

COALFIELDS

Where did coal come from?

The Carboniferous Period was between 359 to 299 million years ago. The Early Carboniferous had a tropical and humid climate. During this time there were vast swamp forests of seedless vascular plants across Europe. Dead plants did not completely decay and were turned to peat in the stagnant water.

As sea levels shifted and the swamps were covered by the sea, marine sediments settled over the peat. In the late Carboniferous period (318 to 299 million years ago) this decomposing vegetation was compressed into coal. (The description 'Carboniferous', or 'carbon-bearing', is derived from this.) The Coal beds can be 12 meters thick, though not necessarily in Newbold. Pockets of plant debris became preserved as fossils and not converted to coal. Called coal balls, these are sometimes found within the coal seams.

NW Leicestershire

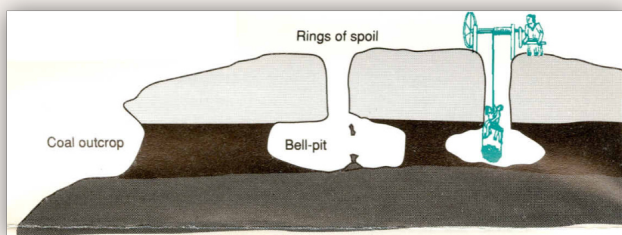
We know that NW Leicestershire was occupied by prehistoric and then Roman peoples. Long before the 9th and 10th centuries, surface coal was being scraped out, and used for heating and cooking. Charcoal was being intentionally produced by 30,000 BC for cave paintings. So people have long been aware of charcoal and coal.

In the 11th Century, north west Leicestershire was still sparsely populated. There were only 1.5-2.5 million people in the whole country (estimated from The Domesday Book 1086.) Farming (livestock and arable) was becoming more significant.

In the early 12th Century, Coal was being mined in Swannington and by at least 1293 in Newbold. Since all the land was now owned by someone, Freeman of the Parish had to be granted rights by the landowners to make use of waste and common lands to dig for coal. Much out-cropping of coal-seams, which lay near the surface went on. So, mining mostly began in this way. The coal was used for household purposes only. There was no "industry". There was so much coal in this area that when the shallow seams were exhausted the men simply moved on, rather than dig deeper. The quantities of coal meant there was no pressing need to develop machinery to extract deeper coal.

The 12th and 13th Century removal of coal from a few metres deep, caused the characteristic 'bell pit' shapes of the diggings.

The use of Bell Pits with a shallow entry shaft, allowed the coal to be excavated at the base, in a circular fashion. No supports were used within the diggings. Consequently, the pits could not be more than 10-20 metres deep, or the roof would collapse. In the 14th and 15th Centuries, winding gear was used to raise and lower a 'Kibble', to move coal and men in and out of the deeper pits.



Picture from Denis Baker

The effect of these bell pit diggings, together with the clearing of the heaths and woods, started the man-made changes which helped to make the landscape look the way it does today.

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During the 16th Century mining, became large-scale – much more of an industry. By 1520 there were five pits at Swannington and others at Newbold, Oakthorpe and Coleorton.

By the end of the 16th Century, the open lands, that were prevalent during the Middle Ages, were mostly enclosed to form fields. Sheep thrived on the rough pastures. On the western boundary of Newbold, under the parkland and woods, there was a large quantity of coal. This became the site of the New Lount Colliery. It was opened in 1924. There was also a mine situated in Pipeyard Lane, Newbold at the bottom left, near the railway line. Known as Newbold Glory, it was not worked for long because of poor conditions.

Calcutta mine was worked from 1853. It was located under Limby Hall Lane in Coleorton . An 1877 engine house is still on the site. Califat began much earlier and coal extraction was helped by the use of a Newcommen Steam Pumping engine-invented around 1729. This was useful to remove water from the mines. A Newcommen haystack boiler from this site is in the Snibston Discovery Park. The grassy areas covering the colliery and the earlier bell pits, plus the associated waste hillocks, are now managed as the Coleorton Nature Reserve.

During the 18th Century the industry developed considerably, because the expanding use of steam power, caused the increasing need for coal,. In the 19th Century, the movement of coal and other materials became more efficient, because of better transport, like the Ashby Canal and the tramway links.

Whereas the area initially had very few people, the mining influence caused the growth of many small hamlets and villages –mostly for miners' homes. Some (like Hugglescote) came about almost entirely as a result of the need for such housing. These villages have rows of brick-and-tile miners cottages; quite different from the older village layout of a group of houses surrounding a church.

The coal industry was massive until the 1960's, when mining became unprofitable. Up to that time Britain was the largest worldwide producer of coal.

Although mining in this area ceased in 1968, in the 1980's, the opportunity to open-cast was undertaken at Lount, because the A42 was to be extended over the area. The ground has now been restored, and the A42 is in place.

In many areas, pit closures have meant that ex-miners moved elsewhere to find different work. In NW Leicestershire we have seen the effect of the in-comers who have had a positive effect in rejuvenating run-down old mining villages, and made them nicer places to live.

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FRANK HODGES & THE NEW LOUNT COLLIERY –NEWBOLD

Frank Hodges.

Born Woolaston, Gloucester, 1887. Died 1947

Commenced work at Powell Tillery Pits, Abertillery, Wales, after leaving school at age 14.

Became a Methodist at 16 and soon began preaching.

Through his trade union links he secured a Scholarship to Ruskin College, Oxford, 1909.

After a time in Paris, he returned to work as a hewer in the mines. This was hard work and he wanted something more intellectual. He successfully applied to be a trade union agent. He now felt he could change people's lives for the better, and started reforming the organisation. He was appointed Miners' Agent, Garw Valley South Wales Miners' Federation, 1912.

Appointed Secretary, Miners' Federation of Great Britain, 1919. He negotiated terms and conditions for miners, with the government and Lloyd George.

He won a seat as the Labour candidate for Lichfield under Ramsay MacDonald in the first Labour Government, and held the post of First Lord of the Admiralty.

Resigned as Secretary, Miners' Federation of Great Britain, January 31st, 1924, on appointment as Civil Lord of Admiralty. During this time he played golf with the Duke of York before he became George VI.

Appointed Permanent General Secretary of the International Miners' Federation, 1924 resigned 1926).

Vice-Chairman, National Fuel and Power Committee, 1926.

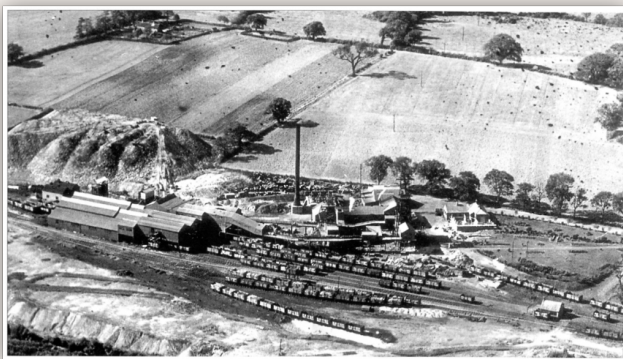
Appointed member of the Central Electricity Board, 1926.

Chairman and MD of The Leicestershire Colliery & Pipe Co. Ltd.

Chairman, The Glasgow Iron & Steel Co. Ltd. Chairman, New Rockwood Colliery Ltd.

New Lount Colliery

New Lount Colliery in Newbold, was initially a series of shallow workings. In 1924 the first shaft



was sunk. Mining continued for a few years, but the colliery then began to fail. Lord Beaumont leased 775 acres and Earl Ferrers leased about 600 acres to the Colliery. Lord Beaumont and Earl Ferrers having interests in the pits in this area, probably approached their colleagues in Parliament, to seek help in improving the pit's profits. Frank Hodges (MP) was then asked by The Treasury, to take over the running of the New Lount Colliery. With his personal experience of working in pits, his

desire to improve the miners' lot and his knowledge of the workings of the unions, as well as his managing ability, things at New Lount improved.

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In 1948 New Lount was producing 36,000 tons of coal each month. Nearby Snibston produced nearly 27,000 tons.

Miners' Houses / Electricity

By his management, Frank Hodges benefitted the owners, and the miners too. He brought his family members and friends from Wales, to help manage the colliery. He built houses for the miners and the managers, introduced baths at New Lount and street lighting for the village. Because of the cheap availability of coal, Newbold never had gas –and still does not.

Pit Head Baths

In the 1930's, New Lount Colliery was the first to have bathing facilities for the miners. Even by 1937 there were only two collieries in Leicestershire with baths. Most had no baths until after 1947 when the coal mines were nationalised!!

Frank Smith a miner of the 1930's recalled that before there were baths he used to walk home through the fields, so wet, filthy and stinking, that he was embarrassed to use the streets. This happened in snow and rain too. The miners would get home so frozen that all they could do, would be to strip and stand in front of the fire. There were very few houses with washing facilities –and those that did, had nothing but a basin or a tin bath. Hot water could only be boiled in relatively small containers, like a kettle. Some miners, like Eric Saunders, washed in the outside water tub, after sweeping away the snow and breaking the ice in the freezing cold. Drying the smelly, wet trousers over the fire would render them so stiff “they would stand up brittle, like concrete”. Quite apart from the lack of baths and hot water, in a tiny house with a family of 5 or more, privacy was an issue too. You can imagine why most miners would remain black from the waist down



With the building of the baths at New Lount, Frank Hodges was pleased to say, that there were facilities for 1008 miners to indulge in a little luxury. Each miner had two lockers for his pit and home clothes. Coal was being used at the mines for steam and electricity generation, so unlimited supplies of hot water were available. An incidental benefit was that the men could get warm, after 8-10 hours lying underground in a puddles of cold water.

Frank Hodges said “There is no reason why a miner should not leave the colliery spick and span in absolutely clean and dry clothing, with the resulting improvement in his health, and I believe, his morale and social standing.”

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Pit Head Baths Tokens were made available after the 1930's. The baths were free for the miners, although they had to pay for the use of the colliery's soap and towels (2d or 3d per week) unless they provided their own. The baths could also be used by contractors who could also use tokens to pay for soap, towels and bathing, from the colliery bath attendant.

Pipe, Brick and Limeworks

Clay was readily available from a mine, near the end of Stardingdale Lane, where that deep pit is now water-filled. The local clay and coal provided the raw materials for both Newbold and Lount Pipe Yards, where good quality glazed pipe-ware was manufactured, providing good employment for the village and surrounding districts. The Newbold Brick Company started in the early 1930's, with its huge chimney still remaining to say – 'We were here.'

There were Limeworks at Cloud Hill. Lime was used in building works and was produced by heating limestone. There is a quarry at Breedon near Lount. It is understood that this limestone is used for the driveways at Sandringham House.

New Lount Colliery Closure

New Lount Colliery closed in 1968. An NCB report stated that the thicker seams of coal were almost exhausted and closure was recommended. Miners could retire at 55 or move to another pit if vacancies existed.

The workings were kept open until 1970's for pumping out water and salvage. The shafts were then filled and capped.

