



**A short history of coal mining
in Wigan and Leigh**

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Wigan is built on coal. There is evidence that the Romans dug coal in the area where it outcropped but the first written record of coal in the area comes from court records in 1246 when there is a case of 'Adam de Radcliffe stole coal belonging to Adam son of Alexander.' Most pits were small and shallow and Wigan was noted for its Canel Coal which families could access from their land.

John Ireland visited Haigh in 1583 and observed, 'Mr. Bradshaw had found much canel or sea coal that was profitable to him.' The work in the pits was seasonable and shared with some weaving and agricultural work on the green and pleasant land. It is thought that the first pit in the town was sunk by Peter Plat, a chandler of Millgate in 1619. The shaft was exposed when the foundations for Wigan and District Mining and Technical College were being prepared in 1863 and workings were exposed by excavations for the new swimming baths in 1964. Records of pits working in Wigan are recorded in the 1770's and coal dynasties were emerging, the Bradshaws and subsequently the Earls of Crawford and Balcarres of Haigh Hall saw the potential of the rich seams that lay under their lands. Shafts were sunk and the coal worked. The depth and extent of the workings was dependent on water being taken away and fresh air getting into the workings, major factors in deep mining, drainage and ventilation. The pits were shallow ladder pits in which drainage was a problem. As a solution, Roger Bradshaw dug the Great Haigh Sough between 1653 and 1670. It was an engineering triumph, 1120 yards long tunnel under the Haigh estate which drained the water into the Yellow Brook at Bottling Wood. The Sough is now a scheduled monument. It was the start of the industrial revolution which made ever increasing demands for coal to drive many new cotton mills, to provide steam for locomotives and to manufacture the large quantities of iron and steel that the emerging engineering industry required.

In the early nineteenth century many shafts were sunk to the rich seams under Wigan. They had names like Ince Yard, Crombuke, Trencherbone, Cannel, Plodder and Arley. The numerous pits were shallow but there were many scarring the landscape. The coal was worked by hewers with pick and shovel in confined spaces by candlelight. Children as young as five opened and closed ventilation doors in total darkness for the coal sleds or tubs to pass, drawn by women and young men to the pit bottom. Whole families were employed in the pit. Colliers relied on their wives, sons and daughters to work as drawers. The daughters of colliers usually married within the mining community and as the industry grew the members of mining families grew.

Pitwork in the Wigan area had the highest rates of female employment in the country in the nineteenth century. The owners used a bond system that contracted the miners to work for a year with harsh penalties if the contract was broken and prevented solidarity among the miners to ask for better pay and working conditions. The Duke of Bridgewater paid eight shillings for a six day working week with shifts of twelve to fifteen hours. Lateness was punished by a fine of two shillings and six pence. William Hulton paid the poorest wages in Lancashire and was hostile to grant his workforce the right to free assembly. The wages were just enough to keep families out of the workhouse.

In July 1832 a flash flood at a pit at the Huskar Pit in Yorkshire, caused the deaths of 26 children aged from 7 to 17. The disaster caught the attention of the public and the authorities and the Children's Employment Commission was set up in 1842. John Lawson Kennedy was the commissioner who

reported on 'the employment and young persons in the collieries of Lancashire.' He reported on the conditions of work of colliers and the women and children who hauled the coal to the shaft bottom.

Mr. Kennedy documented the observations of Mr. Pearson, the surgeon to the Wigan dispensary, Rev. Joshua Paley, clergyman of Lamberhead Green, Wigan and Mr. Halliwell, the Relieving Officer of Wigan on the 'moral condition' of the people. The children appeared stunted and whole families lived and slept on one room in cottages described as filthy. Few went to church or attended school. The colliers were paid every fortnight and spent the next week in alehouses, drunk and fighting and the following week working to pay off the debt. Mr. Halliwell noted that a great many illegitimate children were born to pit women. 'An illegitimate child is a matter of perfect indifference and in many cases so great has been the want of moral feeling they have actually gloried in it.'

There is a note in the Report of a letter from Thomas Latham, Chief Constable of Wigan, in which Latham says 'that many pits are on strike with three to four thousand out of work and have done considerable damage, breaking the windows of those who are in work and damaging the machinery of some works.' Mr. Kennedy said, 'I insert this as showing the uncontrollable and turbulent characters when under the excitement of a turn-out.' The publication of the Report caused outrage and horror in Victorian society and the 1842 Act was passed which forbade women and children under fourteen from working underground. It also underlined the extent of mining in Wigan as being the main occupation in a fast growing industry.

The landscape was changing. Colliery headgears and pit chimneys dominated the skyline, new railways crossed and recrossed the area and row upon row of red brick terraced houses ate up the once green land. Over the next fifty years mining activity increased to meet the ever increasing demand for coal. The women found work on the surface. Arthur Munby, a Victorian photographer who took a great interest in the Pit Brow Lasses of Wigan.

The photographs were thought scandalous by Victorian society as the women were wearing trousers. The Wigan and District Mining and Technical College was founded in 1851 and was recognised as a leader in mining education that made qualified engineers that took their skills all over the world. The original building is now Wigan Town Hall.

New mining companies were emerging and rapidly growing in size and strength employing thousands of men and women. Fletcher Burrows, Tyldesley Coal Co. Ltd., Crompton and Shawcross, Ackers Whitley and Co. Ltd., Garswood Hall Colliery Co., Pemberton Colliery Co. and Wigan Coal and Iron Co. were companies of national importance. The smoke from hundreds of chimneys, domestic and industrial, from mills and locomotives blackened the sky leaving a legacy of dirt and grime. During the latter part of the nineteenth century large holes suddenly began to appear in the town as old workings collapsed. A driver and his horse and cart suddenly disappeared down a large hole in Standish Gate. Old workings could be seen and it was recorded that horse, cart and driver were recovered. There are records of a doctor being called to a house in Gidlow Lane where methane had seeped into a cupboard and had been ignited by a candle, singeing the face and hair of a woman. These incidents were the first indications of the coal's legacy on Wigan. Coal pits and those who worked in them caused great interest to the general population and articles appeared regularly in publications.

The Graphic represented the collier as 'The Noble Workman' but all too often it was mining disasters and explosions that fascinated the general population. The fiery seams of Wigan provided all too many headlines and material for the magazines. There were explosions at Kirklees Hall, several at Ince Hall in the mid nineteenth century and in 1877 the explosion at Pemberton Colliery featured in

the Illustrated London News. The Victoria public loved deaths and disasters but the price of coal was being paid with the lives of pit workers on a day to day account. Between 1850 and 1914 there were over ninety thousand recorded deaths in the nation's coalfields. The coal industry in Wigan was still growing and leaving a physical stamp of dirt and grime on the area. The local coal companies went from strength to strength, none more than the Wigan Coal and Iron Co. Ltd. who built the Kirklees Iron Works, owned coal and ironstone mines all over the country and rose to be the largest coal company in the country. With a ready market for their products and with ideas, skills and a high level of education, mining engineering firms based in Wigan provided high quality heavy engineering products to the industry in this country and abroad. Walker Brothers of Wigan and their Pagefield works had a great international reputation.

New mining methods and technology started to have a major effect on Wigan's landscape. Coal and slag was brought to the surface and was sorted on the screens by the Pit Brow Lassies. The slag was tipped and large heaps that began to grow grey scars over the Wigan landscape and filling the air with grit and grime. The Wigan Alps were growing. The demand for coal was driving the growth of Wigan's collieries and works but by 1910 when the national production of coal peaked, the industry started a slow but steady decline as seams started to be worked out.

As collieries became unprofitable they were abandoned but there was still a demand for coal and Wigan Iron and Coal Co. employed 9000 workers in the 1920's and sunk the shafts of Parsonage Colliery between 1913 and 1920 and at the time they were the deepest in the country. The depression of the 1930's brought short time working and resulted in the closure and abandonment of more pits and dreadful social conditions which were made famous by George Orwell's Road to Wigan Pier.

The human cost of coal continued with the local press carrying several stories a week of colliery deaths and injuries. The curse of gas in Wigan's mines was yet again to cause death and misery when the Maypole Colliery at Abram went off like a volcano covering much of the area with black dust and claimed seventy six lives. The explosion caught the attention of the whole nation and then forgotten but disaster was again to return in 1932 when twenty seven men lost their lives in the Garswood Hall No. 9 Edge Green, Ashton-in-Makerfield explosion. Production of coal nationally increased during World War II but many Wigan collieries were reaching the end of their productive life. The industry was nationalised in 1947 and the names of the great colliery companies passed into history.

It is estimated that eight hundred million tons of coal were mined from within seventy square miles of Wigan town centre. There were numerous large slag heaps, many of the smoking, derelict colliery buildings each with its own distinctive headgear and chimney and numerous pit shafts guarded by fences or walls. Over a thousand of these were known in the Wigan area.

Disused railways and mineral lines crisscrossed the landscape, gradually going back to nature and providing valuable routes for the returning wildlife. The removal of such a large amount of coal from under Wigan had consequences on the surface. The land was subsiding on a large scale. Slowly but steadily flashes were appearing and steadily expanding as mine workings collapsed and the surface sunk below the water table. The Wigan Flashes, Pennington Flash and numerous small ponds were left for nature to take hold of the degraded landscape to be left for many years.

Subsidence in Wigan hit the headlines, sometimes nationally. The Corporation steam roller and driver disappeared down a large hole that suddenly opened up in Mesnes Terrace in the town centre. Sometime later a whole train of thirteen loaded wagons and the engine slid down an

unknown shaft while travelling between Abram and Platt Bridge, killing the driver whose body could not be recovered.

Many of the abandoned shafts were left for years surrounded by fences or broken walls. Such a shaft was well known in Worsley Mesnes as Owld Nat's made tragic headlines in the early 70's when boy fell down while blackberrying. His body was not recovered but his death prompted a concerted programme by the NCB to cap many shafts in Wigan.

Following the Clean Air Act Wigan embarked on a programme of sandblasting the grit and grime that had accumulated on its buildings and bright stone churches and clean red brick terraces appeared. Opencast coal sites appeared exposing the work of long gone colliers and the methods they used. Though not popular when they were working these sites often left green fields for farming, lakes for local anglers and open areas of new countryside but large areas of degraded landscape remained across Wigan.

It took a colliery tip to slide down a mountain side and engulf the village school at Aberfan, taking the lives of 109 children and 5 adults in 1966 for the National Coal Board to carry out a national survey of colliery tips and for the government to provide funds to remove them in the wake of this national tragedy.

Under this scheme the derelict site of the Garswood Hall colliery including the three large conical tips known as the Three Sisters or the Wigan Alps were used to landscape a large area which became at first, a recreation area but as trees and plants grew and wildlife returned, the area is now designated A Local Nature Reserve. Most of the spoil heaps that once blighted Wigan are now gone from Astley, Tyldesley, Bickershaw and Leigh to be replaced by some housing, some industrial units but acres and acres of green open spaces described as Degraded Landscapes and were recognised as providing a recreational amenity for the local population and for wildlife. The landscaped pit heaps at Bickershaw and the Three Sisters, the unique and special flora and fauna of Ince Moss, Amberswood and Ince Hall and the former slag heaps of the Kirklees Iron Works all contribute to the legacy of coal.

Towards the end of the twentieth century Wigan had just three working collieries, Golborne, Bickershaw and Plank Lane which operated as the Bickershaw Complex. It was possible to travel underground from Leigh to Ashton. The true cost of coal was paid by the ten miners who lost their lives in an explosion at Golborne colliery in 1979. The colliery closed soon after. Bickershaw and Plank Lane became victims of the pit closure policy of the 1990s, Golborne and Plank Lane becoming retail units and the Bickershaw site given over to housing. There is just a single headgear remaining of the thousands there had been in Wigan at Lancashire Mining Museum at Astley Green.

The last Wigan colliery chimney to be demolished was that of Maypole colliery scene of the 1908 disaster and had a useful life on a trading estate in Abram.

A cycle has gone full circle from a green and pleasant that was turned grey and ravaged by coal to once again large areas that have become green and returned to nature.

The Haigh Sough still gives good service to this day and in 2005 the Coal Authority built a pumping station, pipelines, settlement lagoons and reedbeds to improve the water quality by removing iron which discoloured the water and allowed fish to repopulate Borsdane Brook.