

Freeminers

Background

Since the 14th century freeminers have had the right to mine anywhere within the Forest of Dean. Under the terms of a royal decree, any man over 21 born within the hundred of St Briavels who has worked a year and a day underground can become a freeminer. The hundred of St Briavels includes the parishes of Coleford, Newland, Staunton, English Bicknor, Hewelsfield, St Briavels, Ruardean, Mitcheldean, Abenhall, Flaxley, Littledean and the East and West Dean areas.

They mined coal, iron and stone. The plot of land that a freeminer was given to mine was known as a gale. The Dean Forest Mines Act of 1838 allowed freeminers to sell their gales to industrial miners. The Act also required a formal register of freeminers to be kept. From 2010 women were allowed to become freeminers.

What records are there and what information will they contain?

D5947: Records of the Forestry Commission relating to Freeminers

Most of the records relating to freeminers were made by the Forestry Commission who look after the Forest of Dean. Records relating to the Forest of Dean are held at Gloucestershire Archives under the reference D5947.

The collection includes:

- Freeminers applications 1838-1956 (D5947/1/2, use the index to find the application number – D5947/1/3)
- Gale books 1811-1838 (D5947/3/1)
- Register of applications for gales 1838-1920 (D5947/3/3)
- Gale rent ledgers 1789-1841 (D5947/5/1)
- Coal and iron mine ledgers 1841-1938 (D5947/5/2)
- Plans of coal and iron workings 1830-c.1960 (D5947/7)

D9096: Forestry Commission*

This collection contains other records that relate to the Forest of Dean. They were transferred from the National Archives in 2002. The collection includes:

- Correspondence and papers (D9096/F3)
- Free miners and Verderers' Courts records (D9096/F16)
- Maps and plans (D9096/F16) 1662-1935
- Deputy Gaveller's Office papers (D9096/F26) 1706-1777, 1838-1946

How to Find the Records

To view a list of records in these collections please use our online catalogue, which can be found on our website at: <https://catalogue.gloucestershire.gov.uk/>. Type in the references that are given above into the search box. Click on "search" to view the list of items under that reference. To find out more information about that item or collection click on the document title, or on the document reference number.

*A printed list of the D9096 collection is also available on site.