

# Early Coal Working at Neston: A Review of the Evidence<sup>1</sup>

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The issue of when coal mining first started in the Neston area of Cheshire has been the subject of many different opinions in books and articles over the years. Commentators have stated a variety of years for the opening of the first named colliery in the area in the mid-eighteenth century. Others have made claims that even earlier coal working occurred, at unspecified dates. These latter claims relate to two very different periods – the era of Roman settlement in Britain, and the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. This article therefore seeks to clear up the confusion, confirming the date of opening of Ness Colliery, putting forward new (in 2023) evidence for coal-working before Ness Colliery opened and evaluating the evidence for others' claims for earlier working.

## Opening Date of Ness Colliery

The first point, concerning the opening date of Ness Colliery, can be dealt with briefly here. Many commentators over past decades have suggested the year in which the works commenced; these range from 1750 to 1850.<sup>2</sup> There is, however, plentiful evidence in *The Neston Collieries, 1759-1855: An Industrial Revolution in Rural Cheshire*, published in 2019, to show that 1759 was the year in which Ness Colliery first started working. The opening of the colliery was based on borehole findings made over the previous two years. Given the comprehensive coverage of the evidence for these dates in the book this writer does not intend to repeat the material here.

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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 *Wyrals* (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'.

## Romano-British Coal Working

The intriguing assertion concerning the Roman era 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.

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 Roman-era 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

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<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 and in Robert A. Philpott and Mark H. Adams, *Irby, Wirral Excavations on a Late Prehistoric, Romano-British and Medieval Site, 1987-96* (Liverpool: National Museums Liverpool, 2010), p. 115.

<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, 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.

originally been deeply buried and, for the reason given above, was thus never accessible to the Romano-British.

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> Based on this information it is far from clear 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. 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 Romano-British 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.

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<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.

<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> G. Webster, 'A note on the use of coal in Roman Britain', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 35 (1955), pp. 210 & 212; Wynn Ffoulkes, 'Roman Remains and Ancient Leadworks near Flint', *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, 8 (1856), p. 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.

## The Pre-Industrial Colliery

There have been several claims about coal being worked at Neston in both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Sadly, little evidence has been put forward to support these. However, it is possible that at least some are grounded in truth as this writer has recently uncovered the first certain evidence for local coal working in the pre-industrial period.

The new evidence comes from an estate survey of the manor of Ness made in 1634.<sup>12</sup> The survey lists numerous land-holdings and their occupiers. Amongst the holdings is one named 'Colliery way Butts' [*sic*] – apparently a plot of land adjoining a lane leading to a coal-works. The word 'colliery' (with later variants such as 'colley') is recognised as being used from the seventeenth century to describe such works. There is, however, no reference in the apparently comprehensive estate survey to a colliery per se. Thus we do not know when the works began nor can we be sure that they were operating in 1634.

The evidence for the pre-industrial colliery is certain but very scant. And, just as we do not know the dates of the works, we also do not know about its specific location or scale. In the remainder of this section, the writer will consider material which may give clues to further understanding of these works.

There are two possible dated reference to local coal just under eighty years after the Ness estate survey. One is 'The Coal, Ness' in a 1711 pew allotment for Neston parish church.<sup>13</sup> In a new version of the document later that year the reference to Ness had disappeared and become, curiously, 'The Cole, Neston'.<sup>14</sup> These references stand out because they are the only ones in the documents which are not personal names (of pew-holders). However, like the 1634 survey reference, they also do not explicitly indicate that there was an active colliery. While it does seem plausible that they refer to an area where coal was to be found — if not actually being worked at that time — there are possible alternative explanations.

The terms 'coal and 'cole'' had been used since the Middle Ages to apply to charcoal and the Neston references could indicate a place of charcoal manufacture.<sup>15</sup> There are other instances of such use, one local, discussed below. An alternative, albeit less likely, explanation for the Neston coal references is to a location where sea-coal could be found. 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>16</sup> This suggests that there was sea-

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<sup>12</sup> Bangor Archives, Baron Hill MSS 6891, 'Survey of Nesse'.

<sup>13</sup> CALS, DHL 12/1 and P 149/6/1 – both pew allotments.

<sup>14</sup> CALS, P 149/6/1.

<sup>15</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>16</sup> 'Copy of Answer of Deponents Massey and others', part of CALS, D5363.

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>17</sup> Perhaps gathering sea-coal had been a local activity for centuries before the English side of the Dee silted up.

With regard to location of the known 'colliery' it seems most likely that it was in the Denhall area of Ness which crossed into the adjoining township of Burton. Denhall is where the shallowest local coal was to be found, at just 37 feet (11.3 metres).<sup>18</sup> The area had been the site of a medieval hospital as well as being an anchorage;<sup>19</sup> coal might have been discovered when, for example, a well was being sunk. Several lanes led to the area which may account for the 'Colliery way' reference in the 1634 survey. Moreover, the name 'Denhall' and variants were used in connection with Ness Colliery from its earliest days, continuing throughout its life and beyond.<sup>20</sup> The name was often applied even when the workings were away from that area suggesting that the name was ingrained in local consciousness regarding coal working. Early working there may also account for the mention of a 'pit' at Denhall which, in 1790, was described as 'old'.<sup>21</sup>

The shallow coal strata found at Ness stretch into a narrow coastal fringe in Burton. Their presence might explain a note added to the parish register of Burton, which mentions in passing 'The coale pitt Hay marled 1619'.<sup>22</sup> There is a suggestion that holes had been sunk there at some time – could these have been boreholes or bell-pits?<sup>23</sup> The latter were an early method of coal mining but if they were used at Burton they would have been at about the limit of depth for such techniques.<sup>24</sup> However, as discussed above, the reference to 'coale' could

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<sup>17</sup> Annakin-Smith (2019), pp. 65 and 286 n.127.

<sup>18</sup> NEIMME/ZA/12/235.

<sup>19</sup> P. H. W. Booth, ed., *Burton in Wirral, A History* (Burton: Burton and South Wirral Local History Society, 1984), pp. 10 and 28

<sup>20</sup> For example, in 1851 the parish church paid 'Denhall Colliery' for coal (CALs, P149/9/3). OS, 25-inch, XXX.2 (1871) describes the works as 'Denhall Colliery (disused)'.

<sup>21</sup> NEIMME/ZA/12/235 and NEIMME/Wat/3/71/1; NEIMME/Wat/35/14 mentions an undated 'Pit sunk' near 'Dinna House' (later 'Dennah Hall' and variants). Care does, however, need to be taken with interpreting the words 'old' and 'pit' as they as those two words can be subject to various meanings.

<sup>22</sup> Burton Parish Register, 2 January 1619.

<sup>23</sup> BGS, Sheet 96; Royal Commission for Historic Monuments, *St. Andrew's Hospital, Denhall* (York: RCHM, 1998). The RCHM (p. 12) was uncertain about the origin of three hollows found close to the shore but suggested they were 'best interpreted as holes dug on a speculative basis to search for stone to rob for reuse elsewhere'. However, they do have some characteristics of bell-pits.

<sup>24</sup> Hatcher, pp. 188–9, gives examples suggesting they averaged about twenty feet deep; the NCM says 'up to 10 metres' (National Coal Mining Museum, 'Early Mining' (n.d.) <[https://www.ncm.org.uk/downloads/24/Early\\_Mining.pdf](https://www.ncm.org.uk/downloads/24/Early_Mining.pdf)> [accessed 27 September 2018]. The depth of the seam at Burton is unknown but the possible bell-pits are downhill from where the borehole found the shallowest coal in Ness.

relate to charcoal; and 'coal pits' were originally places where charcoal was made.<sup>25</sup> Other examples of the use of the words in this context exist in Cheshire.<sup>26</sup>

The nature of Neston's pre-industrial workings is unknown but it seems unlikely that they were of any great scale. They appear to have left no surviving record of their operation and coal at a relatively shallow depth was still to be found there in 1757. Denhall appears to have been the first area where the then lord of the manor of Ness, John Stanley Massey, chose to sink boreholes suggesting he believed that the coal seams there were not exhausted.

The coal strata are to be found next to (and under) the Dee Estuary and there are occasional early references to coal being carried on Neston-registered ships. For example, in 1566, the *Martin*, was recorded as carrying eight tons of coal to Dublin.<sup>27</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 it is quite possible that he picked up his coal at one of the Flintshire quays such as at Mostyn rather than at Neston.<sup>28</sup> In the early seventeenth century Neston coal traders petitioned for a reduction in the duty on seaborne coals.<sup>29</sup> The source 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. A clearer seventeenth-century source of many references to Neston vessels carrying coal is the Chester port books.<sup>30</sup> However, the writer's research into these so far has failed to find confirmation that the coal itself emanated from Neston. Furthermore, it is evident that ships laden with Welsh coal might still come to Neston in order to pick up passengers for Ireland, as was recorded by Oliver Samson in 1676.<sup>31</sup>

### **Published Claims for Pre-Industrial Working**

In the light of the newly-uncovered evidence of a local 'colliery' let us turn to the previous claims that have been made about coal-working in the pre-industrial period at Neston.

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>32</sup> Confidence in this assertion is somewhat undermined by his stating an opening date for Ness Colliery of

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<sup>25</sup> Dodgson, p. 131; *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>26</sup> Dodgson, pp. 138 & 140.

<sup>27</sup> Wilson, p. 75. His reference to the *Mary*, 26 March 1565, is a transcription error (TNA, E 190 1323/1).

<sup>28</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>29</sup> CALS, DVE 1/NI/1. I am grateful to Susan Chambers for her transcription of this document.

<sup>30</sup> See for example TNA, E 122/222/10-12 for 1649.

<sup>31</sup> W. and T. Evans (eds.), 'The Life of Oliver Sansom', *The Journal of Friends*, Vol. XIV (1850), p. 69.

<sup>32</sup> Hodson, p. 142.

1765 which, as noted previously, is certainly incorrect.<sup>33</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>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup> 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 goes on to refer to a road which crosses it at Great Saughall ‘leading from the water’s edge to the interior [of Wirral] and known in later days as Coalpit Lane’.<sup>36</sup> This Coalpit Lane, which runs to Backford, has no plausible geological associations with mining of the Carboniferous rock and must refer to charcoal-making, as discussed above. In summary, these writers’ accounts may well be an example of how historical ‘fact’ becomes distorted through re-telling.<sup>37</sup>

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>38</sup> However the evidence is inconclusive at best. Firstly, one might have expected that if there were local colliery operations in the mid-eighteenth century – less than two decades before Ness Colliery opened and at a time from which a good number of documents of various kinds have survived – there would be *some* explicit local record of it; however, there is none. Moreover, in the eighteenth-century Neston

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> Joan Beck, *Tudor Cheshire* (Chester: Cheshire Community Council, 1969), p. 57.

<sup>35</sup> J. M. Dodgson, *The Place-Names of Cheshire*, Pt. 4, (Cambridge: English Place-Names Society, 1972), p. 204.

<sup>36</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>37</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>38</sup> G. Pearson, *Neston and Parkgate Remembered* (Birkenhead: Countyvise, 1998) p. 104; and G. Dawson, *Wyrals* (Dawson Publishing, 2004) p. 40 citing Geo[orge] Gregory (1746) and John Neilly (1750).

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>39</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 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>40</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>41</sup> Two of the records state that the men were from Llanddulas in Denbighshire, where there are lead mines; the third, who had the name Jones which was 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.

## **Conclusion**

The material presented here means that we can dismiss claims for the date of opening of Ness Colliery other than in 1759; it also seems that, based on the evidence presented to date, there is no case for claiming that the coal at the Romano-British Irby settlement emanated from Ness.

The evidence for pre-industrial working is more mixed, though. In previous published versions of this document this writer has stated that 'one cannot discount the possibility that coal was worked at Neston before 1759 but so far there has been no unequivocal evidence to support the claim. It is not impossible, though, that one day some will emerge.'. That evidence has indeed emerged with the newly-discovered reference to the 'colliery' so that we can confirm

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<sup>39</sup> *Flint Parish Registers 1598-1812* (Clwyd Family History Society, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> Place (1994), p. 208.

<sup>41</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.

such workings did exist. However there are question marks around so many other aspects of these works – maybe, again, evidence will one day be found to answer those questions.

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