

Coal Mining in Gateshead

Tyneside is always associated with industry, especially coal that has been mined here for hundreds of years. Coal mining arrived in Gateshead rather later than in the rest of County Durham; the first recorded mention being in 1344, although coal was probably mined before this.

The pits were relatively shallow and all the work was done by hand, but as time went on, more and more coal was produced until the mid-sixteenth century when Gateshead and Whickham contained the most productive coalfields in the world. 400,000 tons were shipped from the Tyne in 1625 as compared with 35,000 tons in 1565.

Only one Gateshead family appears to have made a fortune in this trade, the appropriately named Cole family. As well as leasing and working their own mines, they were money lenders and many of the Newcastle coal owners were in debt to them.

As could be expected, Gateshead at this time was scarred by coal mines and although no traces can be seen on the surface today, the town rests on a maze of galleries and shafts which occasionally make their presence known by sudden subsidence.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the easily won coal seams were largely worked out and the industry moved further from the river in search of fresh reserves at Tanfield and Stella. However, small groups of men continued to work the outcrops which larger concerns would have found uneconomic. The number of these smaller pits grew, and in 1720 there were 156 on the Shipcote Estate alone!

Coal was mined near to water transportation facilities as land transport was confined to the horse on very poor or non-existent roads. Packhorses were used to carry the coal to the staiths and later horses or oxen pulled large heavy wagons known as wains down to the river.

Wagonways in Gateshead included the Ravensworth, which ran down the west of the Team Valley to Dunston; Gateshead Fell from the Fell to Redheugh, but later to the South Shore, crossing the Old Durham Road, just north of King James's Hospital; and from Sheriff Hill to the Engine pit at Low Fell.

After the invention and improvement of the steam pumping engine, deeper seams could be worked as the water (if present), could be drawn off. In 1765 such an engine cost £1,000. Park Colliery and Tyne Main Colliery at Friars' Goose had these engines, the latter had the most powerful on the Tyne, producing about 180 horsepower and capable of pumping 1,444,800 gallons of water per day, ten times the capacity of Shipcote Baths. Part of the remains of the engine house can still be seen today in East Gateshead Riverside Park.

Coal mining continued at a few larger pits within the town, at Redheugh, Oakwellgate and near the junction of High Street and Sunderland Road.

The last colliery to close was at Redheugh between Lower Cuthbert Street and Morrison Street off Askew Road. Sunk in 1872, it produced 120,000 tons of coal per annum in the 1890s and gave employment to about 420 men and boys but became unproductive and closed in 1927



Team Colliery

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