



Collapse of an old mine shaft, near Walsall, England

A 50-year old house collapsed into a forgotten mine shaft near Walsall in the English Midlands. It was sited at the heart of what had been the South Staffordshire Coalfield. A colliery had closed down in the mid-1800s, and its 90-metre-deep shaft was abandoned. It was probably backfilled, but only loosely, and might have been capped, but rather inadequately, in the days before any regulations were being applied. Some time later, the old colliery site was landscaped with re-distributed mine waste. The shaft was forgotten, leaving no sign, memory or adequate record. Then in the post-war mid-1900s, terraced council houses were built across the site. After 50 years in the same end-of-terrace house, the sole resident woke one morning to see new cracks in his walls. He called the council, which sent an engineer, who was most concerned to see the house's cracks that were already noticeably larger. He had to telephone to arrange re-housing for the tenant, but there was no phone in the house. So they went to use the engineer's mobile, which was in his car. While out on the road, they heard a rumbling sound and turned to see most of the house collapse into the shaft (not having a home telephone seemed to have been a lifesaver in this case, but is hardly valid as a general safety measure). It is likely that a poorly compacted backfill in the old shaft had run in, and flowed into some of the old mine workings, though why this had happened, and culminated at that time, is unclear. It was only a partial run-in, as the debris of the house and its contents were still visible, resting on remaining backfill a few metres below ground level. However, the open shaft was soon backfilled to prevent it flaring out in the made ground above rockhead and thereby endangering adjacent houses. © *Photographs and text by Tony Waltham Geophotos*