

# Claims Concerning Early Coal Working in the Neston Area<sup>1</sup>

As *The Neston Collieries, 1759-1855: An Industrial Revolution in Rural Cheshire* shows, plentiful evidence points to 1759 being the year in which the colliery at Ness first started working. However, many previous writers have suggested other years in which the works commenced – from 1750 to 1850.<sup>2</sup> While these suggestions can be discounted with relative ease based on evidence in the book, there have been other claims that even earlier coal working occurred, at unspecified dates. They relate to two very different periods – the Romano-British era, and the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; this article explores the evidence for these claims.

## Romano-British Coal Working

The intriguing assertion concerning the Romano-British is based on an analysis of two specimens of coal, one in 1991 from an excavated 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. Romano-British settlement site at Irby, north Wirral and the other in 1996 from a spoil heap near the site of the Neston collieries.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this analysis, it has been claimed that ‘Coal at the rural site at Irby was sourced to a small outcrop at Neston’.<sup>4</sup> This conclusion was based on the work of two petrographic analysts who studied the samples, both of which were found to emanate from the Lower Coal Measures. The 1996 analyst concluded that, on the limited evidence he had, ‘the two coal samples were likely to have come from the same locality’ although ‘not...from the same seam’.<sup>5</sup> However, in this writer’s view, the claims that the Irby coal came from Neston appear, at best, to be unproven for various reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that short-form references are given for books and articles which appear in the Bibliography in A. Annakin-Smith, *The Neston Collieries, 1759-1855: An Industrial Revolution in Rural Cheshire* (Chester: Chester University Press, 2019). Other items are referenced in full.

<sup>2</sup> Cheshire Heritage Environment Record for ‘Denna Colliery’ (HER no. 30/1), citing G. Dawson in *Wyrale* (Irby: Dawson Publishing, 2005), says ‘between 1750 and 1760’. Lysons & Lysons, p. 413, N. Ellison, *The Wirral Peninsula* (London: Robert Hale, 1955), p. 115, K. Burnley, *Portrait of Wirral* (London: Hale, 1981), p. 122, *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, Vol. III, June 1899, p.63, and Hanshall, p. 70 all say 1750 - see note 66 on p. 318 of Annakin-Smith (2019) for a possible explanation. Mortimer, p. 168, says 1757. A. Brack, *The Wirral* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1980), p. 152, W. Hewitt, *The Wirral Peninsula: An Outline Regional Survey* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1922), p. 269 and P. Sulley, *The Hundred of Wirral* (Birkenhead, 1889), p. 189, say 1760. J. Hodson, *Cheshire, 1660-1780: Restoration to Industrial Revolution* (Chester: Cheshire Community Council, 1978), p. 44, says 1765. None of these gives any primary references. Rideout (1927), p. 81, cites Mortimer. O. Ashmore, *The Industrial Archaeology of North-west England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), p. 50, says ‘Denhall Colliery’ started ‘c.1850’.

<sup>3</sup> R. Philpott & M. Adams, *Irby, Wirral Excavations on a late prehistoric Romano-British and medieval site, 1987-96* (Liverpool: National Museums Liverpool, 2010), p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> Philpott (2006), p. 85. The attribution to Neston also appears in A. H. V. Smith ‘Provenance of Coals from Roman Sites in England and Wales’, *Britannia*, 28 (1997), p. 309.

<sup>5</sup> From T.E.S. Bretby, a division of Environmental Services Group Ltd. The information is in an unpublished letter and short report, both dated 18 April 1996, sent to the leader of the Irby excavation,

Firstly, as far as we know all the Neston Lower Coal Measures seams were well below the surface – the shallowest seams noted in any source to date appear to have been at least 11.3 metres (37 feet) below the surface and most were much deeper.<sup>6</sup> However, to date this writer is not aware of any reports of Romano-Britons carrying out sub-surface coal mining anywhere in the country. It therefore seems extremely highly unlikely, if not impossible, that they were capable of finding the Neston coal and then mining it.

There also appears to be a problem with the Neston coal sample used for the analysis. This writer understands that it was taken from estuary-side spoil heaps north of Marshlands Road (most of which have now been removed). These were largely or wholly created by works from Neston Colliery and Wirral Colliery, which operated between 1875 and 1927. These worked coal deep underground and the site is about two kilometres from the locations where the relatively shallow seams mentioned above were reported. Two geological sections from the old collieries show at least 28 metres (92 feet) of deposits above any coal in that area.<sup>7</sup> Logic therefore suggests the spoil, and thus the coal stratum from which the sample was taken, had originally been deeply buried and, for the reason given above, was thus never accessible to the Romano-Britons.

Given the above it is unclear why the petrographic analysts put weight on the Irby sample coming from Neston rather than, say, from the significant seams in the Lower Coal Measures appearing in North Wales. While it is true that the principal seam worked in Flintshire was the Main Coal, from the Middle Coal Measures, the Lower Coal Measures are the bedrock in many parts of the coalfield and these carry the same seams as at Neston (though mostly under different names).<sup>8</sup> The later analyst's conclusions are based upon the 'reflectance value' and 'rank' of the coal concerned and he notes that the reflectance value from the two samples is significantly different. The report (and subsequent published commentary) acknowledges that this means the samples came from different seams, with the Neston sample coming from a seam lower than that of the Irby one.<sup>9</sup> It is not clear, though, why the analyst then went on to conclude that 'the two coals are ... likely to have been derived from the same locality'. He presents no evidence for this, nor for why the quoted reflectance value in the Irby sample could not equally be consistent with the coal coming from seams in North Wales. It is worth noting that in the 1991 investigation the analyst admitted to there being 'scant' available comparable information on Flintshire's coal due to so much having been removed over time.

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Dr. Rob Philpott, then at Liverpool Museum. He very kindly made the letter and report available to me and advised me of the location from which the Neston sample was taken.

<sup>6</sup> NEIMME/ZA/12/235.

<sup>7</sup> BGS Sheet 77 (1888); OS 25" (3rd edn, 1912), Sheet XXX.2.

<sup>8</sup> OS Geological Survey, one-inch series, Sheet 96 (Liverpool), Solid (1974); Wood, p. 248.

<sup>9</sup> Philpott & Adams (2010), p. 115.

He admitted that his view that the coal came from Neston (based, at that time, on just the Irby sample) was 'not entirely conclusive'.

Overall, it seems much more likely that the Irby coal came from across the Dee Estuary in North Wales where there were easily accessible surface outcrops of coal and where the Romans were mining lead ores.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, coal has been found used on Roman sites in Flintshire and may have been carried some distance from Flintshire, too.<sup>11</sup> Alternatively the Irby coal could have been washed onto the Wirral shore in the form of sea coal which, as will be described below, has been reported locally.

### **The Early Modern Period**

There are several claims about coal being worked at Neston in both the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Hodson, writing in 1978 in the 'A History of Cheshire' series, says 'At Neston [my italics] two small pits had been worked in the seventeenth century', but gives no evidence.<sup>12</sup> Confidence in this assertion is somewhat undermined by his stating an opening date for the colliery of 1765 which is certainly incorrect.<sup>13</sup> In any event, if there were pits in Ness township in the seventeenth century one might have expected them to have been mentioned in contemporary records but no such record has been found and a comprehensive survey of the locality in 1634 makes no mention of any coal pits.<sup>14</sup> Hodson may well have been misconstruing Beck who, in an earlier-published volume in the same series of books stated:

'Coalpit Lane *near* Neston [my italics] led to two small pits on the estuary which were worked from early in the seventieth century to the nineteenth century, in the later years by gangs of women working on the edge of the tide and carrying coal in baskets on their backs'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Wedd, Smith, Simmons and Wray, p. 46 (re outcrops); Wedd & King, p. 176; V. Gardiner, 'An analysis of Romano-British Lead Pigs', *IAMS*, 21 (Institute for Archaeo-Metallurgical Studies, 2001), pp. 11-13. Dunn (1852), Plate XIV, illustrates the seams reaching the surface at Mostyn Colliery.

<sup>11</sup> Webster G. (1955). 'A note on the use of coal in Roman Britain', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 35, 210 & 212; Wynn Ffoulkes (1856) 'Roman Remains and Ancient Leadworks near Flint', *Archaeologica Cambrensis*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, 8, 308; Donald Atkinson and M. V. Taylor, *Flint Excavation Report*, Flintshire Historical Society, 10 pt.1 (1924), pp. 10 & 20; J. Liversidge, *Britain in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 201.

<sup>12</sup> Hodson, p. 142.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Bangor Archives, Mostyn MSS, 6891. The survey includes three field names with the terms 'Blacco' or 'Black' in them which might be considered indicative of blackening by coal dust. However, J. M. Dodgson (*The Place-Names of Cheshire*, Pt. 5, Section 1.i (Cambridge: English Place-Name Society, 1981) pp. 105-6) explains that 'black' can have various meanings: not only black or 'dark-coloured' but also fertile or bleak and colourless. Further, the Ness tithe map lists two fields with 'black in the name but neither sits on the coal field.

<sup>15</sup> Joan Beck, *Tudor Cheshire* (Chester: Cheshire Community Council, 1969), p. 57.

Again, there is no evidence presented to support her detailed assertions. There is no record of a Coalpit Lane ever having been in or particularly close to Neston but there is a lane of that name starting at Great Saughall, six miles away, and it may well be that to which she refers. If that is the case she, in turn, may simply have been echoing – and embellishing – Rideout in his analysis of ‘The Growth of Wirral’. Writing in 1926 he mentioned the ‘old Chester-Neston road’, and then went on to refer to a different road through Great Saughall ‘leading from the water’s edge to the interior [of Wirral] and known in later days as Coalpit Lane’.<sup>16</sup> In summary, this may well be an example of how historical ‘fact’ becomes distorted through re-telling.

The Coalpit Lane which starts at Great Saughall and runs to Backford has no plausible geological associations with mining of the Carboniferous rock.<sup>17</sup> The name is similar to one found in a note added to the parish register of Burton, which neighbours Ness, which mentions in passing ‘The coale pitt Hay marled 1619’.<sup>18</sup> Here there is a narrow strip of Coal Measures adjacent to the estuary but there are no other historical references to a ‘coal pit’ field name in Burton. A plausible explanation for both cases derives from a different meaning of the word ‘coale’ – ‘charcoal’.<sup>19</sup> The word was used this way from the Middle Ages and ‘coal pits’ were originally places where charcoal was made; other examples of the use of the words in this context exist in Cheshire.<sup>20</sup>

There are occasional early references to coal being carried on Neston-registered ships but there is never any indication that the coal was loaded locally. For example, in 1566, the *Martin*, was recorded as carrying eight tons of coal to Dublin.<sup>21</sup> A Neston man, Thomas Mylner, was both master and merchant on the voyage but he was a regular trader between Chester and Ireland and could easily have picked up his coal at one of the Flintshire quays such as at Mostyn; there is no evidence his coal came from Neston.<sup>22</sup> In the early seventeenth century Neston coal traders petitioned for a reduction in the duty on seaborne coals.<sup>23</sup> The source

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<sup>16</sup> E. H. Rideout, ‘The sites of Ancient Villages in Wirral’, *THSLC*, 77 (1926), pp. 54-69 (p.61). *Cheshire Sheaf* (1950) 45 (February), p.6 also mentions coal at Saughall but it has not been possible to trace the writer’s source.

<sup>17</sup> OS Geological Survey, one-inch series, Sheet 108 (Flint), Solid (1974). The lane overlays at least 400 metres of sandstone, itself covered almost wholly by glacial till. There is no mapped evidence of any borehole or mine. The earliest known use of the name was in 1787 when it was mentioned in what has become known as the ‘Wirral Turnpike Act’. Edward Hull (*The Coal Fields of Great Britain* (London: E. Stanford 1873), p.150) mentions that ‘coal has actually been proved on the east side of the river Dee north of Chester, as well as at Neston’ but gives no evidence. See also Annakin-Smith (2019), p. 264, note 23.

<sup>18</sup> Burton Parish Register, 2 January 1619.

<sup>19</sup> Dodgson, p. 131; *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>20</sup> Dodgson, pp. 138 & 140.

<sup>21</sup> Wilson, p. 75. His reference to the *Mary*, 26 March 1565, is a transcription error (TNA, E190/1323/1).

<sup>22</sup> Donald Woodward gives examples of coal shipments from Mostyn at this time in *The Trade of Elizabethan Chester* (Hull: University of Hull, 1970), p.17.

<sup>23</sup> CALS, DVE 1/NI/1. I am grateful to Susan Chambers for her transcription of this document.

document is in very poor condition, but there appear to be at least two references to the fact that the coal came from Wales, rather than England. Ships laden with Welsh coal might still come to Neston, though, in order to pick up passengers for Ireland, as was recorded by Oliver Samson in 1676.<sup>24</sup>

It has been suggested that a reference to 'The Coal, Ness' in a 1711 pew allotment for Neston parish church is evidence of colliery activity.<sup>25</sup> The words certainly appear there, although in a new version of the document later that year the words had become 'The Cole, Neston'.<sup>26</sup> These references are curious, not least because they are the only ones in the documents which are not a personal names. The earlier wording could reasonably be taken to refer to coal works in Ness township but alternative interpretations can be made. Firstly, the word could, once again, refer to charcoal – 'coal' and 'cole' are recognised variants of the term used at that time.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, the word could be a reference to the gathering of sea-coal. A 1788 document concerning royalties for coal obtained refers to 'All the Coals gotten upon the Pebly Shore' distinguishing this from the 'Coal raised from the Mine'.<sup>28</sup> This suggests that there was sea-coal in the Neston area, washed from an exposure beneath the Dee, or from North Wales. This is consistent with reports that mines on both sides of the river had, on occasions, bored into the estuary bed.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps gathering sea-coal had been a local activity for centuries before the English side of the Dee silted up.

At least two writers have suggested that a small number of early references to 'miner' as fathers' occupation in Neston parish records are evidence of coal mining; one source specifically cites baptism entries in 1746 and 1750.<sup>30</sup> Again, the claims are, at best, unproven. In the eighteenth-century Neston parish register the local coal-workers were termed 'collier', not 'miner'. The latter term was widely used in North Wales, though, in areas where there were lead mines as well as the nearby coal mines. In the Flint parish registers the recording of occupations was more sporadic than in Neston; there are, however, many references to 'colliers' and occasionally references to 'miners' as well (sometimes in the same year, e.g. 1778).<sup>31</sup> These references indicate that 'collier' and 'miner' were viewed as distinct occupations, with miners working the metal ores. One of the Neston 'miners' records his place

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<sup>24</sup> W. and T. Evans (eds.), 'The Life of Oliver Sansom', *The Journal of Friends*, Vol. XIV (1850), p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> Place (1994), p. 211. He cites CALS, P 149/6/1, but the reference is actually in CALS, DHL 12/1.

<sup>26</sup> CALS, P 149/6/1.

<sup>27</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>28</sup> 'Copy of Answer of Deponents Massey and others', part of CALS, D5363.

<sup>29</sup> Annakin-Smith (2019), pp. 65 and 286 n.127.

<sup>30</sup> G. Pearson, *Neston and Parkgate Remembered* (Birkenhead: Countyvise, 1998) p. 104; and G. Dawson, *Wyrle* (Dawson Publishing, 2004) p. 40 citing Geo[orge] Gregory (1746) and John Neilly (1750).

<sup>31</sup> *Flint Parish Registers 1598-1812* (Clwyd Family History Society, 1994).

of residence as Holywell in Flintshire; the other states it as Great Neston, rather than the coal locations of Ness or Little Neston. It is impossible to know why this man was in Neston but it does seem more likely that he had been working the North Wales ores rather than being the only recorded Neston coal worker at that time. Maybe he had crossed the estuary on the many small lead-carrying boats that plied between Bagillt and Parkgate at that time.<sup>32</sup>

The term 'miner' also occurs in three entries for marriages in Neston's parish register in the 1760s, when Ness Colliery had certainly started operating.<sup>33</sup> Two of the records state that the men were from Llanddulas in Denbighshire, where there are lead mines; the third, who had a name common in Wales, gave Neston as his residence. In these instances, it seems plausible that some or all of the men were Welsh ore miners who came to Neston to work in the coal mines. An alternative explanation is that they were pit sinkers, with skills to bore new shafts through rock and who were temporarily engaged at Neston before moving elsewhere – none appears to have had children baptised locally.

The evidence for early coal-mining in the Neston area, then, is at best inconclusive. In this writer's view, perhaps the most persuasive factor which *might* indicate early mine working at Neston – and one which no one has particularly highlighted -- relates to the focus on Denhall from the earliest known time of mining in the area. The first known boreholes were sunk there and the name Denhall (or variants) was constantly associated with the colliery workings.<sup>34</sup> Many of the colliers recorded in the 1760s gave Denhall as their place of residence in parish registers. This is the area where the coal strata appear to have been at their shallowest depth – recorded, as noted earlier, at just 11.3 metres (37 feet). The seams ran into adjacent Burton and it is easy to conceive that activity at the settlement of Denhall, which straddled the Ness/Burton border, stumbled across such coal, perhaps when digging a well. There was a hospital at Denhall from the middle ages as well as a shipping anchorage and quay so there would have been much activity there over the centuries. 'Old pits' were recorded at Denhall in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – although the meaning of each of those two words can be subject to various interpretations.<sup>35</sup> Two recently-identified hollows at the hospital site could perhaps have been boreholes, wells or the entrances to bell-pits.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Place (1994), p. 208.

<sup>33</sup> John Jones of Neston parish, 10 November 1763; Thomas Williams of 'Landillas', 29 April 1767; Thomas Foulkes of 'Black and Blue' [Llanddulas], 29 April 1767.

<sup>34</sup> Annakin-Smith (2019) p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Annakin-Smith (2019), p. 51. While 'pit' was often used to describe a coal shaft, it could be used in other contexts e.g. in relation a marl pit, clay pit or fishpond. 'Old' is a vague word in terms of time, and could also simply mean 'disused'.

<sup>36</sup> Annakin-Smith (2019), p. 16.

Ultimately, though, the possibility of early coal-getting at Denhall is speculation and the fact remains that there is no *evidence* for it.

The position relating to Denhall is indicative of the more general picture. One cannot discount the possibility that coal was worked at Neston before large-scale commercial operations started in 1759 but, as this article has shown, so far there has been no unequivocal evidence to support the claim. It is not impossible, though, that one day some will emerge.

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