocks of claims pegged, to Mr. P. B. S. Wrey (now Sir Bourchier Wrey), then General Manager of the Mashonaland Agency. On analysis this coal was shown to be very much superior to anything already exposed. The site of the claims pegged by Giese is 4 miles to the west of the present Colliery. In a conference between Mr. Rhodes, Dr. Jameson and Mr. Wrey, the idea of a direct railway to the North was put on one side in favour of a deviation to the North through Wankie and Victoria Falls in order to tap the best coal available and cater for the tourist traffic to Victoria Falls which was sure to eventuate. Preliminary exploration and development work was done by the Mashonaland Agency, and a company named the Wankie (Rhodesia) Coal, Railway and Exploration Company was floated to take over the concern on April 22nd, 1899.

Due to Mr. Rhodes' influence, who was insistent that a Colliery able to supply a large amount of coal should be open and equipped against the arrival of the railway, a large amount of money was spent—rather needlessly as it turned out—in forwarding stores and machinery by ox wagon to the mine at enormous expense, with this aim in view. This scheme exhausted the capital resources of the Company and when the railway did arrive the exchequer was empty and trade results were very disappointing. Strict economy had to be exercised in that the business offering was quite inadequate to give a return on the money invested and I am sure the long suffering shareholders would have been quite prepared to sell out lock, stock and barrel at that time for less money than it has since cost the Company to instal a regular and sufficient water supply.

It might be interesting to chronicle how I came to the Colliery in 1908. I had some time previously applied for a position in any capacity, but my application was not successful. I came to Rhodesia in 1896 and by 1908 my name was well known in gold mining circles. It was due to a difference of opinion with Mr. A. H. Ackerman, the then Consulting Engineer of the British South Africa Company, that the information came to light concerning my early mining training in connection with coal in Scotland. The late Mr. H. Wilson Fox—at that time a Director of the Colliery Company—was sucessful in arranging a contract with the Cape Government Railways to supply 4,000 tons of coal per month at Mafeking. This addition to sales brought the Colliery output up to between 8,000 and 10,000 tons per month (the present output occasionally exceeds 100,000 tons per month). The B.S.A. Company guaranteed this contract on behalf of the Colliery Company, but due to adverse circumstances, the Colliery could not fulfil the contract, with the result that the B.S.A. Company sent their engineer to find out what was wrong. The nett result

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of this action was that Mr. J. A. Stevens, the then local manager of the B.S.A. Company, and Mr. Ackerman formed a local Board with myself as General Manager. The local Board dissolved a few months later.

Wankie had a bad reputation, and before coming I was well warned regarding the climate and the lawless state of the inhabitants, each of whom was reputed to take a bottle of whisky on shift with him. There was certainly far too much drinking, but the population was law abiding and rather apathetic. Living conditions were bad and the bottles reputed to contain whisky were filled with boiled water or tea. The one and only sport of the camp was to meet the passenger trains passing through Wankie Station to regale the passengers—mostly tourists—with tales of the wild life, wild animals and how many people were buried each day. Probably this circumstance is responsible for the exaggerated ideas in regard to Wankie and its climate which for many years filled the public mind.

CONTRACTS NOT CARRIED OUT.

The failure of the Colliery to fulfil its contracts was put down to boiler trouble. On getting down to bedrock the cause of the trouble was easily ascertainable in the lack of a suitable water supply. Apart from the existence of coal Wankie has no redeeming feature to recommend it. The altitude is low, the climate is hot and everything that Wankie has to-day has been artificially created. It was found that the water got from the coal measures, unless found in springs or pools in the river courses, which are few and far between, is acid and unfit for human consumption. In 1908 the only source of domestic water was a well (since filled in) just outside the coal outcrop. This gave water, which although not perfect, was not so bad as the mine water. The capacity of this well was 2,000 gallons per day, and water from this source was sold at 10s. per water-cart load with lesser charges for smaller quantities.

The author of this article, Mr. A. R. Thomson J.P. M.I.M.E., who has just completed 20 years service at Wankie during which period not only has considerable progress been made at the Colliery itself, but great improvements have been made in the Township. Since the grant of Responsible Government Mr. Thomson has represented Wankie and district in the House of Assembly.

The mine was flooded, and the only place where coal could be loaded and sent to the surface was under water, to the extent that the natives had to dive in order to couple up the coal tubs. Due to boiler troubles it was a common sight to see the place at a standstill and strings of boys with paraffin tins carrying water from the mine to refill the boilers. Shortly after arrival I hit on an idea which helped matters considerably by discarding the accumulation of water and taking water for boiler purposes from the water coming freshly off the strata. This water proved less acid than the accumulation and gave the boilers a better chance, but as things progressed the Colliery was able to borrow £7,000 to instal a pump on the Deka River with a 5½ mile pipe-line connecting this to the Colliery to obtain water from the pools, described by the oldest inhabitant as never failing. It so happened that three weeks' pumping drained these never failing pools and then followed a long period of well sinking, dam building, etc., in an endeavour to eke out a sufficient supply of fresh water. The increasing wants of the place made it evident that this method of supply would shortly be insufficient and thoughts were directed to the Zambesi River 28 miles away. In investigating the Water-from-Zambesi scheme, hot springs giving 25,000 gallons of water per hour were found in the bed of the Deka River in difficult country 10¼ miles from the Colliery and this up to the present has been sufficient for the Colliery's requirements in addition to which it supplies the wants of the railways both at Wankie and Thomson Junction.

THE SALVATION OF THE PLACE.

The procuring of good fresh water was the salvation of the place. In addition to eliminating troubles with plant it added greatly to the amenities of Camp life and in recent years it has always been possible to have a bath in Wankie when one felt like it which is more than can be said of places like Bulawayo and Salisbury.

It was now very evident that the compressed air plant was wholly inadequate to deal with development and the acetylene gas plant installed for lighting seldom worked so thoughts were directed to electricity. I had six months' correspondence with my Board debating the question as to whether a 50 or a 75 K.W. plant should be installed, but to the credit of the Wankie Board, who are never mean or stingy, provided they realise the item asked for is required, they ultimately agreed to the purchase of a 200 K.W. set. It is interesting to chronicle that at the present time we are completing arrangements in a new Power Station to contain 7,500 K.W.

The Mine was laid out on sound lines, but it took the main haulage twenty minutes to do what is now done in four minutes and pending electricity being installed, haulage arrangements set up certain difficulties. In dewatering the Mine a Stanley Header machine was salved. This was cleaned up and the cutting disc replaced by a sheave wheel and this improvised haulage driven by compressed air served the purpose on the West Slant for nearly a year, it being the one and only haulage in existence at that time. There are now 15 electrically operated haulages driving 15¾ miles of endless rope underground.

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BENEFIT TO THE COLONY.

Very few people realise the immense benefit the Colliery was to Rhodesia at a time when things were in the melting pot about 1909. At the moment the papers are chronicling the fact that the railway from Lobito Bay to link up with the Belgian system will be completed in about two years from now. In 1909 it was the considered opinion of many people that the Lobito Bay line would have to be built at once to provide an outlet for copper and for the importation of fuel for the smelters. The linking up of the Rhodesia railway system with the Belgian railway system by the Katanga Junction railway (an enterprise of Robert Williams and Co.) as the quickest means by which to get fuel and machinery to the Congo made it possible to investigate Wankie as a source of fuel supply for the Belgian Congo Mines. The distance from Wankie to Elisabethville is 735 miles—a shorter distance than from Lobito Bay to Elisabethville. Wankie fuel was therefore a more attractive business proposition than imported fuel, provided it was suitable. The questions then debated were: had the Mines in the Belgian Congo the quantity of Copper they were supposed to have, and, if so, had Wankie the quantity and quality of fuel to meet the requirements of the industry? Previous to my arrival at Wankie two small beehive coke ovens were built against and connected to the boiler chimney stack and in these ovens 250 tons of coke were manufactured to find out whether the coal would coke on a commercial scale and, if so, whether the coke was suitable for copper smelting. It took nearly three months to manufacture this 250 tons in that there were no conveniences for crushing or cleaning coal to help matters. This coke proved very satisfactory and the Union Miniere Company and the Wankie Colliery Company got to business. The Union Miniere Company in the agreement concluded agreed to help the Colliery Company financially in the enterprise. The ovens built were designed by myself and constructed under the supervision of the late Caesar Catella, a man well known to the older generation of Wankieites. Those ovens have long since been swept away to make room for ovens of the Coppee Retort type which are more efficient and cheaper to operate than Beehive ovens, but the memory of the struggles in getting the first Beehive Plant to work on very little money still gives the keen gratification of achievement. At that time the Colliery was only able to market large coal in Southern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia customers were very particular in this respect. The under-sized coal made in mining had to be dumped as nobody would accept it even at the low price of 2s. 6d. per ton. Cleaning and sorting plant for small coal, primarily installed in connection with coking, is now in existence and to-day there is keen competition for the class of fuel amongst owners of up-to-date steam plants which at that time was thrown away. The trade in coke with the Belgian Congo was a great help to the Wankie Company in that the coke is manufactured from coal which was previously unsaleable.

STILL A LOT OF COAL AT WANKIE.

Much more might be written about the early struggles of the Company but space forbids. Wankie Colliery is looked on at the present time as a sound commercial concern which has been a great help to Rhodesia in many ways, not the least of which is the distribution of money in the country obtained from the extensive trade with the Belgian Congo. There are, of course, others who hold a different opinion and condemn it as a capitalistic enterprise which has done the country no good. The type of mind which condemns the enterprise usually puts forward the suggestion that no special grant should have been given, and that the coal should have been pegged by the ordinary prospector in the usual way. All I can say is that there is a lot of coal in Wankie outside the Special Grant which is open for locating and pegging to-day and there is no need to envy the Wankie Colliery Company: it is open for these people to copy what has been done by the Wankie Company. Had the coalfield been open to ordinary pegging only, the position to-day would not have been any better than it was in 1908 in that the business arrangements with big guarantees would probably not have been effected. As an example of coal mining in small areas I would point to India where there are vast deposits of coal held by small owners who will not co-operate, with the result that India has to import coal to-day which could easily be supplied by itself if it were possible to consolidate the position by buying out the small owners and working on a large commercial scale. At the present time the only coal enterprises in India which are doing any good are where the suggestion I make has been given effect to.

Wankie Fitters Shop and Power House on right corner in 1903; just prior to the arrival of the Railway.

If this article is written in an egotistical strain I crave the readers' indulgence. It is not written for self advertisement, but rather to give the public some idea of the difficulties and troubles this Company had in getting into its stride. My duties at Wankie have been light at times, due to the excellent support given by a capable and loyal staff. Sir Edmund Davis, who found the money to start the place in the first instance, is Chairman and Managing Director, and still guides the destinies of the Company. On the other side there are at least two men on the place who were here when I took over the management over twenty years ago, viz., Tommy Large who still skippers the screening plant at No. 1 Colliery (except for the time he spent doing his duty in France) and Bill Johnstone, foreman mason, who with several spells off has been at Wankie since before my time.

In conclusion, I can only say that the coal reserves at Wankie are immense. Competing collieries may arise in the future, but it is questionable if anyone now living will see the colliery enterprise, whose early struggles I have attempted to detail, reach the zenith of its operations.

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