

CRASH GOES A MILLION-POUND DREAM

At exactly four minutes to four on Wednesday afternoon an earth-shaking crash marked the end of a million-pound dream that once had the Fens in the grip of oil fever.

It was a dream that excited the imagination of thousands of local folk who hoped to cash in on the fact that there was black gold in "them thar Fens."

It all started at the end of World War One when deposits of shale - a mineral from which the full range of oil can be produced - was found on the outskirts of Setch, a few miles from Downham Market and no more than 12 miles as the crow flies from Wisbech.

Rich Deposit

In less than no time Setch took on the appearance of a Western Boom town - except that the locals did not tote six-shooters.

Money poured into the coffers of the English Oil-fields Company, a public company - and equipment poured into Setch. First indications were that this would be the richest shale deposit to be struck.

And all this called for more labour than was available in Setch, so into the village came men from Downham Market, King's Lynn, Wisbech and all the villagers between. There was big money to be earned.

In those days there were hundreds of men at work here, recalled Arthur Ransome, whose first home in the village was a wooden house erected by the company - one of the scores put up to accommodate married families.

A failure

Mr. Ransom, a clerk for a subsidiary company, was only a boy when the oil boom was on: "I came here with my family when my father got a job as an electrician. The place was certainly different then", he said.

Different, because the boom did not last. There was shale dug by the hundreds of tons from the quarries by local men, but when the oil was extracted by heat it was found to be impregnated with sulphur.

Said the manager, Mr. H. Burnett, looking across the now deserted fields: "It was found that sulphur free oil could not be produced as a commercial proposition".

So bit by bit the plant was removed, hundreds of acres of land that had sprouted derricks were given back to more normal crops. The wooden houses disappeared, and with them many of the families who had "been in the money" while the boom lasted.

Just before, and all through the war, the sulphur that had been responsible for the slump became the means of maintaining some activity. It provided ~~some~~ the base for a medicinal product used to combat skin complaints.

Company Folded

During those years the retorts belched out clouds of black smoke - "a right old pong it was too", commented one villager.

But from the 160ft chimney which towered above the flat countryside for 40 years, there was never one wisp of smoke. Built for the steam power house that was never built, it remained until Wednesday a reminder of a dream that was never realised.

Soon after the war cheaper imports from the Continent put an end to the limited production at Setch. In 1953 the last of the derricks was dismantled. Last year the English Oilfields Company went into voluntary liquidation.

But still the landmark stood an inescapable memorial to what might have been and a handy landmark for locals a bit hazy in their bearing after a night out.

Then on Wednesday, some thirty or forty villagers who had turned up to be in at the death watched for hours as the steeplejack's drill bit deeper into the base. From nearby houses mothers brought small children to watch.

It swayed, faltered - then down it came, a quarter of a million bricks were transformed into a vast pile of rubble.

And a million pound dream was finally shattered.

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Your ref

Our ref

Date 25 June 1974

Dear Mr Lewis

Further to our conversation on Friday last concerning the old oil shale workings at Setch I visited the waterlogged pit on your company's property. It was possible from the spoil to confirm that this is indeed the opencast working shown in the 1920 photographs, although no section is now visible.

I should therefore like to apply to your company for permission to re-excavate part of the old working face in order to obtain samples for chemical analysis. These analyses would form a small part of a general study being made by this Institute of the variations in kerogen content of the Kimmeridge Clay of southern England. Kerogen is an organic material which, on retorting, yields hydrocarbons and which has led to the somewhat misleading term 'oil shale' being applied to these clays.

As you know, large sums of money were spent during and shortly after the First World War in trying to find ways of obtaining oil from the clays of the Setch area. Very little shale was actually dug, most of the money being spent on exploratory boreholes and experimental retorts. Judging by the size of the pit on your property and by the amount of waste material left behind, it is unlikely that more than a few hundred tons of shale were dug during the whole active period of exploration (from about 1916 to 1935). The descriptions of the workings that we have in our records are very confusing and in part contradictory. There is good reason to believe that many of the statements made at the time of exploration about the nature and thickness of the kerogen-rich horizons are grossly exaggerated, but without having carefully collected samples from the old workings it is impossible to confirm this.

If permission were granted to re-excavate part of the workings we would of course do the work at a time convenient to yourselves and your tenant and would reinstate the ground to your satisfaction. I estimate that the excavations could be made and backfilled within a working day. We would of course supply your company with a copy of the report which will include the analyses of samples collected from your property.

Yours sincerely

R. Gallois

R GALLOIS
for the Director