

COAL MINING IN THE SMOILE



1835 FIRST EDITION O/S MAP

BY SAMUEL T STEWART – FEBRUARY 2020

PREFACE

This publication is an update of a feature which appeared in another book on the website entitled "*The Development of Coal Mining in the Local Area*". More research has been carried out which increases our knowledge of coal mining in the area of the Smoile which was in Coleorton Parish and part of the Beaumont Estate at the time. The author therefore felt it would be appropriate to put the revised article on the website as a separate publication.

The 1835 O/S map featured on the front cover shows in the top LH corner the location of Smoile Wood, Worthington Rough and *Lount Colliery* (described in the following feature as *Lount No.2. Colliery*, which will aid the reader to locate the collieries geographically when compared to the 1882 O/S map shown later.

The publication is mainly focused on the *Smoile (Coleorton) Colliery*, as little information is recorded on the other two collieries referred to.

NOTE

The *Coleorton Railway* is referred to in this publication, and a complete history of this is included in a free to download and read publication on this website entitled "*A History of the Coleorton Railway and the Charnwood Forest Canals*" for those wishing to know more about this important piece of local industrial history.

A more general history of coal mining in the area is also contained in another free to download and read book on the website entitled "*The Development of Coal Mining in the Local Area*".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Numerous sources of research material have been consulted in order to write this publication including:-

- The well respected book *The Leicestershire & South Derbyshire Coalfield 1200-1900* by Colin Owen.
- The John Crocker archives. John studied the Beaumont coal mining activities on behalf of the National Coal Board.
- Various coal mining maps and records.

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AN INTRODUCTION TO EARLY COAL MINING IN THE LOCALITY

Coleorton has a long history of coal mining, almost certainly dating back to the 1200's. When the *Lounge Open Cast* site near Lount in Coleorton parish was excavated between 1985 and 1993, evidence of deep shaft mining was discovered. A study of artifacts and tree ring dating established that coal mining had taken place here between 1450 to 1600.

The following extract from a lease held at the L&RRO (26D53/512), suggests that this was the time when the hamlet of Lount in the form of a settlement as we know it today, was established:- *This indenture made on 23rd April 1606 between George Shirley of Staunton Harold in the County of Leicester and William Wallis of Staunton, aforesaid Yeoman, John Yeomans of Melbourne from Derby, Yeoman, and William Holmes of Staunton, aforesaid collier. George Shirley gives leave to William, John and William their executors or administrators to erect and build in Staunton, six houses for six colliers.....we can safely assume that these houses would have been funded and owned by Sir George Shirley, and then rented out to colliers. It is thought, although open to conjecture, that these cottages were built in the current area of what became the hamlet of Lount.*

Coal mining did not come to an end in the locality until the closure of *New Lount Colliery* in 1968.

It was 'recorded' that coal was being worked at Swannington (Leicestershire) in 1204 during the reign of King John. This small Coalfield was fairly isolated and eventually bordered the South Derbyshire Field where coal was known to have been mined in 1208. A Charter of confirmation relating to the village of Swannington, formerly preserved in the Tower of London, confirms the gift of one Philip, son of Eilnod, to Rudolf, son of Gerbold of a piece of land, worth 2 shillings per annum, in Swannington "*where cole is gotten*". A lawsuit of 1293 mentions a coalmine operating there also. As Swannington was adjacent to "*Overtone*" (Coleorton), it can be safely assumed that coal was also being mined / outcropped there as well.

There is reference to coal being mined at Swadlincote (South Derbyshire) in 1208. William de Gresley granted half of his lands in the 5 acres of woods stretching from Leverichgrave to Blakepit where coal was known to be worked, to Robert de Sugkenhull and his wife Petronilla. We are told that two charters of 1374 and 1377 indicate that coal was being mined at Swadlincote.

During the mid thirteenth century one of the most important landowners in the *Worthington* district was Ralph Bozun. Around 1270, he and his wife granted their lands and coal mines which they contained to Garendon Abbey, probably in the area of "*the Smoile*" and the adjacent "*Worthington Rough*" where the coal seams outcropped. This to some extent is confirmed by the following.

Isabella de Hastings granted certain tithes of coal to the "Convent of Breedon" in South Derbyshire, and worked small diggings at *Worthington* in 1340, and is recorded in the "Garendon Enspeximus" as follows:-

The gift, grant and confirmation, which Ralph Barron of Claxton and Lora his wife made to the same Abbot and Monks of the whole wood at Worthington with the whole soil to the same adjacent, with the common of pasture, coal mines (minera carboneum) and all other appurtenances".....This again probably refers to the outcrop of coal workings of "Worthington Rough" and "The Smoile" where the coal seams outcropped. Isabella de Hastings was responsible for the workings of both coal and iron ore at Gelsmoor in Breedon parish at that time, where coal seams outcropped also.

In times gone by, Coleorton must have been a dirty and foreboding village, from all the smoke and the grime that would have been produced. From William Burton's "Description of Leicestershire" published in 1622, we gather that coal was found on the surface before the days of King Henry III, and distributed around the countryside by donkey pannier. Burton tells us that "*These coal mines in the beginning of the raigne of King Henry the Eighth (as I have heard reported) did burne many years together, and could not be quenched, until that sulphurous and brimstony matter (whereupon it wrought) was utterly exhausted and consumed*".

THE CONTINUATION OF LOCAL COAL MINING BECOMES DEPENDANT ON SIR GEORGE BEAUMONT

With the disappearance of Raper, Fenton, Burslem and the Boultsbees, it was largely left to Sir George Beaumont to keep the coal mining industry alive at Coleorton. Willis Bailey, who had acted as Burslem's agent for many years, is said to have sunk his own pit to the "Main Coal" close to the George Inn, on Loughborough Road, Coleorton, although it is possible that this was a redevelopment of Burslem's earlier colliery. Beaumont certainly kept at least one pit working at Coleorton, and in 1820s he is said to have opened a new colliery there, a shaft sunk to a depth of 300ft with the aid of improved pumping engines. In 1823, he was involved in yet another lengthy dispute with the Trustees of the Hinckley-Melbourne Turnpike because he had made a private road from his colliery to the Rempstone Road, thereby avoiding payment of tolls.

Further evidence of the survival of the industry, is provided by a survey of the Beaumont estates by Edward Butt Knight (Beaumont's agent) shortly after the death of Sir George Howland Beaumont 7th Baronet in 1827. This showed that Benjamin Walker's farm at Newbold was in a reasonable state apart from the condition of the fields and fencing around his "Cylinder Pit" which suffered from the "unruly conduct of the people at the coal pits". See the publication entitled "A History of Coal Mining & Brick and Sanitary Pipe Making in the Vicinity of Newbold, a Village in NW Leics" which can be downloaded on this website.

Smoile Farm to the east of the Melbourne Road and just south of Lount cross roads (see maps on pages 6 & 9) which belonged to Thomas and James Walker, was in a similar state; they also worked an adjoining colliery (marked **A** on page 9), and it was hoped to eventually convert James' house into accommodation for colliers.

Throughout Coleorton there existed a chaotic pattern of cottages, small holdings and rights of way and it was considered desirable to invest around £1,000 in the construction of a compact block of colliers' houses close to the collieries in the Smoile so that many of the dilapidated scattered residences around Coleorton could be demolished. The study indicated the presence of collieries at Coleorton, Newbold and Lount, at least two of which were operated by tenant farmers on lease from the Beaumont's. Nevertheless, the reduced status of the industry around Swannington and Coleorton was of concern to consumers. In Leicestershire, which had been one of the key areas of production throughout the coalfield's long history, the industry experienced a sudden and almost total collapse after 1795 owing to its failure to establish effective links with its traditional markets.

Particularly remarkable was the village of Swannington, whose name had almost been synonymous with coal mining for over five centuries. Following the closure of its colliery in 1798, it was to have to wait for over 50 years before enjoying a brief revival of its traditional activity. Elsewhere, within the sector at Coleorton, Lount and Newbold the industry survived as a pale shadow of its former self. The days when Coleorton Moor and the commons of Swannington, Thringstone and Newbold were dotted with clusters and rows of miners' cottages were gone.

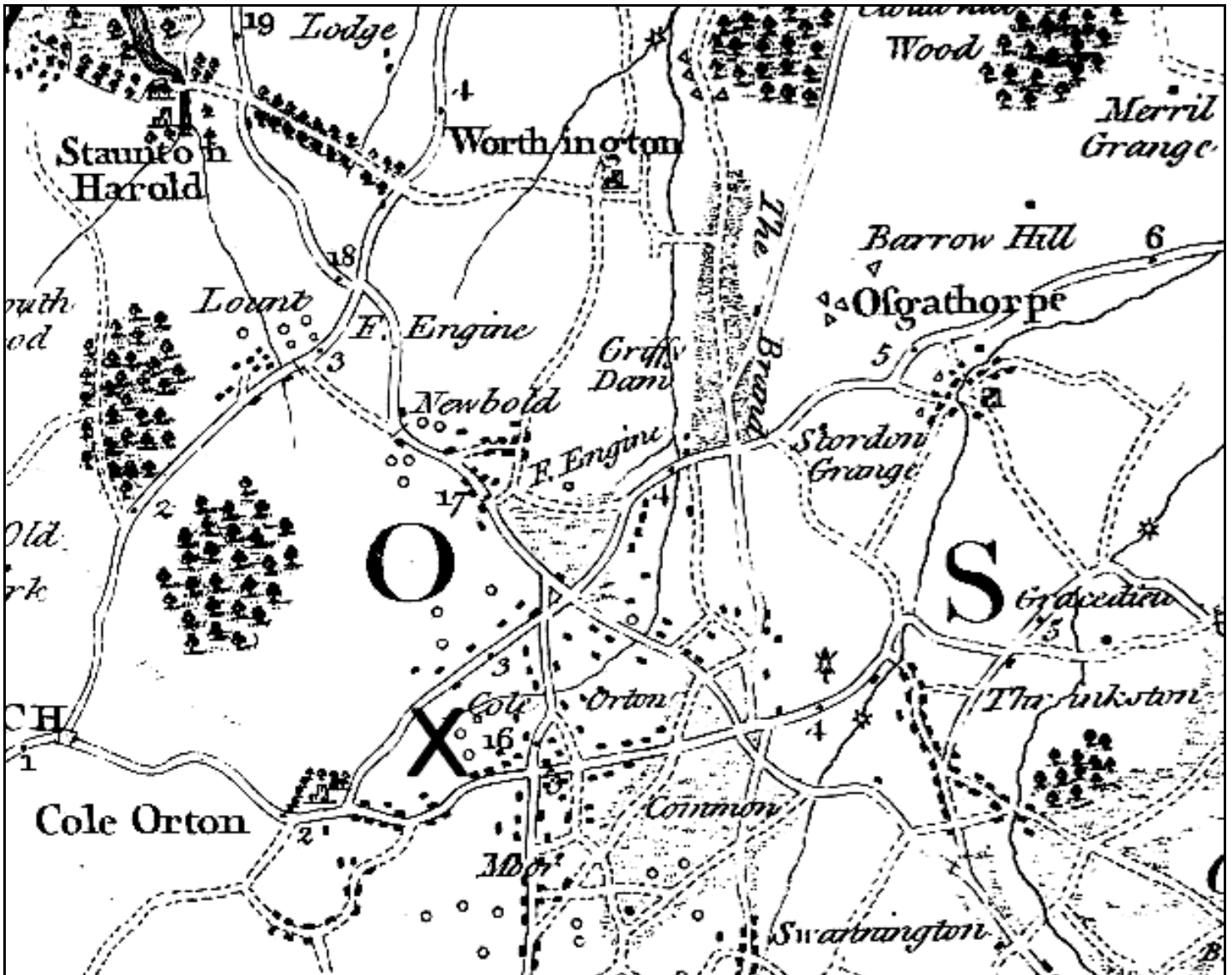
In "The Rise of the British Coal Industry, London, 1932" by J.V.Neff he states the following:-

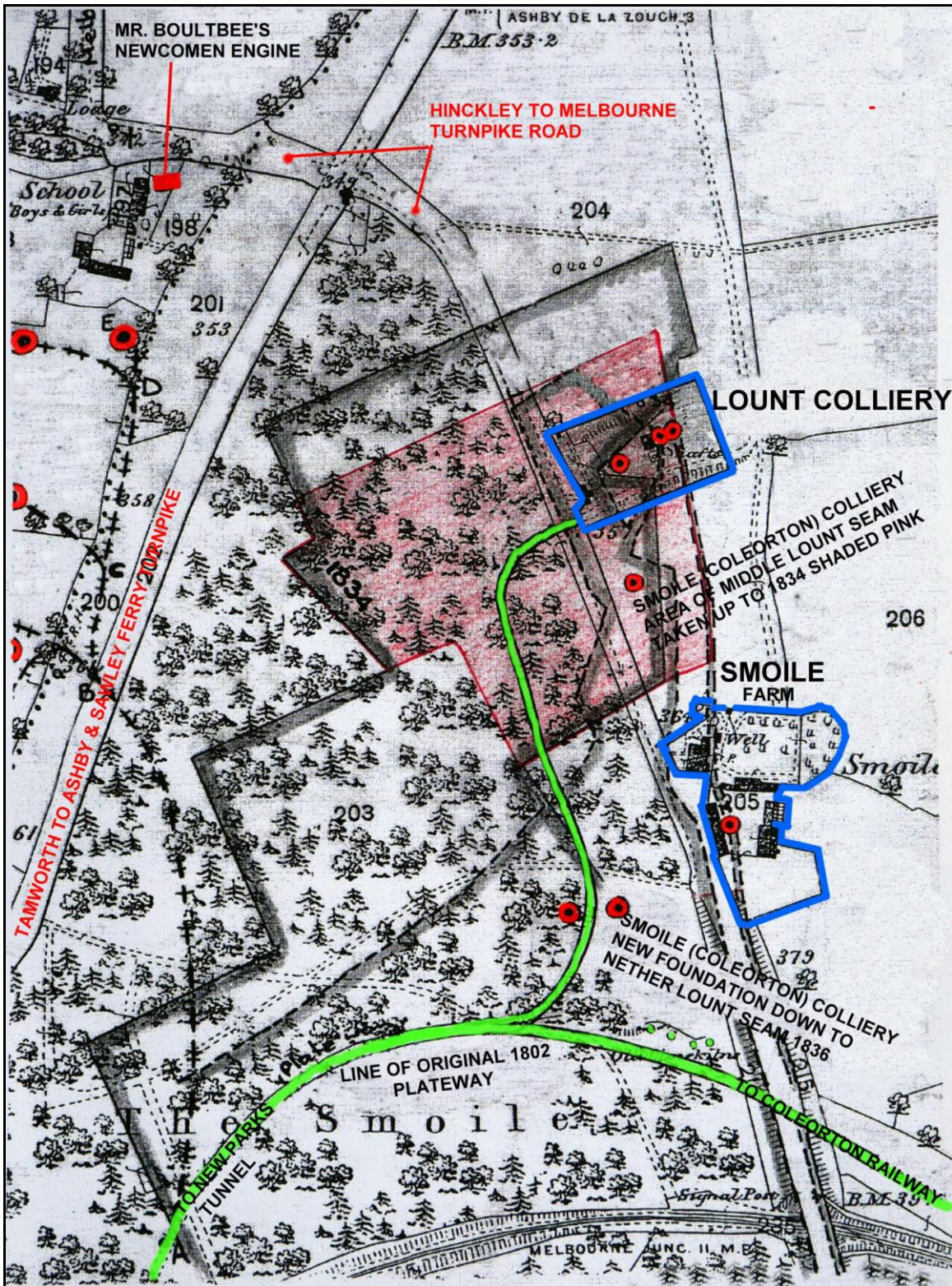
"The Beaumont's were reckless adventurers, who poured all their own savings which had accumulated over several generations of prosperous landlords into coal pits, and then borrowed until they had strained their credit to the breaking point".

COAL MINING IN THE AREA OF THE SMOILE

Over a long period of time, numerous old mines have been worked in the Smoile / Lount / Newbold area. John Priors map of 1777 below identifies the proliferation of shafts, defined by circles, in the area.

Little in the way of records has survived for most of these old mines to make them suitable for inclusion unfortunately. Hopefully this update will provide increased clarity for the location in the area of the Smoile of the two main coal mines.





The above 1882 25 inch O/S map has been included to provide the reader with a geographical representation of where Smoile (Coleorton) Colliery and Lount Colliery were located in the Smoile. This can be used in conjunction with the map on the front cover (top LH corner) and the map on page 9.

SMOILE (COLEORTON) COLLIERY

In 1828, Lady Beaumont apparently described Benjamin Walker, rather dismissively, as a “butty collier”, however, he was clearly a man of ability and ambition confirmed by his future involvement in local coal mining. On Oct 11th 1830, he took over the lease on Coleorton Colliery, commonly known as Smoile Colliery, and by July 1832 he had become described as a “coal master”, and was arranging to lease 25 cottages in Coleorton, Worthington and Thringstone from Sir George Beaumont.

Walker redeveloped the colliery in anticipation of the new “Coleorton Railway” which opened in 1833.

The failure of the original aim to reach the colliery in the Smoile (leased by Benjamin Walker from Sir George Beaumont) by the Coleorton Railway proved costly, and initially coal wagons had to be double loaded (transhipped) from the coal shaft to reach the Coleorton railway via the 1802 tramway for transportation to Leicester, which was clearly inefficient. It is possible, that a branch from the 1802 tramway to one of the Smoile Colliery shafts was first constructed c.1836, based on the record of a submission of a bill from George Chubb for 2 guineas for surveying the extension. He was the surveyor and resident engineer of the railway. This is shown in [green](#) on the preceding map.

The Coleorton Railway line was the standard 4 feet 8½ inch gauge, and used edge rails, it was worked by horse drawn wagons with flanged wheels and there is no documentary evidence that steam engines were ever used on the “Coleorton Railway”.

The Cloud Hill 1802 horse drawn tramway / plateway joined up with the Ticknall tramway just prior to New Parks tunnel on its way to Willesley basin wharf, where goods were transhipped for onward travel on the Ashby Canal to the National network.

The reason limestone / burnt lime from “Cloud Hill Quarry” and coal from the mines in the Smoile would have had to be transhipped onto the “Coleorton Railway”, was due to the fact that the Tramway built in 1802 was in fact a 4 feet 2 inch gauge plateway. The L shaped line plateway, used narrower wagons with plain rimmed wheels, and therefore this did not match either the rail type, wheel type or gauge of the “Coleorton Railway”. The “Ashby Canal Company” which owned the tramway had anticipated this, and considered Lord Stamford’s (owner of “Cloud Hill Lime Works”) proposal in Feb 1833 to lay a compatible rib (edge) rail from Cloud Hill, to connect with the “Coleorton Railway” at Worthington Rough. This was not carried out, and the “Ashby Canal Company” then considered a proposal in 1837 from the “Leicester and Swannington Railway” board, who had become concerned about the lack of traffic over Swannington Incline from “Coleorton Railway”, to lay down rib (edge) rails parallel with the tramway from its intersection point with the “Coleorton Railway” to “Cloud Hill Lime Quarry”. The canal company went one step further, and requested their company engineer to prepare costings for relaying the whole of the tramway from Willesley basin to Ticknall and Cloud Hill with rib (edge) rails, and also to prepare an estimate for the likely increased traffic. Clearly, this proved too expensive, and the final solution, agreed by the “Ashby Canal Company” on Dec 4th 1838, was to lay a rib (edge) rail on the tramway from Cloud Hill to “The Smoile”, the cost of which was borne by “Bostock & Co” (Lord Stamford’s tenant at Cloud Hill), and “Coleorton Railway” via loans from the Swannington and Leicester Railway of £600 and £633.13s.11d respectively. The work was recorded as not being completed till Aug 5th 1840. **See the schematic layout on page 10.**

The “Coleorton Railway” and “Leicester and Swannington Railway”, clearly stood to benefit from considerable extra traffic over the line, which proved to be the case. The rib (edge) rail proved to be a success, and traffic from Cloud Hill continued steadily over the line until the building of the Midland Railway from Derby to Ashby took place. From the time the section from Worthington to Ashby was opened in 1874 no further shipments from Cloud Hill over the Coleorton Railway were recorded for obvious reasons.

New shafts were started in June 1833 prior to the railway being built, and there is evidence that some coal was actually carted to the Leicester & Swannington line. By June 1835 there were three shafts, two going down to the Middle Coal and one going down to the Nether Coal. There were 924 yards of heading underground, but work had been delayed by a "swamp" or depression in the Middle Coal seam, which prevented the water draining back to the Engine Shaft, and meant that additional pumping had to be done by hand underground. Without this delay, two further shafts would have been completed, nearer to the termination of the railway, and indeed the whimsy and engine for these shafts had been purchased. In the meanwhile, the coal was being moved northwards underground and then shipped back on the plateway system at the surface at a cost of ½ d per ton, before being conveyed onwards over the Coleorton Railway for 1d per ton.

Another report, this time by Willis Bailey, was completed on June 8th 1835. This says the colliery was working two seams, the Middle and Nether (Lount) Coal, which were 53 and 70 yards deep respectively at the Engine Shaft. Bailey confirmed that Walker was intending to sink two more shafts, one to the Middle and one to the Nether Coal, and that he had made or purchased railway wagons for use over Coleorton Railway. Bailey's report revealed the nub of the problem, when he states that "before the passing of the Leicester and Swannington Act", i.e. in 1830, Derbyshire coal sold for 15s 10d per ton in Leicester, but at the time of writing (1836) this had been cut to 7s per ton. Coal from the Smoile could not be sold profitably in Leicester for less than 9s 10d per ton. It was simply not worth shipping it at this time. A note from Benjamin Walker himself on Feb 15th 1837 says he could put best coal into wagons "at the pit mouth for 6s 8d per ton", and hard coal 5s 10d per ton. Another set of figures dated December 1837, indicates that it was costing 6s 6d to produce a ton of coal at the pit mouth, and 4s 9½d to ship it into Leicester, giving a total of 11s 3 ½ d, when the going price was just 11s.

In February 1837, there seems to have been an attempt to form a new company to develop the mine. A draft prospectus shows that two new shafts of 80 yards depth were planned (presumably the ones Walker was planning to sink in 1835) and that these would need a pumping engine of about 50 horsepower and a winding engine of 14 horsepower. The prospectus paints a rosy picture of the Colliery's ability to produce 40,000 tons of coal and 16,000 tons of slack per year, and in theory make a profit of £2,750 a year.

Presumably, over the next couple of years, the price of coal in Leicester did increase to some extent, because a surviving account book for Smoile (Coleorton) Colliery, covering the period of April 1839 to March 1840 indicates over 80 customers in the city, including private households, shops and factories.

At some point, Benjamin Walker entered into business with William Worswick in the running of Smoile (Coleorton) Colliery which resulted in them both subsequently developing new collieries in Swannington and Coleorton. Worswick was a wealthy property owner, coal merchant and contractor from Leicester, where he also owned the manors and halls of Normanton and Birstall and extensive lands at Thurcaston and Syston.

In the 1840s, the colliery was despatching coal over the Coleorton Railway by horse drawn wagons until it reached Swannington at the rate of 250 tons per month – less than an eighth of the optimistic estimates issued in 1837. The figures were erratic, suggesting production difficulties or problems obtaining an adequate price. Tonnages dwindled away to nothing in the mid 1850s, although at this time 20 or more tons of lime were being despatched each month. There is a record that Walker stopped mining at the Smoile c.1853. However, the colliery was reopened in 1857 and was working the Nether Lount Coal below the west and south edges of Smoile Wood between 1859 and 1865. The colliery effectively closed in 1865 but between 1865 and 1869, small quantities of Middle, Nether Lount and Roaster or Yard seams were worked by *Leicestershire Colliery and Pipe Co.* The colliery sent out modest amounts of coal and lime over the railway until 1867. A note on the plan of the Roaster Coal says "Pit stopped working Jan 27th 1869".

LOUNT COLLIERY

Two other members of the Walker family, Thomas and James, leased Smoile Farm and Old Lount Colliery, shown on the 1881 surveyed O/S map below in the area marked **A**. Smoile Farm and Lount Colliery were both across the Hinckley to Melbourne turnpike road running north alongside Smoile Wood

Little is known about this colliery, except that it was being worked around 1827 at the time of Sir George Beaumont's death, and it had been the intention to convert James Walkers' house into accommodation for the colliers.

It is believed that this was the Old Lount Colliery that Worswick and Benjamin Walker subsequently became involved with and was finally closed in 1864 prior to the Smoile (Coleorton) Colliery in Smoile Wood.

There is a record that the colliery was re-opened in 1900 by John Smith and company, who ran the Sanitary Pipe Works near Lount, but it is not known when it finally closed.



