

Coal for locomotives may no longer be mined in Britain by 2022 or shortly afterwards. Once remaining coal reserves in current sites have been extracted and stocks have been exhausted, we could be entirely reliant upon imports by the end of the decade.

That means British locomotives will not burn British coal for the first time in over 200 years. When Richard Trevithick's Pen-y-darren locomotive made its pioneering journey in February 1804 near Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales – in the heart of one of Britain's biggest coalfields – it cemented the binding and lasting relationship between coal and railways. The steam locomotive was born from the coal industry, and until the end of standard gauge BR steam in 1968, coal was crucial to railways' existence, not only powering trains to all four corners of the country but comprising the bulk of railways' traffic and revenue.

Now it seems that relationship is drawing to a close. Unless the Government grants planning permission for the creation of new mines, coal mining on any significant scale in Britain will cease within two years. In addition to the threat posed by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs' plan to phase out the sale of coal for domestic use – plus an increasing nationwide desire to dispense with coal altogether and embrace cleaner alternatives – this poses a very serious challenge to preservation's future. And it's a problem that cannot be easily overcome.

THE FINAL VOID

Have you ever wondered where coal comes from?

More specifically, have you ever wondered how this vital fuel gets from hundreds of feet below the ground and into the fireboxes of your favourite locomotives?

Coal is such an omnipresent part of railway furniture that we arguably take it for granted. Besides, does it matter where coal comes from, or how it gets there? Coal is coal, isn't it?

To find out, *Steam Railway* went to Shotton surface mine in Northumberland, approximately nine miles north of Newcastle-upon-Tyne city centre.

It is one of three pits owned and operated by The Banks Group, and is the largest surface coal mine in England, bordered by the major A1 road to the west and the East Coast Main Line to the east. More importantly for us, however, it is one of just three pits – in addition to Hargreaves' House of Water pit in Ayrshire and Merthyr (South Wales) Ltd's Ffos-y-Fran pit near Merthyr Tydfil – that supplies the preservation industry.

It won't for much longer, however. Shotton is coming towards the end of its operational life. Coal extraction is currently concentrated in the 390-foot-deep pit fittingly dubbed by the miners as 'the final void', and even this is already in the process of being filled in. By May of this year, all the coal will have been mined at Shotton and within a couple of years there will be scarcely any evidence there was a mine here – such are the lengths to which Banks goes to restore its sites once their useful days are over.

Normally, the miners would move on to a new site and carry on digging out coal. Compared to deep mines, surface mines like Shotton have more limited working

☛ Coal's golden age. Lines of private-owner coal wagons in the Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway's coal storage sidings at Goole Docks on April 24 1911. Two years later, Britain would produce a record 287 million tonnes of coal. GETTY IMAGES/SSPL

GOING underground

FOCUS ON COAL

Britain's coal mining industry is under threat. **THOMAS BRIGHT** visits one of the country's last remaining opencast pits to discover what the future holds for this vital resource.