Conditions for a Successful Farewell
Memories of Coal Mining in Ibbenbüren

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In conversation, Ibbenbüren miners sometimes call their colliery a small Gallic village. This term refers to the relationship with RAG Aktiengesellschaft, which owns the Ibbenbüren colliery since 1999. However, the pitmen always add that the expression is not meant maliciously but entirely amicably. Unlike the fighting Gauls in the Asterix books, the citizens of Ibbenbüren do not regard themselves as the last shelter of resistance against an all-powerful opponent. The term “Gallic village” rather means that the colliery occupies a special position in the corporation where it is managed as a limited liability company, located at some distance from the Ruhr area, the largest German coal field, and far from the administrative centres of the coal industry. The Ruhr remains a frequent point of reference when it comes to the self-description of the Ibbenbüren miners. But perhaps the word also simply means that Ibbenbüren is the smallest coal mine in Germany.

The Ibbenbüren colliery was one of the last two German coal mines to cease production in December 2018. The coal district in northern Westphalia comprises the town of Ibbenbüren and five neighbouring municipalities (Fig. 1). It has a total population of about 110,000. This region is the field for a long-term documentation of mining culture in Ibbenbüren (Schürmann 2015)¹, a key feature of which will be a collection of oral history interviews undertaken with active and retired miners as well as with other people involved in the wider Ibbenbüren community. Based on these interviews, this article will have a closer look at the changing self-images of miners in Ibbenbüren, particularly in the recent context of an accelerated deindustrialisation process both in Ibbenbüren and in German coal mining at large.

¹ Between June 2014 and August 2018, I conducted 100 interviews. I would like to express my thanks to the interviewees and also to the RAG Anthrazit Ibbenbüren GmbH for giving me the opportunity for the interviews. The recordings and transcriptions are kept in the archive of the Volkskundliche Kommission für Westfalen, Münster, Germany. The following text references to the interviews also contain the date of the interview and the page of the transcription. The documentation can be seen as a parallel project to the documentation “Menschen im Bergbau” set up in Bochum: http://www.menschen-im-bergbau.de/ (21.06.2018). Thanks to Roy Kift (Essen) for making a completely new translation of this text.
Fig. 1: The mining region of Ibbenbüren in the North of Westphalia (Source: own illustration)

Pitmen and Farmers

One of the things that characterises the self-image of the Ibbenbüren region is the fact that Ibbenbüreners assume people in the Ruhr area are unaware of its existence. And if they are, its image seems determined by agricultural stereotypes: the miners there wear wooden shoes (Interview 68 *1962), they drive to the colliery on tractors (Interview 95 *1978), and they tend to dig out sugar beets rather than coal (Knappenverein 2005: 23). An ink drawing made in 1960 in Ibbenbüren humorously illustrates how the people of Ibbenbüren imagine the way people in the Ruhr area see their district: as rural and rather backward (Fig. 2).

The people of Ibbenbüren would strongly dispute the opinion that their colliery is backward. Technically speaking, they were up to date – from today’s point of view one can say: until closing. So they proudly point out that one element of the mechanisation of coal mining, the coal planer, was developed decisively in Ibbenbüren. In addition, for many years Ibbenbüren was the deepest coal mine in the world, its shafts going deeper than 1,500 meters below the surface. Indeed, because of the immense depth and